

Transmen and “the Nude”

by

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Abstract

The utilization of the internet to share nude images is very widespread. While this phenomenon has been looked at in previous literature as a tool for flirtation and an extension of exhibition into the online world, there has yet to be information on how it is affecting more critical populations. The lack of information on, and under-representation of transgender peoples and their bodies posits a need for further studies. This study aims to look at transmen who share their nude bodies online in nude-sharing, trans-communities. Through a content analysis of posts, comments and usernames within this online space, I argue that sharing nude images is a beneficial and therapeutic method for transmen to gain more body confidence and to explore their sexualities. A discussion of pornotherapy and its benefits ensues as a result of this study.

Introduction

Transgender individuals have long had to hide their identities due to prejudice and discrimination based on societal norms. Since the 2010s, the experiences and lives of trans people have been given more attention as trans rights and activism has surged. Popular media, such as the 2013 show, *Orange is the New Black*, have also brought further visibility to trans individuals. Although there is slightly more recognition for transgender people now, the bodies of these individuals remain shrouded in taboo. This is especially true for transmen, who have received much less attention than transwomen have in mainstream culture and media, as well as within the porn industry. The creation of porn websites such as “Bonus Hole Boys” in 2014, have brought some awareness to the bodies and sexuality of transmen. However, there is still little representation of these bodies in more dominant outlets. In online communities, such as Reddit’s /r/FTMPorn (female-to-male porn), transmen are combating this lack of visibility and sharing nude images of themselves. Breaking the taboo of nudity therefore works as a form of activism along with providing a space for transmen to gain confidence about themselves and their bodies.

Being a transman myself, I want to perform a study that will look into the experiences of transgender men, as the majority of the studies I come across that look into transgender

individuals focus on both transmen and transwomen, as if their experiences are equivalent. While these studies are still extremely important, I think that there needs to be more specific research that can reveal the different issues that these two groups face. Online, amateur, nude culture has been an expanding section of the internet-world since its creation. These online spaces have allowed for individuals with bodies that do not represent the “ideal” or “norm” set by the dominant culture to show themselves off. I think focusing on a performance that is considered a deviant act (showing one’s naked body) and learning the positive outcomes of this behavior could help to change societal ideas of what is acceptable. If sharing one’s nude body can help one to feel better about themselves in addition to breaking stereotypes and expectations, this information needs to be analyzed and disseminated. I have shared my own body in one of these groups in the past. The feedback from other trans-men and supportive individuals truly aided me in feeling more comfortable in my own skin. I think we tend to be much more critical of ourselves than we are of anyone else, and the expectations set by popular media only adds more negativity to that self-criticism. The ability to actually see other people with bodies much like your own, who are also confident with themselves, helps to change the perceptions you have of your own self and body. It is because I have encountered this experience myself that I want to study if other transmen who participate in these communities have gone through a similar transformation in their self-confidence.

Previous literature has focused on how online nudity is affecting cis-populations, as well as discussing whether sharing nude images online is an extension of exhibitionism (Veer and Golf-Papez, 2018; Kaylor, Jeglic, and Collins, 2016; Hugh-Jones, Gough, and Littlewood, 2005). While there have been studies on how online communities are affecting transgender individuals (Cannon, Speedlin, Avera, Robertson, Ingram, and Prado, 2017) little to no research is available

on how trans individuals, specifically transmen, are interacting with and being affected by, what is commonly referred to as “the nude.” It is vital to study how sharing one’s body can affect how one feels about themselves, especially for a critical group such as transmen, whose bodies sit outside the norm of what a male body is expected to be. There clearly needs to be more research focused on the experiences of transmen, especially in relation to their sexualities and bodies.

This study takes an exploratory look at how sharing nude images of oneself in online trans communities is affecting the confidence of transmen. This is important due to an overall lack of studies on transmen. It is also important to see how online communities are able to affect the lives of this group, whose bodies have been widely invisible in the mainstream, hetero-dominant world. I argue that sharing nude images in online, trans-specific communities, allows for FTM and trans-masculine individuals to gain confidence about themselves and their bodies and to feel a sense of support and belonging. The ways these individuals present themselves and their bodies, and the reactions others are having to them, could reveal how transmen have created their own sets of bodily expectations to combat the heteronormative conceptions of a man’s body. Sharing their nudes also increases the access and availability of images of transmen’s bodies, creating a sense of visibility and affirmation of them.

The following sections detail the various connecting factors that are influencing an individual who is participating in these online, nude-sharing communities. The theories involved in this study include Goffman’s theory of the presentation of self, Sutherland’s theory of differential association, and a critical queer theory. Presentation of self relates to how these individuals have to create titles, usernames and images that represent how they want others to see them. Differential association, while typically a theory for criminality, relates to the way in which these online groups remove a sense of deviancy from the act of being nude. A critical

queer theory will be utilized to focus specifically on transmen's "queering" of the male body and of heteronormativity. A content analysis of posts, comments, and usernames within a transgender, online nude-sharing community is utilized to reveal how transmen are interacting in these communities and how these interactions are affecting them. Coding of the terms and patterns used in r/FTMPorn will be utilized to show how transmen are building their confidence and actualizing themselves and their bodies through the act of sharing their nude selves online.

