Gender patterns of transgender people.

A historical, cultural and sociological reconstruction through the experience of social and health professionals.

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Abstract

This paper aims to illustrate the research path and methodological aspects of the study of sexual normativity with reference to a specific population of the LGBTQ+ universe, namely binary and non-binary transgender people in the Italian context through the analysis and historical reconstructions of the path of gender affirmation, in daily life and in the narrative proposed by the main old media. The decision to orient the focus of the analysis on transnormativity is related to the observation of an important research gap present in the scholarly literature, which has so far analyzed the processes of the construction of sexual normativity in mainstream society - and, as a result, has produced several studies and theorizing on heteronormativity and the male homosexual population (or homonormativity) - while conspicuously leaving out noncisgenderist sexual identities (transgender, genderfluid, agender, etc.). Following up on these premises, specifically, the following research questions were set: what are the reference gender models that guide and direct the identity construction of transgender people? And what are those of binary and non-binary people? how do these models reflect aspects attributable to mainstream sexual normativity (mainly heteronormativity and cisgenderism) furthermore, what differences are evident among these reference models in relation to various socio-demographic and identity aspects (how do they vary according to age, educational qualification, gender identity status, and sexual orientation). In order to try to answer the questions of the research design, a survey was conducted, using a biographical approach, through the administration of semi-structured interviews with privileged witnesses working in the field of gender reaffirmation pathways in the medical, clinical and legal fields, in order to reconstruct the chronological and cultural stages of the construction of transnormativity from the enactment of State Law 164/1982 to the present day. In contrast to this perspective, new, increasingly fluid, complex, and differentiated demands are emerging, which have generated debate on the one hand and tension both with mainstream society and within the LGBTQ+ community on the other. This further fragmentation of cis-heteronormative criteria could, for some, pose a threat

to the achievements and social positions acquired through years of struggle, demands and construction of their own sexual normativity.

Keywords: transgender people; gender identity; gender patterns; non binary; media

Introduction

This paper aims to illustrate the research path and methodological aspects of the study of *sexual normativity* with reference to a specific population of the LGBTQ+ universe, namely binary and non-binary transgender people in the Italian context through the analysis and historical reconstructions of the path of gender affirmation, in daily life and in the narrative proposed by the main old media.

The decision to orient the focus of the analysis on *transnormativity* is related to the observation of an important research gap present in the scholarly literature, which has so far analyzed the processes of the construction of sexual normativity in mainstream society - and, as a result, has produced several studies and theorizing on heteronormativity and the male homosexual population (or homonormativity) - while conspicuously leaving out noncisgenderist sexual identities (transgender, genderfluid, agender, etc.) (Butler, 2004; Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino, Taylor, 2005; Deaux, Major, 1987).

As defined in the previous chapters, the approach will be *intersectional*: it aims to highlight, on the one hand, multiple discriminations in which transgender people, binary and nonbinary, incur in socialization processes, both in the relationships of their daily lives and in the digital world. In addition, *identity modeling* processes that are enacted by T people, aimed at their social positioning in various life contexts, will be explored here.

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The decision to use semi-structured interviews with privileged witnesses allows for the historical and cultural reconstruction of the dominant gender models in society over the past forty years, both through the narratives and narratives proposed by people who - in different capacities - work in the field of gender affirmation pathways, and through the analysis of cultural industry products that have contributed to the birth, consolidation and nurturing of the main models of trans-normativity in Italy.

To enable understanding of the data and provide a theoretical frame in which to frame the interpretations of the interviews, a first part of the paper will present - briefly - an excursus of the gender patterns of people with gender incongruence most highlighted in the scientific literature.

As we have seen, the nosographic model has for many centuries dominated, almost unchallenged, the transgender issue, contributing robustly to the consolidation of the process of biologizing and medicalizing the condition of gender incongruity, fueling and amplifying the stereotypes of deviance and the resulting social stigmatization.

In the second half of the twentieth century, however, thanks in part to the minority social movements that have exploded around the world, a new desire and new needs to analyze, study, diversify and complexify the discourse on sexuality in a broad sense emerged in the scientific landscape of the social sciences, clearing forever the models proposed up to that time.

The study and analysis of social reality, of its own rules and dictates, of the construction of symbols and meanings find fertile ground in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and social psychology, which have not a few times questioned (and interfaced with) sexuality and discourses related to gender and sex.

Transgenderism and transsexuality become topics of extreme complexity, which fall outside of explanations and descriptions of a phenomenon considered by most to be "extra-ordinary." Breaking the gender order, the dichotomy of the sexes and the other dogmas of the veterosexual model inevitably implies the need to attend to the ways and salient aspects through which dominant cultures and structured social organizations exercise power, control and regulation of the social roles and expectations expected and ascribed by society itself (Goffman, 1956; Ruspini, 2009).

The presence of gender incongruence brings about substantial and real changes at different levels of society, destabilizing the social contexts in which the individual is embedded, which may encounter resistance, opposition and discrimination, but also processes of revision, renegotiation and redefinition.

A first change that the transgender person enacts with his or her coming out and/or gender reassertion journey is that of *gender role.* This change, although different

with respect to the type of transgender person - there are numerous studies in the literature reinforcing the theory that an FtoM transgender person has a better chance of social reintegration than an MtoF person - involves a deconstruction of the division of gender roles that underlies society and according to which political laws, economic systems, dimensions of the welfare state, and aspects related to health, welfare, religion, and social stratification are constructed and determined (Wilson et al. 2009; Rodriguez et al. 2017; Shifmanm et al 2016).

An additional aspect that is worth considering in the study of transgenderism and transsexuality is the often complex and undefined link between *sex, gender and sexual practices* link on which much of the dominant *sexual normativity*, or cis-heteronormativity, rests. In other words, concepts such as "normality," "naturalness," and "generativity" are challenged, fully invoking the constructivist value of genders, in which the masculine and feminine are expressions of a specific culture and a specific history.

Analyzing transgenderism and transsexuality also allows us to examine and complicate the often not always effective relationship between social policies, prevailing gender patterns and the formation of active and recognized citizenship through "legitimation" processes based, evaluated and controlled on the cis-heteronormative model.

Indeed, the study of *sexual normativity* within the transgender community represents a new frontier in *LGBTQ+ studies.*

It is, in fact, interesting to analyze the evolution of social and medial models of the gender of transgender people, which - forty years after State Law Number 164/1982 came into effect in Italy - still contribute to providing a collective and social representation of the transgender person as an individual who necessarily undertakes a medical-surgical and legal process to acquire "transgender status" and exist only if "normed" by that protocol.

In contrast to this perspective, new, increasingly fluid, complex, and differentiated demands are emerging, which have generated debate on the one hand and tension both with mainstream society and within the LGBTQ+ community on the other. This further fragmentation of cis-heteronormative criteria could, for some, pose a threat to the achievements and social positions acquired through years of struggle, demands and construction of their own *sexual normativity*.

Theorerical Frame

Breaking the gender order: social representations of the transgender person.

Transgender identity for many years remained at the bottom of discourses on sexuality and gender, encapsulated within a cultural legacy and matrix of thought that ascribed

the condition of gender incongruence as a possible, perhaps extreme expression of primarily male homosexuality.

The scholarly literature has only recently engaged in a debate related to transgender people, highlighting the symbolic processes, needs for visibility and sexual citizenship of this particular minority segment of the population in *mainstream* society. An analysis of the social representations of transsexuality and transgenderism cannot fail to consider how cinema and the media have represented the transgender issue and people with gender incongruence.

As mentioned, the main social representation of the transgender person was ascribed to psychopathology and psychiatric disorders, likened to a personality disorder or perversion. An example of this social representation is clearly shown by the character of Buffalo Bill in the film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1990), a heinous serial killer who is presented as a transgender person who goes insane after a negative opinion from one of the centers designated for the surgery of transgender people in response to his willingness to undertake a gender transition path.

Another widely shared societal conception of the transgender person has been-and still is present in various layers of society and in the construction of common sense-overlapping with homosexuality, in one of its most extreme and feminized forms.

The culture industry and most of the media have put forward images of transsexuality as a possible expression of homosexuality, with grotesque, macchietizing aspects, emphasizing the sexual and moral ambiguity of people with these conditions. Examples have been films such as *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *In Bed with the Enemy* (1991).

The latter view of transgenderism calls into question the symbolic construction of homosexuality, of the feminization of male identity (Valantine, 2007).

Valantine (2007) and Gilmore (2009) in their analysis pointed out that over the past three decades, the separation between the concept of *sexual orientation* and *gender identity has been* stably delineated with a relatively clear demarcation between homosexuality and transgenderism. However, the social representations that have characterized the period of the *demarcation* have not been free of stereotypes and prejudices that have almost directly ascribed the transgender person, usually a woman, to prostitution and contexts of social deviance.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a character still considered one of the main archetypes of transsexuality in Italy is proposed in Italian cinema to support this view; the character of the transgender woman Mery in Marco Risi's film *Mery per sempre.* Mery clearly and completely embodies the social and media representation of the transgender person in those years: devoted to prostitution, with the *double identity*

contrasted between the daytime life, bordering on ambiguity, and the nightlife surrounded by transgression and bringing discomfort that pushes the protagonist to the commodification of the body and the hypersexualization of the person. In the background is the social discomfort of a part of Palermo represented in a retrograde way and outside the social emancipations that, instead, invaded the rest of the Peninsula (Grimaldi, 1989).

The dilemma of the *spectrum of femininity* fully invests the discourses and reflections on the construction of imagery regarding transgenderism; contemporary society has for several centuries been centered on the male identity that has always represented power, strength, and virility. The female gender has historically been perceived as something negative, limiting, and less suited to environmental situations because of emotions and behaviors associated with submissiveness to the 'male identity. Transgenderism, however, breaks this established pattern by blending male and female gender traits and making the boundaries between the two uncertain (Butler, 2006). Based on these philosophical and sociological premises, homosexuality in the first place, and later transgenderism, posed a problem for cisgenderist male identity in terms of relationships and positioning, widening conflicts within feminist movements of emancipation from male hegemony to include LGTBQ+ identities (Connell, 2006).

While this dilemma of femininity has contributed-though in stereotyped and marginalized forms-to the visibility of transgender women, it has nevertheless completely left transgender men (or FtoM) in the background and delegitimized from public and social discourse for many years.

It was not until the late 2000s, with the exponential increase in requests for pathways to gender reaffirmation of FtoM people, that the male counterpart of the female transgender condition began to be talked about and proposed: a difficult and articulated process that has often been influenced by the invisibility of female sexuality, which was considered non-autonomous in its own expression. In fact, it is not unusual to hear in the discourses and life stories of transgender men that they were unaware, before the arrival of social media, of the possibility of transitioning from female to male identity, or that this identity construction was nothing more than an extremely masculinized expression from female homosexuality (Masullo, Coppola 2021).