Transgender 101

It is important to start off with some basic definitions and explanations of what it means to be transgender. Firstly, according to the Oxford dictionary, transgender is defined as, "denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex." In other words, to be trans is to mentally and emotionally identify with a gender that does not match your physical sex and/or original gender marker. The and/or is added due to the experiences of intersex (having ambiguous genitalia) trans people being labelled as the incorrect gender at birth. Sex has been defined as corresponding to the genitals with which you have been born with while your gender is what you express and identify as.

Gender itself is often discussed as a dichotomy between male and female. In actuality, it is on a spectrum. The concepts of "male" and "female" being two separate and opposite positions is a socially constructed idea. Judith Butler and Simone De Beauvoir are both known for their deconstruction of gender. They relate gender to the influence of others, rather than it being something innate in people (Olson, 2012). Based on their theories, everyone has some level of masculinity and femininity within themselves, this does not determine if you are male or female. Additionally, masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive opposites as the language in

our society tends to frame them as (Hegarty, Ansara, and Barker, 2018). Gender is a performative act and it is much more fluid than the perceptions we have historically held on to (Butler, 1990). The stereotypes and norms we have created within society for these genders leads to ideas of how a man and a woman are supposed to act and express themselves. However, even if you identify with the gender you were assigned at birth, you more than likely break some of these stereotypes. The point is, to say there is only male and female is to discredit the actualized lives of many individuals who identify as both, as neither, as in-between and as different than their assigned sex. This assumption also completely ignores intersex individuals who are naturally born with aspects of both sexes, revealing that sex should also be viewed on a spectrum (Kruse, 2019). Acknowledging intersex people is important in any study relating to gender. Intersex studies have often had to pave their way separately from gender and transgender studies which is detrimental in trying to understand how all these aspects of gender relate to and influence each other (Kruse, 2019).

Since this study is focusing on transmen, I feel that I need to bring up the concept of masculinity as it is most often connected to conceptions of men. To be masculine or to act in a masculine manner has historically been marked as something only a cis-man should be able to accomplish (Gottzén and Straube, 2016). Aspects of masculinity include both physical markers and behavioral markers. Physical examples involve being tall, muscular, and having a large penis. Behavioral examples relate to being confident, aggressive, and withholding one's emotions. How transmen and trans-masculine individuals are able to express their masculinity is of importance as they must break through the stereotypes of cis-masculinity (Gottzén and Straube, 2016). Many transmen are pressured into presenting themselves as hyper-masculine in order to feel accepted as a man in the wider society (Cannon et al., 2017; Edelman and Zimman,

2014). There is an expectation that to be seen as transgender you must display the most stereotypical aspects of the gender you identify as. This leads to feelings of self-shame for any feminine qualities one has (Abelson, 2016). It also reveals how as a society, we tend to characterize masculinity as being for men and femininity as being for women when it is much more complicated than that (Gottzén and Straube, 2016).

Every trans individual goes through their own experience. While there are certainly shared experiences between trans-people, it is important to emphasize that there is no one, single path that an individual goes down to transition. This is true between transmen and transwomen but also within these groups. Some trans people desire surgeries and hormone replacement therapy to help decrease the body dysphoria they may be feeling. Body dysphoria is a term for expressing extreme discomfort with one's body. This is something that most transgender people experience to some extent. You feel one way but your body is developing and acting in another way, this makes the physical and the emotional clash, leading to issues with self-acceptance and body positivity.

It is because trans people are characterized as having this body dysphoria that the phenomena of trans individuals sharing their naked bodies is vital to study. How are individuals who struggle so much with living within their bodies able to overcome this enough to publicly reveal their body? How does the act of sharing one's naked body influence the embodiment of the self? And is sharing nude images of oneself able to work as a long-term form of self-therapy for these individuals?

Theorizing Sexuality and Power

Within this section, I utilize several sociological theories to discuss and develop a fuller sense of how sexuality and power may create confidence through sharing the nude self. I use several theories of classical sociology to provide a grounding and then delve into contemporary theories to flesh out this argument. The purpose of this section is to look at the ways in which the nude image acts as a catalyst for recognizing and accepting one's sexuality as a transman. Additionally, how this recognition may be able to influence feelings of self-empowerment. Other aspects of power are also discussed, as well as a conversation about the layered meanings of nudity.

The work of Erving Goffman and his theory of the presentation of self is relevant to my study. Goffman is a very well-known sociologist that looked at the ways in which day-to-day interactions influence the social world. In Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* he examines the social world like theatre, asserting a dramaturgical self. In other words, we all practice our performance of self in the "backstage" and when we interact with others, we are acting in the "front stage" (Goffman, 1959). The view is that we all have multiple selves, and like masks, we alter our presentation depending on who our audience is (Goffman, 1959). Goffman's presentation of self functions in this study to represent how individuals present confidence through revealing their bodies and are affirmed through the feedback they receive from others. They may gauge how to pose in their images and what language to use based on what they have seen and learned from others in the group (McCarthy, 1996; Lasén & García, 2015). The individual's profile and posts can be seen as the frontstage while their preparation in taking photos and determining what to title their posts can be seen as part of the backstage (Goffman, 1959; Lasén & García, 2015).