Thus, we see, on the one hand, the emancipation of transgender women who try to free themselves from the stereotype of prostitution but become bearers of a need to explicate, argue and fight for the claim of visibility, legitimacy and democratization (these are the years, for example, of the election in the Italian Parliament of transgender woman Vladimir Luxuria); on the other hand, transgender men are being proposed, albeit in a residual form, for the purpose of "informing" about the existence of this sexual identity through popularization and niche scientific information programs.

Thus, two dominant models in the social representation of transgender people emerge - and will be the subject of discussion in the following section: on the one hand, the transgender *hyperwoman*, bearer of an extreme sexuality necessary to position herself socially within social contexts with the new identity, and on the other hand, the transgender man with a social positioning still being defined, struggling between rising to a superior social positioning given by the new male identity and abandoning a "feminine history" that places him in a position of inferiority to the cisgender male identity; both dominant identity constructions are binary and contemplate a heteronormative sexual orientation; other transgender identities (such as non-binary identity) have not been contemplated and lacked legitimacy and democratization for many years.

Transgenderism and gender patterns: cultural anchors and internalized scripts.

From the brief analysis set forth of the main social and media representations of the transgender condition, it is clear that the discourses and processes of symbolization are once again "calibrated" to the masculine vision: the transgender woman is represented and recognized if *hyperwoman* in the service of cisgender man's sexuality and fantasies; transgender men prove their masculinity and virility on the "cisgender male model."

Let us take into analysis the *hyperwoman* gender model that is still struggling to wane today. The transgender woman, in order to find a form of legitimacy, albeit a stereotyped and stigmatized one, has necessarily, for many years, had to embody the idea of sexual transgression, seeking and aspiring to hypersexualization of the body. Indeed, it is not unusual to run into transgender women with a breast size above the norm, who have resorted to cosmetic surgery repeatedly to perfect their bodies and who assume an eccentric and *sui generis* gender dress and expressiveness.

This gender model that has been dominant for many years among transgender identities does not modify the body solely for its own well-being and desire for self-determination, but rather to adhere, therefore, to dominant male stereotypes and patterns.

The hyperwoman has only reinforced and nurtured the range of stereotypes and prejudices that surround the social representation of transgender women, articulating the complex vicious circle that has been established: eccentricity and transgression do not allow the social positioning of transgender people functionally in life contexts; difficulties in integrating and finding work ensue; in order to survive or to find a life positioning, people resort to prostitution, reinforcing the direct transgender-prostitution stereotype (Turolla, 2009).

Different aspects concern, however, the gender pattern among transgender men, as this is a reality that has only recently emerged and has remained invisible and underestimated for many years.

One of the first to analyze and argue the debate on male transgender identities was Rubin in 1992 when she used the term *boundary wars* to describe the identity and symbolic process that occurred between extremely masculine homosexual women (*butch)* and FtoMs; the scholar defined the former as homosexual women who deconstructed the gender patterns ascribed to their biological identity without necessarily having to homologate from a somatic point of view; the latter did not claim symbolic deconstructions and had little interest in feminist discourses, since, seeing themselves as men in the wrong bodies, they wanted, on the contrary, to "purge" femininity especially in appearance (Rubin, 1992).

Noble (2006) in his volume *Sons of the moviment: FtoMs risking inchoerence on post-queer cultural landscape*, takes up precisely the latter aspect, viewing male transgender identity as a step backward from feminist trajectories, as the outcome of a fear of female emancipation through a process of "switching" to the masculine in order to dominate, to conform, to pass "on the oppressor bandwagon."

Recent studies have shown that most transgender men seek to conform to the dominant masculinity ideal to improve their social standing. Many trans men who transition from female to male have an easier time finding jobs and integrating into society than trans women who transition from male to female. The latter have a lower quality of social life than trans women and other nonconforming transgender identities (Johnson, 2016; Masullo Coppola, 2021).

In contrast, the point of fragility in the experience of male transgenderism would concern the private and intimate aspect, in that - while resorting to medicalized processes and reconstructive surgery - the discomfort experienced on both a factual and symbolic level of the "lack of the phallus" would condition interpersonal relationships and levels of perceived self-esteem and self-efficacy (Avera et al. 2016).

Nonbinary transgender identities have struggled to establish their own gender models over the years and often have to borrow those from other sexual identities. This confirms that the heterosexual and cisgender gender model is the only one considered legitimate by the dominant society.

It is the quest for "normalization" that drives transgender people to seek, desire and chase after dominant models with an attempt to homologate, or at least lower the possible risks of marginalization and social discrimination.

Within studies on transgender people, gender transition pathways, and processes of stigma and social discrimination, the concept of "passing for normals " takes on an important role (Rinaldi, 2016).

The word passing first appeared in the United States with reference to the phenomenon of camouflage of people of color who, due to their lighter phenotypic characteristics that allowed them to appear white, assumed roles, positions and privileges typical of the social category considered normal and consequently "dominant."

Instead, the term *passing* assumes, within the LGBTQ+ community, the dynamic of attribution by an outside observer of normative and heteronormative characteristics: specifically, attributing the heterosexual characteristic to a homosexual person, attributing cis-sexual characteristics to a transgender person.

"*Passing for normals"* becomes an important test case for the transgender person to reintegrate into society, and the social fabric, with the new gender identity.

Kanuha's (1999) study showed that the level of passing for normals can be an important predictor of LGBTQ+ people's social inclusion and psychological well-being in both family, work and social contexts.