The second theory I utilize is Edwin Sutherland's theory of differential association. Sutherland was a criminologist who created several theories in relation to deviance. His theory of differential association is the idea that individuals learn to favor criminal behavior through their interactions with pre-existing criminals (Sutherland, 1939). To expand on this, one develops values through their continued interactions that show more positive reasons for committing crimes (Sutherland, 1939). Simultaneously, one feels more negative toward following societal norms and laws (Sutherland, 1939). Differential association functions in this study to explain how within these online groups, a discourse is created that supports the revelation of one's nude body. Through the involvement with these nude-sharing communities, one's perspective of nudity as deviant is altered.

Another relevant theory is Charles Horton Cooley's concept of the looking glass self, which built the groundwork that Goffman later continued on (Scheff, 2003). His theory essentially states that we are constantly looking at ourselves through the ways we imagine others are seeing us (Cooley, 1902). The "looking glass" uses the analogy of someone staring at themselves in a mirror (Cooley, 1902). This theory adds on to the ideas of Goffman's presentation of self in that, when posting a photo of oneself, one must take care to make the right kind of poses and lighting and have the right kind of title to ensure they are being interpreted by others in the way they desire (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959). Cooley was adamant on the ability of "self-monitoring" to result in feelings of pride or shame. I argue that within online nude-sharing-communities, it is feelings of pride that are developed through the positive feedback that online posters receive (Cooley, 1902; Scheff, 2003). There is also a constant awareness about other people's interpretations even when the focus is on the self. In looking at posts from other

transmen, one may develop a specific view of how they think they should be presenting. It is the influence of others that impacts the view of the self.

Using Goffman's presentation of self, Sutherland's differential association, and Cooley's looking glass self as a framework, I expect that continued involvement in these online communities provides transmen with an acceptance of their nude bodies and a positive alteration of self-perceptions and presentations. It is critical to study this group as there is an overall lack of information on them, especially in relation to their experiences with their own bodies and online culture (Edelman and Zimman, 2014). Studying how mediated exhibitionism provides a sense of belonging and confidence to transmen is critical in exploring the benefits online exposure of one's body can have for those who live beyond heteronormative expectations. The representations and continued discussion within these spaces allows for confidence and support to flourish. Transmen who interact in these communities are able to feel more embodied confidence as well as confidence surrounding their sexuality. The following paragraphs delve into contemporary studies and theories that aid in supporting this argument.

Through these online communities, there is a sense of visibility brought to trans bodies (Edelman and Zimman, 2014). Because these communities, such as Reddit's /r/FTMPorn, are specific to trans people and/or transmen, there is ample representation of trans-bodies that allows for feelings of confidence and belonging to grow. Even for transmen who do not post images, being able to see bodies that may resemble their own is an affirming and empowering process (Loureiro, 2017; Veer and Golf-Papez, 2018). Sharing nude images online in trans-specific communities can also help in fostering feelings of power and affirmed sexuality. This is because the act of sharing one's body in an accepting environment that already showcases bodies similar to one's own can help you to feel embodied and in control of yourself (Hugh-Jones, Gough, &

Littlewood, 2005; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015; Veer & Golf-Papez, 2018). While it can be argued that an objectification process may occur through the act of sharing one's body (Kaylor et al., 2016; Jones, 2010) the support and moderation from other transmen within these communities counteracts this process, thus allowing for shared nudity to be a positive method of gaining self-confidence. The ability to remain anonymous and having the choice of a facial reveal allows another aspect of power to emerge: one can avoid societal punishments for performing the supposedly deviant act (Jones, 2010; Nagel & Frith, 2015). While in face-to-face interactions it is one's body that marks an interaction as intimate, in the online world, it is the face that becomes the signifier of intimacy (Jones, 2010). In protecting one's identity on the internet, the anonymous body allows a degree of agency because it can be shared freely. The ability to have a choice in sharing your identity is a powerful force.

Edelman and Zimman (2014) performed a study in which they analyzed interviews of 30 transmen. They also performed a content analysis of erotic personal adverts posted by transmen as well as titles and comments from transmale porn videos from Xtube. Edelman and Zimman argue that language is a tool of power. It is the poster who determines their own titles in this space. More specifically, they state, "...members decouple body parts from gender such that a penis is not necessarily portrayed as an organ on men and a vagina is not necessarily a signifier of womanhood" (Edelman and Zimman, 2014, p. 682). Transmen are able to formulate concepts of gender that go beyond the typical, heteronormative expectations of genital terminologies. While Edelman and Zimman focused on transmen seeking sexual encounters through craigslist, a careful examination of transmen who share images of their bodies online would reveal a more complex situation. Because language is being used as a tool of power in ads for sexual encounters, I argue that within an online, nude-sharing FTM community, these terminologies are

fostered and reaffirmed in comments and discussions between transmen and others who participate and provide support.

Online spaces can promote self-acceptance and decrease feelings of not being “man enough” through the process of sharing, viewing and participating in positive interactions within the community. There is power in feeling authentic to oneself and in feeling comfortable in one’s body when the social expectation is to feel completely dysphoric at all times. Sharing nude imagery of oneself is a therapeutic process and can help one to be active in how they want themselves and others to be perceived (Hugh-Jones et al., 2005; Loureiro, 2017). This concept of self-pornification or “pornotherapy” is a key aspect in my argument that mediated exhibitionism is able to boost a sense of confidence and belonging for transgender men (Jones, 2010; Lasén & García, 2015; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015; Loureiro, 2017). Loureiro argues that the naked image is able to do more than simply act as a catalyst for sexting and sexual interaction online. More specifically, she claims that, “...the nude can... be used as a vehicle for a different and individual erotica, even as an erotic therapy” (Loureiro, 2017, p. 57). In other words, one’s nude body is not only a source of sexual desires in others, but is able to manifest these sexual feelings within one’s self. Loureiro is studying how Brazilian women of color use erotic therapy online, I argue that the same explanations can be applied to transgender men who utilize similar methods of pornotherapy.

It is important to recognize that the idea of nudity has multiple meanings. Specifically, that there is a sexual, dirty nudity and a non-sexual, beautiful nudity (Sibilia, 2015). This concept has its roots in the idea that it is okay for a “clean” body to be seen but it is obscene for a body that does not match traditional standards of beauty to be seen (Sibilia, 2015). This is important to address, as there are pushes and pulls within these communities against these concepts. Sibilia

discusses this idea within her own study on self-exposed nudity. The concept is utilized here to look at the ways in which online, nude-sharing, transgender groups are actively altering what it means to be nude. While there is certainly a sexual aspect when sharing your body in these groups, there is also the sense that this is an attempt to normalize trans bodies. In other words, to change which bodies are considered acceptable as beautiful beyond a purely sexual form. With support from Sibilía, I argue that these nude-sharing groups are morphing these two meanings of nudity into a single definition in which bodies can be both sexual as well as intrinsically aesthetic and beautiful (Sibilía, 2015).

Mediated exhibitionism also brings about sexual power in other forms. There is an ability to express one's sexuality openly and to hear from others who desire one's body (Loureiro, 2017; Edelman and Zimman, 2014; Lasén & García, 2015; Tziallas, 2015; Veer & Golf-Papez, 2018). There is sexual excitement derived from sharing one's body (Hugh-Jones et al., 2005; Kaylor et al., 2016). An acceptance of deviancy within these communities occurs as it is *expected* that one will be nude. This relates to Sutherland's theory of differential association because the deviant act of sharing a nude image of oneself is continuously reaffirmed as normal within these spaces (Sutherland, 1939; McCarthy, 1996). A narrative develops that overwhelmingly supports breaking this taboo rather than adhering to normative, societal standards that work to shun nudity. This narrative affirms the sexualities of transmen as authentic and meaningful, adding to a sense of confidence and control over one's own sexual representation.

Feeling in control of one's representation, being able to view other bodies, and having a platform to interact with other transmen allows for a further sense of belonging to develop. The ability to learn about ways in which other transmen are acting on and presenting their sexuality leads to the formation of a discourse. This discourse moves beyond sexuality and representation

in the sense that the nude has become normalized within this group, there is an ability and opportunity to discuss features of transitioning. The capacity to see the impact of surgeries or hormones on the bodies and experiences of other transmen may invoke feelings within oneself. Images that may have begun as a source of sexual empowerment can also become sources of information.

Transitioning Through Spaces

The process of transitioning can be very different for each individual. However, it is commonplace to go through this transition by entering a number of different spaces. These include but are not limited to: personal and familial spaces, online spaces, group-oriented spaces, occupational spaces, and institutional spaces. When someone decides to take their first step toward transitioning, it involves more than just coming out to those you care about. A complicated process begins that includes having to work through bureaucratic institutions in order for one to “actualize” their identity in the eyes of the law. While coming out is a very intimate and personal experience, the process of going through name and gender alterations on legal documents as well as physical aspects of transitioning, require one to enter into spaces that are somewhat void of interpersonal connections. The amount of time and work one has to put into this system depends upon age, financial status, and geographic location. This section aims to look at the various spaces trans individuals have to move through during their transition and how these spaces affect them.

Before a person is even able to begin hormone therapy, they must first see a licensed therapist for a set amount of sessions. This typically amounts to at least a year of therapy. Then, that person needs a typed document signed by a therapist to *prove* that they are transgender and

are acceptable to continue with physical changes. One then needs to either find, or get recommended to, an endocrinologist (a doctor who studies hormones) and provide the *evidence* they have received from their therapist. The transitioning process is spoken of in the same language one would use to discuss a court case. Only, instead of being innocent until proven guilty, one is guilty until proven innocent. One is not *legally* trans until they are *proven* to be. This not only frames transitioning in a dichotomous light, but also makes the desire for some physical change a *requirement* to be accepted as trans. The entire process is also dependent on one's knowledge of transitioning. Beyond being aware of where to go to start transitioning, the ability to start this process is also affected by the person's health insurance and financial situation. If a trans person is under the age of 18, this leads to further roadblocks if they do not have the support of their parents or guardians. Not only is the lack of support going to affect the emotional state of an individual, but in order for one to legally change their name, they must be over the age of 18 or have the consent of their guardians.