Thus, "passability" becomes a parameter of intra-group discrimination as well; in fact, it has been shown that transgender people with high passing for normals would tend to marginalize, not attend and discriminate against transgender people with low *passing for normals* to avoid being associated with the stigmatized category, creating a form of double stigma for transgender people.

There are factors that condition and influence the process of *passing for normals:*

- biological, physical, and biochemical factors: genetic predisposition, biological and somatic connotation, and anthropometric aspects condition the process of *passing for normals*: for example, an MtoF transsexual person with a height above female standards and a typically masculine build would present a low passability compared to an MtoF person with a moderate height and petite morphology;

- gender expressivity factors: how one represents and expresses the gender to which one wants to belong would condition the process of *passing for normals*; for example, an FtoM transgender person who tends to wear a shaved beard would present low passability compared to an FtoM who presents male gender expressivity with a beard;

- social and relational factors: hanging out with non-LGBTQ+ or high passability people would promote the *passing-for-normals* process of transgender people, as they would fit into a normative and heteronormative social and contextual construction.

It is evident how a high level of *passing for normals* improves the transgender person's quality of life, and this is not only because the individual can achieve a satisfaction and a level of self-esteem that is important for psychological well-being, but also because he or she is thus more likely to escape the social prejudice and social stigma associated with transsexuality.

The process of *passing for normals*, therefore, assumes a central role both in the choice of whether or not to undergo surgery or to complete the gender transition pathway with the reconstructive phase, and in the choice of taking a clear or conventional gender transition pathway versus a dark and unconventional pathway, effectively exposing the subject to additional danger and stress to his or her psycho-physical and social well-being.

The role of passing for normals would invest a central role in the construction and relational and couple dynamics of transgender people.

Masullo and Coppola (2022) conducted research on the couple dynamics, gender patterns and imaginary processes of transgender people. The authors interviewed about 30 transgender people, some in a couple with transgender partners (referred to as a *switch couple*), some in a couple with a cisgender person (referred to as a *gender-mixed* couple).

Analysis of the interviews revealed several interesting as well as pioneering aspects for studying and understanding the relationship and couple dynamics of transgender people. First, analyzing the *switch* couples, formed by an MtoF and an FtoM, the choice of identifying a romantic partner within the transgender community would seem to be a functional option: both in terms of self-determination and in terms of legitimacy and social recognition; the sharing of the path of gender reaffirmation and the relaxation from the social pressure experienced in life contexts-a consequence of sharing an expertise of support networks on the transgender issue-would be an important factor in the well-being of the couple, which in the long run would have greater resilience in terms of emotional agreement, psychological and social support. In contrast, *gender-mixed* couples-that is, couples formed by a transgender partner and a cisgender partner-would show greater difficulties in the recognition of the couple's social status, and the couple's well-being would be undermined by processes of discrimination and stigmatization of the transgender partner within the life contexts of the cisgender partner. A crucial role would play, as mentioned earlier, by the passing *for normals: the* lower the *passing of* the transgender partner the greater the likelihood of incurring discrimination, *closet* phenomena and social marginalization.

The research path.

Through the research path, an attempt was made to reconstruct the historical and cultural path of the concept of *transnormativity* from the enactment of Law No. 164/1982, which regulates surgical sex reassignment in Italy, to the present day through the thought, experience and opinions of privileged witnesses who have been working for several years in the field of *gender reassignment* pathways.

The decision to conduct an exploratory phase and semantic, conceptual and imaginative reconstruction of *transnormativity* stems from many needs: 1) to fully understand the cultural-historical evolution of transgender people's gender and identity normativity models over 40 years; 2) to highlight evolutions and changes affected by the processes of homologation to mainstream society's sexual normativity models; and 3) to outline the possible scenarios and factors that have influenced the processes of innovation, emancipation and self- legitimation.

To better understand and analyze the aspects outlined so far, the following *research questions were* formulated:

A) What are the main models of gender and gender expression followed and established in the collective imagination of the transgender community in Italy from the enactment of Law 164/1982 to the present day?

B) What are the main changes in these models in the current landscape of nonnormative gender identities?

C) What are the main motivations and social, cultural, and political aspects that have influenced these changes and/or evolutions?

sexuality within the transgender community between the *old media* and the *new*?

D) Is there currently a dominant, and consequently normative, model in the transgender community*?*

Although aware of some methodological limitations--first and foremost, the impossibility of reporting the unambiguous and unanimous opinion of the scientific community regarding the research questions--a reasoned sample of 15 privileged witnesses who have been working for several years in specific areas of the gender reaffirmation path in Italy was selected, whose main characteristics are summarized in the following table:

N.	Genus	Age	Place of Residence	Professional Scope
1	F	48	Rome	Psychologist
2	F	28	Rome	Psychologist
3	F	34	Salerno	Endocrinologist
4	M	72	Naples	Researcher and psychologist
5	NB	33	Naples	Researcher
6	F	34	Rome	Psychologist
7	M	40	Rome	Psychologist
8	M	50	Rome	Psychologist
9	G	38	Rome	Endocrinologist
10	F	32	Rome	Psychologist
11	M	78	Rome	Surgeon
12	M	48	Rome	Lawyer
13	M	44	Rome	Activist
14	M	45	Rome	Activist
15	M	43	Salerno	Lawyer

Table 1 - Main characteristics of the sample of privileged witnesses
Source: Authors

Interviews were conducted through the Meet digital platform between the months of September and December 2020); the decision to use this tool was necessary due to regulations to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The methodological approach followed here is a biographical one: life stories, professional experiences and opinions provided material to reconstruct the conceptual, theoretical and cultural frame of gender and sexual normativity models of nonnormative gender identities.