Legally changing one's name is not as easy as erasing one name and filling in another. You first need to get in contact with a judge via the supreme court of your state (if within the US) and fill out documents based on the county you live in. You then begin a petition, and get it examined by the county clerk and a signed order by a judge. After this, as my experience required me to do as a New York state resident, you must advertise your name change in a public newspaper within 60 days and provide proof of this to the same judge. This then legally changes your name if approved. However, you still need to go through the process of changing your name on all of your legal documents. This requires you to bring all of the documents previously mentioned to your department of health to change your name on your birth certificate. The same goes for changing your name on your social security, at your doctor's office, your job, etc. The

whole operation amounts to a collection and recollection of documents. My name change process alone took me over a year to finally complete. Think about having to wait in line at the DMV to update the registration on your car, except instead of a car, it is *you*. The impersonality of a bureaucracy and the excessive hoops a trans individual must jump through in order to actualize their identity legally and physically reveals just a portion of the struggles these individuals must go through.

I feel it is important to explain the details of some of these processes due to the misconceptions surrounding transitions. One does not simply walk into a plastic surgeon's office and have a "sex change" just like that. Transitioning is a life-long process. The differences between social spaces like support groups and institutional spaces like the county clerk reveals the multifaceted systems people must enter. While some spaces are open to trans individuals, others are very clearly closed off. This section aims to look at the influence of spaces on the dissemination of information. If you do not have a source that has been through these processes, you are essentially left on your own to figure it out as the spaces previously discussed do not provide you with a map of transitioning. It is essentially up to trans individuals to support one another emotionally and intellectually since the systems we have in place do not (Cannon, et al., 2017).

Online transgender communities for sharing nudes are not only beneficial to one's sexual self. The specificity of the group allows for information on how to transition and results of transitioning procedures to become central and available (Cannon et al., 2017). A transman may have a mastectomy and post a nude image of himself. Another transman may seek information on who performed his surgery, in order to help himself gather more information for his own transition. Transmen who share their nude bodies online are also performing an act of activism as

there is an overall lack of visibility and self-representation of transmale bodies in both the mediated world and popular culture (Loureiro, 2017; Edelman and Zimman, 2014). This shows that sharing a nude image publicly is not simply a sexualized act but a powerful tool in feeling authentic, helping other transmen feel represented, and in bringing attention to bodies otherwise made invisible.

Commenting on images and messaging posters are some of the ways in which these individuals are communicating with one another (Cannon et al., 2017; Loureiro, 2017; Veer and Golf-Papez, 2018). While not every active member in the group is a transman, the space remains safe and supportive through constant moderation (Cannon et al., 2017; Loureiro, 2017). For those who do post their bodies, they will often receive feedback in the form of comments and/or “upvotes” that tell the poster that their body is being received positively (Veer and Golf-Papez, 2018; Kaylor et al., 2016). This can be seen as a form of activism due to the overall lack of self-representation of transmen's bodies in the mediated and mainstream world as well as through the discourse that these individuals provide (Loureiro, 2017; Edelman and Zimman, 2014). The community provides a dissemination of information and exposure of how transitioning can be very different for distinct individuals. For instance, some transmen do not have or desire a mastectomy. The imagery and vocalized feelings of these individuals are able to be valued within these communities, allowing for the knowledge that others feel the same way to be spread and thus adding to feelings of confidence and authenticity for transmen.

While information may be accessible from offline trans-communities, the utilization of the internet allows people who may feel they are unable to be “out” or who do not have a widespread trans-community in their area to also obtain this information. The knowledge and support gained from these spaces may be extremely important in helping one to gain confidence

and to take the first step towards a physical transition process. Online spaces allow one to search for this information and connect with other transmen without the fear of being reprimanded or judged. Face-to-face communities of transgender individuals have also done a lot of groundwork in hopes of providing access to information (Hines, 2007). However, many people end up “growing out of” these communities as they feel they need less and less support (Hines, 2007). The online communities that I focus on appear to differ in this sense as there is no obligation to physically be somewhere at a certain place and time. This means that an individual can participate in the online space at any given moment. Information is also able to be disseminated and updated much faster in an online space. Breaking the taboo of being nude can go beyond pure discussion of one’s body as presenting the body itself and getting direct feedback can be more helpful than speculation and generalized positivity one may gain from an in-person support group.

My focus on online communities does not discount the efforts and work of in-person groups. I seek to reveal that there are benefits to online groups that in-person groups are just incapable of providing. The problem of being nervous to ask someone personally about their transition is an aspect that an online group is able to break through as removing that face-to-face interaction tends to also remove social anxieties (Zhao, 2005; Nagel and Frith, 2015). This relates to remaining anonymous online, as one can feel freer to interact in ways they might not otherwise if their ‘real’ identity was visible (Nagel and Frith, 2015).

These online spaces can become safe havens for transmen who are just coming to terms with themselves as it provides a positive narrative for transbodies that is hard to come by on other platforms. One may be able to garner information on transitioning from other sources and locations but they will miss out on knowledge pertaining to bodily performance that these groups

can provide (Zhao, 2005; Edelman and Zimman, 2014; Lasén and García, 2015; Sibilia, 2015). This can relate to Goffman and Cooley's theories in the sense that a transman can learn how he thinks he is supposed to present himself through participation within these nude-sharing communities (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959). Participation within the group allows one to see themselves through the feedback of others and the presentations that other transmen are performing (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959). This differs from narratives gained from other platforms as there is a general idea in mainstream and heteronormative sources that transmen should be as masculine as they possibly can in order to "pass" and be accepted as "real" men (Abelson, 2016; Gottzén and Straube, 2016; Kruse, 2019). The reality is, that transmen, just as everyone else, have different levels of masculinity and femininity. Within these nude-sharing communities, there is no such stigma against a performance of one's body that does not adhere to heteronormative conceptions of the male body (Lasén and García, 2015).

It is also through these online communities that transmen learn to "un-deviate" the act of revealing their nude bodies (Sutherland, 1939; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz, 2015; Sibilia, 2015; Veer and Golf-Papez, 2018). The nude is reformed to represent a source of confidence, authenticity and embodiment rather than as a source of shame (Scheff, 2003; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz, 2015; Sibilia, 2015; Veer and Golf-Papez, 2018). While this alteration in definitions of nudity, at first glance, doesn't seem to involve information on transitioning, the result is that one essentially learns to become more comfortable within their own body. This is extremely important in a transition as the body is typically known for being a source of stress and discomfort. The ability for these online-communities to teach transmen not only about the physical aspects of transitioning, but also how to present and think about their bodies reveals how impactful they are to one's transition. Being informed on the ways that you can transition

and present yourself is powerful, allowing a stronger development of confidence. It is this connection between knowledge, confidence, and bodies that also leads to further feelings of representation and belonging amongst other transmen and within the mediated world.

Data and Methods

In this study, I use a qualitative research framework to examine the significance and meanings of publicly shared, nude images of trans men. Unlike quantitative research which gathers and analyzes numerical data, qualitative research focuses on meanings, interactions and interpretations. This being said, qualitative research is more suited for expressing theories rather than correlations and causations. Qualitative methods of sociology try to understand the symbols and interpretations that occur within every day, micro-interactions. The aim is typically to try to better understand how a specific social phenomenon is being understood by a distinct population. The methods that are often utilized with this type of research include observations, interviews, content analyses, open-ended surveys, and oral histories. Rather than trying to understand what causes a trans-man to share nude images online, I explore the ways in which transmen who share nude images online interpret this action and their interactions with others within these online spaces. In other words, I am looking to grasp the view of this phenomenon from the perspective of those participating rather than trying to explain why this phenomenon occurs in a general sense. Within my own study, I will use the method of a content analysis of Reddit's r/FTMPorn community.

A content analysis is essentially a sociological method of research that aims to analyze documents to further understand social phenomena. By studying the images and words used and the ways in which they are being used, sociologists are thus able to make theorizations about the

culture being studied. Due to the vast amount of information that has been documented on the internet and the growth of online communities in general, content analyses of online data have become a popular method of social research. I contend that looking at online social spaces will reveal the importance of these spaces to critical groups such as transmen. A critical group is essentially a group of people that has been historically understudied and are typically marginalized from mainstream society. Since my study seeks to understand how sharing nude images in transgender communities is affecting the confidence of transmen, utilizing a content analysis will enable me to code the specific language being used as well as an analysis of the images being shared. This will allow for an analysis of how sharing nude images in online spaces gives meaning and empowerment to trans bodies. By keeping myself personally separated from these interactions, I am better able to gather and analyze this data without any possible interference that my presence may cause.

I feel it is important that I also provide an introduction to what Reddit is since it will be the basis of my content analysis. Reddit.com has been consistently growing its website traffic since its launch in 2005. Its motto has always been that it is “the front page of the internet” due to it being one of the top most visited websites in the US and the world. In simple terms, Reddit is a hub for different forums. Users are able to share a number of different media, including images, text, videos, and news and are then able to comment on and have the option of “upvoting” or “downvoting” these posts and comments. Through your usage of Reddit, you gain what many refer to as “internet points” which is listed as “karma” in Reddit’s system. These points do not necessarily relate to how many upvotes one gains on their posts and comments but on how often they are interacting on Reddit in general. As stated before, Reddit is essentially a collection of different boards and forums known as subreddits. Users are able to create their own

subreddits if they choose and can also subscribe to as many others as they wish. These subreddits typically have one specific focus to them. For instance, there is a subreddit known as r/animation that is all about content relating to animation. These subreddits also tend to have their own sets of rules referred to as “community standards” in addition to Reddit’s site-wide rule-set. They are moderated by Reddit users themselves who have been made moderators by the creator of the specific subreddit. What this means is that even though Reddit is one website, there is an enormous number of sub-groups and variation within the website.