In this study, we opted to conduct semi-structured interviews, that is, a type of interview (non-standard) in which a series of questions are asked, always the same and in the same order for everyone, leaving the respondent free to answer as he or she sees fit. Thus, open-ended questions are provided. It cannot be called completely standardized because the interviewee can direct, along with the questioner, the interview. It is called semi-structured because the outline merely prefixes relatively the questions and not the answers.

The semi-structured biographical interview touched on the following dimensions:
   a) socio-anagraphical information, describing age, occupation, educational qualification, and roleplayed within the scientific, clinical and conceptual debate of gender reaffirmation pathways;

b) intergenerational comparison between the models of today and yesterday by highlighting themes, points of contact and/or main differentiations

c) relationships with the mainstream community and LGBTQ+ communities, formal and informal, in terms of social inclusion and exclusion, confrontation and/or closing to dialogue

d) processes of construction and consolidation of gender patterns and sexual normalization of transgender people in relation*old* and *new media* and the role of the digital revolution;

e) identification of sexual normativity within the transgender community, the role of this identity in the community, and the relationship and management of power with other transgender identities

Gender patterns among transgender people: the binary domain phase, demedicalization, and nonbinary identities.

Called upon to comment on the main models of gender and gender expressivity followed and consolidated in the collective imagination of the transgender community in Italy from the enactment of Law 164/1982 to the present day, many of the privileged witnesses highlight some salient points that could clarify the current state of gender models and processes of intra-categorical normalization of nonnormative gender identities. These three interrelated points are:

a) the intra-categorical tension between binary and non-binary transgender identities and how this is reflected in terms of generational confrontation and the meaning of militancy;

b) the change in the collective meaning attributed to transition, and the need for some to implement a demedicalization of the transgender condition;

c) the spread and expansion of nonbinary identities predominantly in adolescents and young adults that are challenging previous legal and health systems calibrated and regulated on binary identities.

Regarding the first point, the intra-categorical tension within the transgender community between binary and non-binary identities would represent one of the main aspects of the social, cultural and health debate regarding the transgender condition.

Whereas until a few years ago transgender identities were almost entirely binary, with the contemplation of only two possible paths to gender reaffirmation (MtoF and FtoM), in the 2010 decade there has been a major increase in nonbinary identities (agender, genderfluid, genderqueer) that have necessarily forced the entire social and welfare state system to question the appropriateness of gender reaffirmation pathways as a tool for social and health democratization of the transgender community.

This intra-categorical tension is clearly and clearly expressed in the words of one of the interviewees, a Roman psychologist who has been involved in gender reaffirmation pathways for more than 10 years:

> *In recent years there has been a major change in the transgender population, also accomplice to cultural changes and especially the new legal instruments available. There are more and more nonbinary people, especially very young people, who are poorly digesting the sexual identities so far proposed by society. Of course, they also experience sexuality more freely in terms of personal choices; in fact, many declare themselves pansexual or even decide not to orient themselves toward anyone, as in the case of asexuality. There is certainly no shortage of tensions and conflicts between the "old guard" of transgender people, mostly binary and medicalized, and the new identities. (L, 40, Rome).*

The intra-categorical tension becomes very heated and bitter when, in processes of normalization, binary identities claim the long and complex process of emancipation and consolidation of social credibility within mainstream society and the LGBTQ+ community. Such credibility and "legitimized citizenship" is challenged by the deconstruction of the gender binarism of non-binary identities, resulting in the *perceived* process of *involution* in the social acceptance of the transgender community with exposure to new waves of intolerance, discrimination and social stigmatization by other sexual identities.

An excerpt of L.'s interview is quoted, which clearly expresses the concept of "cultural advantage" as one of the main drivers of the transgender community's ongoing intra-categorical tension between binary and non-binary identities.

> *Binary transgender people, who make up the majority of people over 35, view non-binary identities with suspicion and disapproval as they would enjoy a "cultural advantage" gained over the decades from the work, struggles and movements of binary transgender people, and through this process of clearance from gender binarism would thus reopen the struggle for "normalization" with cis-genderist society (L., 45, Rome).*

Another important aspect, highlighted in almost all interviews, is the waning of the "omnipotence of medicalization" in gender reassertion processes.

In fact, in recent years, the percentage of requests for medicalized pathways has declined sharply (although it remains the genuine and requested desire of many transgender people, especially binary). This weighty decline can also be attributed to the 2015 enactment of Supreme Court ruling No. 15138, which established the possibility of registry change without demolitive and reconstructive surgery and with only phenotypic adjustment with elective gender identity.

This decline of medicalization in the demands of the various instances of gender *nonconforming* identities has set in place the need for the transgender community

and the T-association world to push toward the definitive process of *depathologization and demedicalization* of the gender incongruent condition, a process endorsed and reinforced by the international scientific community and the recently published WPATH Standards of Care (version 8, September 2022).