A content analysis of posts and comments from the subreddit /r/FTMPorn on the Reddit website will be conducted. This method works best for this study as it will allow for the focus to be on what is being said in the titles and the comments of posts. This lets me see the ways in which transmen are presenting themselves as well as how they are interacting with one another and others in relation to their own posts. I will also be able to examine the images being shared within these subreddits to try to better understand any patterns or symbols that may be gathered visually.

Findings & Analysis:

This study started with an assumption that there would be a lot of discussion between transmen around the process of transitioning. While I did find some evidence of this, the primary focus within r/FTMPorn is just that—a self-posting pornography forum for transmen. There is an atmosphere in which people can process, learn, or work out the myriad of difficulties that come with a transition. This relates more to the nude body and to conceptions of sex and sexuality. However, this is still an important aspect of transitioning that I do not think is discussed as much in more general trans communities. The findings from this content analysis support my overall

argument that communities like r/FTMPorn can be spaces where transmen are able to garner both body and self-confidence and can learn from others within the group. Through my analysis of usernames, photographs, titles, and comments it appears that transmen are utilizing this space to create and reaffirm terminologies for themselves and their bodies. There are a variety of expressions and terms that are employed, making visible the reality that transmen are not a uniform group that all agree on the same language. The patterns found within photographs as well as the significance of body hair also seem to point in the direction of variety and diversity when it comes to the visual presentation of transmen's bodies. Overall, I found that r/FTMPorn provided a needed space for transmen to display and discuss their bodies and sexualities in a safe and exploratory manner.

It's About Sex and Self-Definition: Photograph Patterns and Terminologies

As stated, r/FTMPorn is about sex. From the titles to the comments, there is very clearly a sexual edge that is imbued within this community and those who post here. There is a focus on the genitalia by both posters and commenters alike. This includes posters referring to their own genitals but also referring to someone else's genitals. Additionally, posters often made reference to their audience in their posts, asking for their opinions or on what they "would do" to them. Comments are heavily focused on the body and the genitalia in particular.

One of the most interesting findings of this study is that there is seemingly no agreement on which term to use when referring to transmen's genitalia. While some transmen employ terms such as "cock" and "dick", others use terms such as "pussy" and "hole" instead. This shows that there is a preference by some transmen to have their genitalia referred to in more phallic terms while others seem to be comfortable with vaginal or more non-descriptive terms. Interestingly,

there did not seem to be much discussion about what terms to use when trying to reference different parts of one person's genitalia. In other words, while there were some transmen that focused on their "dick" (for the purposes of being clear, I will say that this is in reference to the bio-clitoris) others focused on the "pussy" (referencing what is a bio-vagina) and there was no overlap of this in the data I collected. While this does not mean that there are no transmen on r/FTMPorn that do utilize dual terminologies, it does show that there seems to be differences among transmen in defining one's own genitals.

In addition to the use of genital-terminologies in titles and comments, there is also the use of what I refer to as the "crotch shot" in many of the images analyzed. I describe this as a photo taken with the prime focus being on the crotch of the individual. This sometimes includes using one's fingers to "spread" the genitals and make them more apparent. While this is a very common pattern, showing up in 86/124 images analyzed, there is still variation within these images. Like the variation with terminologies, some of these images are focusing on the phallic aspect of the genitals while others seem to be focusing on the "hole" or include both in the image. The crotch shot paired with the language in the title of the post then informs the commenters on how they are to interact with this poster. Those that focus on their "cock" receive a lot of comments about the length and size of it or about wanting to "suck on" it. On the other hand, those that focus on their "pussy" get a lot more comments about wanting to "fuck" the poster. Whenever anyone seems to break these unspoken rules, their comment gets extremely negative votes from the community. In other words, if someone comments on a post in which the poster has already laid claim to the term "cock" and they choose to use the word "pussy" their comment receives downvotes to the point where it is no longer shown unless you actively click to view the removed comment. This reveals the formation of a safe space for trans sexuality as

the judgement is not on the specific terms themselves but on who the terms are being applied to. Transmen can describe themselves anyway that they like and the commenters are to uphold the language rules implicitly set by the poster.

As we have discussed the crotch shot pattern of photographs within r/FTMPorn, there is also a significant portion of posters that seem to focus on their chest within their images. I refer to this as “the chest shot”. While this is not as common as the crotch shot, the chest shot still comes up several times and is worth discussing. Firstly, we need to discuss that there are those who have surgeried chests and those who have non-surgeried chests. Surprisingly, of the images that I collected in my data, there are more instances of non-surgeried chests being displayed than surgeried chests. At first glance this seems to be counter to what one would expect, in fact it certainly is a different finding than I had originally inferred. This being said, those sharing their surgeried chests still receive much more traffic on their posts than those who share their non-surgeried chests. There is still an apparent preference for a body that it is “closer” to a cis-man’s. However, those who are sharing their non-surgeried chests are really pushing back against this norm. The display of a transman’s non-surgeried chest in a community like r/FTMPorn brings recognition to transmen who have not yet had surgery or who are choosing not to undergo surgery at all. This is important as it again brings forward the fact that there is a wide amount of variation when it comes to the actual lives of transmen. Just as we have seen with language and terminologies, the physical bodies of transmen and the parts they choose to focus on in their photos also proves as evidence of this diversity.