The reported interview excerpt clearly highlights this change and evolution, and represents the point of a Salerno lawyer specializing in Pathways to Gender Reaffirmation:

> *As is often the case, the Legislature will come after the Judiciary. The rulings on gender reaffirmation pathways have been real "social battles" because the law that still regulates RCS pathways is not fully democratic and does not cover all possible expressions of gender identity. As a result, many instances have had to struggle to have their subjectivities recognized. The 2015 ruling and the recent ruling of the Court of Rome on the possibility of declaring oneself "non-binary" represent real "pearls" in the field of civil law and social democratization (M.48 years old, Rome)*

Clearing the path of gender reaffirmation from medicalization, however, has contributed within the transgender community to the intra-categorical tension previously mentioned; in fact, it is not unusual to witness processes of social stigmatization and discrimination within the transgender community itself for individuals who decide to reaffirm their gender identity without resorting to medicalization, and specifically surgery. Often, medicalized transgender people accuse nonmedicalized transgender people of "little courage" and "little credibility," contributing in the eyes of mainstream society to the regression of the aforementioned process of social credibility and legitimacy.

We report the views of a Roman psychologist, who works in Gender Affirmative Pathways.

> *Many medicalized transgender people discriminate against nonmedicalized transgender people on the choice to maintain gender ambiguity and thus exit the attempt at gender normalization put in place by Law 164/1982, which regulated a standardized pathway at the end of which superimposed the transgender person on a binary cisgender person in terms of legal social recognition (L, 45, Rome)*

A third salient point that emerged from the interviews on intergenerational comparison is the increase in nonbinary identities among adolescents and young adults. This increase, according to the interviewees could have disparate reasons, but it can be assumed centered on two basic aspects: on the one hand, the crisis of the dominant gender models in mainstream society, with an over-demanding masculine and an extremely sexualized and commodified feminine; on the other hand, the process of infodemy with respect to gender variance-the hyperdiffusion of content and news about possible gender *nonconforming* identities.

The testimony of a Roman psychologist better clarifies the above:

> *I have been dealing with transgender adolescents for many years, and I can say that in the past two decades, the demand for a gender questioning phase from teenagers and young adults has grown significantly. We must also consider the shock effect that the recent COVID-19 pandemic will also have on the identity fragilities of the younger generation.*
>
> *In my opinion, the response to proposed gender patterns has changed, and as a result many adolescents distance themselves or flee from these identity patterns by "assuming" a different identity and role to hope for easier social integration. Of course, there is no single valid theory to explain the phenomenon, and the scientific community is unanimous in saying that explanations are multifactorial. (M, 48, Rome)*

It is in the new generations that the *revolution of gender models and gender expression is* taking place *in the transgender community*. Adolescents and young adults are carrying new instances and new ways of representing gender and sexuality, complementing and taking to a different and complexified level the process of deconstructing the veterosexual model, having *self-determination* as a dictat. Precisely for these reasons, the intra-categorical tension could, over time, push what are the current reference models (based on a strong push for transnormativity) to a phase of complete innovation and unbundling from the mainstream (cis-heteronormative) models, but this phenomenon cannot take place without a complete generational change also in the systems of power and social management; this aspect is fully expressed in the interview of A. a Roman psychologist who deals with gender reaffirmation in adolescents and young adults:

> *I believe that the "internal struggle" within the transgender community between binary and nonbinary identities is not really open and unveiled, but is something that is made explicit in the visibility and legitimacy that binary transgender people have over nonbinary transgender people. Hardly the news, broadcasts and media deal with nonbinary transgender people or, if they do, they are portrayed as extremely bizarre and sexual ambiguities are emphasized. While the model of binary transgender, almost always MtoF trying to emancipate themselves by "telling" their own story of suffering and sacrifice is increasingly proposed. This on the one hand may give visibility, but on the other hand in my opinion it consolidates the idea that around Gender Incongruence there is only suffering and discomfort (A., 40, Rome).*

Gender models and sexual normalization of nonnormative gender identities in old and new media: from Hyper-woman movies to genderless influencers.

Another aspect that was investigated with the interviewees relates to the collective imagination about T persons as they have been and still are represented through old and new media. On the one hand, media representation helps to shed light on the

processes of stigmatization experienced by T persons, but on the other hand, it also allows for the identification of certain models that may serve as a reference for T persons.

Non-normative gender identities have a long tradition of media representation over the centuries, and the changes, evolutions and reworkings have followed hand in hand with the cultural-historical changes of contemporary societies.

There are, however, important considerations to note when trying to delineate the history of gender patterns within the transgender community (at the micro level) and in mainstream society (at the macro level).

Beginning with the latter, it is important to point out that the past century has seen an increasing production of the cultural industry on transgender people and identity, which has come up with numerous archetypes as well as symbolic constructions that had as their only common *file rouge the* exaltation of the common gender binary: they were binary, and polarized only on the MtoF path.

Many of these representations reproduced an image of transgenderism centered on sexual ambiguity and hyper-sexualization (Turolla, 2009).

In cinema it is not unusual to find transgender characters who fully embody the archetype of the *hyper-woman*, often against the backdrop of scenarios that refer to the world of deviance and in particular prostitution. Highly represented is the *crossdresser* model, which generally insists on caricatured, grotesque and ironic aspects, clearly contributing to the positioning of nonnormative gender identities in a position of delegitimization and lack of social credibility, compared to cisgenderist identities. An example in this regard is the impact in the collective imagination of the protagonists of the film *Some Like It Hot* (1959); the quote from the final scene has become, in fact, a veritable *cult* of embarrassing and grotesque situations inherent in the unveiling of the *crossdresser* condition.

Other ways of representing transgender identities (particularly female identities) concern, for example, the transgender person who, having completed the gender transition process, seeks to reposition themselves in mainstream society away from their hometown, as the bearer of an "unmentionable secret" not to be made explicit in their new living contexts; or conversely, the transgender person who leaves home and only when away from their home contexts is able to be themselves. Moreover, they often fit into communities of "marginalized" people, with people almost always afferent to the LGBTQ+ universes, and in some cases immigrants or people in vulnerable conditions, clearly reinforcing the stereotype that ascribes the transgender person to the contexts of deviance.

An example of the first type is proposed by Italian cinema, with the character of Chantal, (played by Ornella Muti in the film. *Nobody is perfect* released and distributed in 1981, on the eve of the enactment of Law 164/1982. In the film, multiple stereotypes and clichés that revolved around the transgender condition in those years are reproposed: such as the change of identity in Casablanca, the attempt to build a traditional family, the problem of generativity, the unconfessability of this condition, up to discrimination and bullying, with the inevitable attempt to overcome the problem through feelings.

Example of the reconstruction of one's life away from one's family of origin-from which an emotional, relational, and communicative distance is taken-is exemplarily represented by the character of Mara in Ferzan Ozpetek's film *Le fate ingnoranti,* released in theaters in 2000. Mara fully represents the transgender woman who embodies the model of the *hyper-woman*, who tries to experience a normal life in Rome, far from her homeland, by building a family that welcomes other marginalized people from the LGBTQ+ world within it. Mara has never returned home, no one in her family knows about her journey of gender reaffirmation, and a "family event" (in the film, her brother's wedding) puts the protagonist in the position of having to unveil her secret and face the past.

During the 2000s and 2010s always through the *old media* (TV and Cinema) new films were produced that proposed transgender characters less tied to the model of the *hyper-woman* and/or the caricature character taking on a role of social denunciation, desire for legitimization and normalization of the transgender condition. One example is the 2005 film *Transamerica*, which tells the story of a black MtoF woman who in a small town in the United States tries to rebuild her life and new identity, legitimizing her serenity through reformulating her relationship with her son and small community.

Even on television, thanks to the spread of programs such as reality shows, the visibility of transgender people as an alternative option to homosexuals has increased, contributing to a greater positive and empathetic attunement of public opinion and thus also to a redefinition of the social representation of transgender people in more ''normative'' terms

In 2009, for example, a transgender man participated in Big Brother 10 for the first time, thus on the one hand helping to shed light on the existence of another possible binary transgender identity, that of FtoM people, thus allowing many transgender youths who had never been represented in the public and media scene until then to come out of invisibility.

In fact, as a Roman psychologist notes, the gender models proposed for transgender people in the past, particularly through movies, were characterized by a stereotypical representation inherent in conditions of social deviance, a condition often attributable to the *sex worker.* As we can infer from the following interview excerpt:

Transgender people in the old media were mainly transgender women or transvestites. They were carriers of deviance, discomfort and social marginalization, hardly proposed as integrated into society. I remember, for example, a transgender character in Nanni Loy's film "Scugnizzi," I think it's from the late 1980s, who was portrayed as a prostitute who was unable to access gender reaffirmation services and was cross-dressing, but she was taking care of a child as her own. It was an image that we can say was typical of the "Neapolitan femminielli" but it certainly helped install in the collective imagination the idea of deviance of transgender people. Surely things have changed, thanks also to the revolution of the media and the film proposal itself. But there remains, of course, a difference in visibility; to date the transgender person visible at the level of the old media is the transgender woman (L., 48, Rome).

The advent of new media, the Internet, and social media have contributed to a veritable revolution in communication and the symbolic construction of reality, and as a result it has proposed new models of gender and new models of reference even within the transgender community.

Social media such as: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok now represent the main stages where to source, observe, internalize or externalize the gender patterns that binary and non-binary transgender people follow.

Over the years, in fact, there has been a proliferation of transgender people who share in detail and extensively on various platforms (mainly YouTube) their own gender reaffirmation journey and their emotions and experiences about the different stages of the process. These become veritable reference points as well as *opinion leaders* on transgenderism and gender reaffirmation pathways.

The digital revolution, also aided and accelerated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, has shifted the focus from YouTube, then Facebook and Instagram, to TikTok reaching especially adolescents and young adults, bringing with it innovative aspects from the perspective of new identity constructions.

From the interview excerpt of V. a 34-year-old Roman psychologist, motivations and opinions emerge about "migration" between some socials and others and the construction of new forms of identity within the digital LGBTQ+ community:

The new generations have also changed the way they communicate and use the medium. While on TV models are proposed that we can definitely consider present in society, but not unique, on social media, on the other hand, other models and sexual identities are depopulating. It is not difficult to find grenderfluid, genderqueer or even binary transgender influencers who become real talking points and communicators. I am reminded of the case of M. G. a genderqueer influencer who posts short reels on TikTok where she explains her life and makeup techniques on a daily basis. He has more than 120,000 followers. Like him many other alternative proposals for nonregulatory

sexual identities. What we should expect is that the digital revolution will be followed by a new sexual revolution (V., 34, Rome).

Many transgender personalities, binary and nonbinary, have become influencers within the Instagram and TikTok platforms building an alternative, different, and specific voice on the pathways of gender transition and reaffirmation than people who work in the field from a professional and academic perspective. This aspect, on the one hand, brings people with nonnormative gender identities closer and helps orient them toward awareness of their condition and alleviates the sense of personal and social loneliness that transgender people often experience in mainstream society; on the other hand, it confuses, disorients, and can turn them away from institutionalized and protected pathways even from a health, medical, and legal point of view, as G. endocrinologist from Rome, an expert in Pathways to Gender Reaffirmation, explains:

> *With the spread of social media and the emergence of "influencers" who share information with followers about their own journey, it is not so difficult to find transgender people who do not follow official protocols that are also protected from a medical/ health care point of view but incur what we insiders call "darkside" or "black market" among us. This malpractice is extremely dangerous since, especially for HRT, one must constantly monitor the hematochemical and functional values of the stimulated organs, and professionals must also necessarily be trained and specialized. I myself have had to, precisely to approach the world of young people, become very "social" to try to intercept young users and orient them in healthy and functional paths (G., 38, Rome).*

 The first phase of the research path helped to identify the main models of gender and gender expressiveness followed and consolidated in the collective imagination of the transgender community in Italy since the enactment of Law 164/82 and the main changes that have occurred in these models in the current landscape of sexual identities, attempting to hypothesize the main motivations and social, cultural and political aspects that have influenced these changes.

Through the analysis of the interviews of the privileged witnesses, it was possible to delineate how the binary transgender identity, predominantly female gender or MtoF, has been the main model of gender and transgender representation present in mainstream society (and in the transgender community itself) since the beginning of the entry into force of the normative device that still regulates gender change in Italy. This model was embodied in what the specific scholarly literature has called hyper-woman, that is, a hypersexualized woman who is the bearer of sensuality and transgression, and this model is present in a wide range of Western cultural industry products in the *old media*.

However, as evidenced by the privileged witnesses, there has been a gradual but steady revolution of gender patterns in the transgender community that has led to

the *crisis of binarism* and the emergence of new instances in sexual identities on the founding principle of "self-determination."

This process of gender redefinition would seem to be fueled by several motivations: first by the questioning of cis-heteronormative models considered, by LGBTQ+ people, to be oppressive and non-inclusive; and second by the digital revolution, which has expanded and diversified the "social spaces" where one can identify, aggregate and share needs, struggles and necessities for social change.

Concluding Reflections

At the conclusion of this research work, it is possible to enucleate some reflections that can somewhat attempt to answer the *research questions* formulated in the research design.

While I am aware that I have come to conclusions and considerations that cannot be considered applicable to the entire transgender universe, as it is varied and complex in its expression, they may represent an attempt to focus attention on the processes of normalization of transgender identities, an attempt that, moreover, has attempted to fill an obvious gap in the scientific literature, especially in the Italian scene.

Starting with the first research question, namely: *what are the main models of gender and gender expression followed and consolidated in the collective imagination of the transgender community in Italy from the enactment of Law 164/1982 to the present day?* From the analysis of interviews conducted with professionals from different fields involved in gender reaffirmation pathways, a *hegemony of* the gender model of transgender people emerged that embodies two main characteristics: gender binarism and adherence to cis-heteronormative models, again confirming the absence of sex-specific models and scripts for nonnormative sexual identities, forced to "borrow" scripts and scripts established in the cis-heteronormative model (Butler, 2004; Simon and Gagnon, 2003; Bacio, Peruzzi, 2017; Masullo, Coppola, 2022).

Trying to answer the *research questions* about the main changes in the construction of dominant gender models in the transgender community, what are the main motivations behind these changes, and what social and political debates these changes have initiated in contemporary society, it is important to emphasize a few key points.

The first major shift in gender patterns in the transgender community is the advent of nonbinary identities, instances that call for the deconstruction of gender order, binarism, and the dominant cis-heteronormative models of male and female. This deconstruction would seem to be initiated especially in new generations, who have not at all internalized the rigidities and structures of the veterosexual

model, and consider *fluidity* the criterion for constructing a new social and sexual reality (Scandurra et al. 2018; Bauman, 2002; Scarcelli et al. 2021).

However, there is no shortage of conflict and claims in the LGBTQ+ community and among transgender people themselves about the authenticity of nonbinary transgender identities. Just in the transgender community, in particular, there would be an intra-categorical tension between binary and non-binary transgender people regarding the normativity of the transgender condition: for the former, being transgender implies gender binarism, the medicalization of the path of reaffirmation and adherence as much as possible to the gender models proposed by *mainstream* society; for the latter, on the other hand, it is time to rethink and redefine the rigid dichotomy defined by male and female, promoting new expressions of identity.

Non-binary identities challenge the normative system of the dominant society, questioning the genderist apparatuses of control expressed by medical and legal institutions; this aspect underlies the tension and conflicts with binary transgender identities, which on the contrary, in order to legitimize themselves, have adhered to the normative and cisgenderist criteria established in the dominant society (Foucault, 1996).

Finally, the comparison between the gender models of transgender people proposed by *old media* and *new media* would perfectly trace the division between binary and nonbinary identities: while in the cultural products of theater, film, and television, transgender women were relegated to deviant settings and situations, with the almost total absence of transgender men, in the new media (Internet, social media, apps for dating) there has been instead the expansion and visibilization of male and nonbinary transgender identities, thanks to the spread of *transgender video loggers* and the *binary and nonbinary next-generation influencers.*

Finally, it is important to consider the methodological limitations of the present research work and outline future scenarios for trans-normativity research.

The first methodological limitation is the biased scope of analysis of the transgender universe considered: the professionals interviewed work predominantly in accredited centers for gender reaffirmation pathways, and therefore have experience with transgender people accessing the medicalized pathways, thus generally binary, middle-class and with a desire to enmesh themselves in the institutionalized pathway for gender transition; the narratives of non-medicalized transgender people, who cannot access social-health services or who are not intercepted by the trajectories of gender reaffirmation pathways, are therefore missing.

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