My findings also bring me to the realization that r/FTMPorn is able to be a safe space for transmen beyond its community policing—the choice is up to the poster if they want to reveal their face. This allows transmen who may have a desire to share their bodies to do so without

fear of being “found out” by people that may be in their day-to-day lives. There are a few posters who do share their face or part of their face however, the vast majority have chosen to remain anonymous. This may sound like it is counterintuitive to the idea of this space being the grounds for activism but I argue that there is a level of agency and control over one’s representation that is gained through this choice of anonymity. You do not have to be “out” to share here, you do not have to become some mainstream expectation of masculinity to share here: r/FTMPorn allows transmen to explore their identity, their bodies, their sexuality. Being able to remain anonymous appears to push this exploratory manner of becoming oneself as there are no preconceived expectations. Nobody knows who you are in your “real life” and thus you have more room to play around with how you present yourself. This idea of playing with the self can relate to Goffman’s theories on self presentation and dramaturgy.

Transmen are utilizing r/FTMPorn as a sort of front-stage testing ground. What this means is that even though r/FTMPorn is a public space, due to the ability to remain anonymous or under a pseudonym, it functions as something almost in between the front and back stage. These individuals can utilize the side-stage of r/FTMPorn to watch and learn ways of being as well as utilizing the stage themselves to play and try out different terminologies and ways of being. The fact that r/FTMPorn is an online space also adds to the idea of it as a side-stage since it literally appears to sit somewhere between an individual’s public and private life. It is important that transmen are able to go through an exploration of self such as this as they learn to create and recreate representations of themselves. Just as children play pretend and try out different roles and terminologies, transmen are employing a similar tactic in this space. This helps you to grow and to understand what makes you feel like you. Goffman would argue that we all wear masks to seem favorable to different audiences—r/FTMPorn is one place in which

the self is both actor and audience. This can relate to Cooley's Looking Glass Self as well, as this self-play leads to the development of a certain conception of oneself from the perspective of others.

Influence from Conventional Pornography: Body Hair and Peniscentrism

Body hair is a site of variation among the transmen who post in r/FTMPorn. Of all the findings, this one seems to be the most noticeable. There are some transmen who appear to love showing off that they have hairy bodies while at the same time, there are some that seem to enjoy the fact that they have shaved. There does seem to be a preference for transmen who are hairy as there are many comments making reference to this. However, there is a significant number of posters that are choosing to shave all or parts of their body. Since I can only base this off of what I can see in the images, I do not speak of facial hair or if someone has shaved their body in the past. 34/124 of the images I collected seemed to show signs of shaving while 80/124 seemed to show no signs of shaving. Clearly there is a lot of variation in this community on whether or not one will shave. This seems to show some distancing from male gender norms and from mainstream expectations of how a transman should present. However, you can view this finding as a way in which conventional pornography is continuing to influence this community. It is possible that some of these transmen feel a pressure to shave due to pornographic expectations of those with bio-vaginas to be hairless. This is not to say that these transmen identify with women but that some may identify with having a bio-vagina and that due to the general lack of representation of transmen in conventional porn, are adopting and queering a pre-existing script about certain body parts.

As I have discussed the importance of the vocabulary transmen use to describe their bodies as well as their photograph styles and body hair, there is an underlying pattern that seems to be present: the influence of conventional pornography. One of the findings that points toward this is the extreme focus on the phallus. Many transmen on r/FTMPorn and many of the commenters refer to the size and length of these transmen's cocks. There is a clear preference given to the transmen whose bodies have had access to hormones due to the high amount of upvotes and comment activity on posts from transmen that focus on an image of the testosteroneed cock. A majority of the comments on these posts are complimenting the poster's size, asking the poster how long they have been on testosterone or asking how much it has grown from testosterone. There is also an overwhelming amount of comments that reference wanting to "suck" the posters cock as well. This shows that even within a community in which most people do not have a bio-penis, there is still an extreme focus on what has been *defined* as a penis.

The importance of the penis has its roots in traditional conceptions of masculinity and manliness. When discussions of gender come up, there is always one argument that places the emphasis on the genitalia (Hegarty et al., 2018). The penis has been masculinized in this sense. Moreover, it is often deemed as the singular piece of "evidence" that one is a man. When taking into account the multifaceted experiences and expressions of trans bodies, this act of essentializing the penis creates some expectations. Most transmen do not have a bio-penis, as stated, and thus, defining of their genitalia as such speaks to this expectation of the penis on a male body. The taking of terms traditionally used for a bio-penis by some transmen shows that there are still attempts to adhere to this expectation of manliness. This is not to erase the fact that these men find the utilization of and conception of their bodies in this way as actualizing but to simply reveal how even in a space created for self-exploration, influences from conventional and

heteronormative society still affect how we are defining ourselves. It appears that a singular definition of masculinity does not suffice to encapsulate all of the varying expressions of masculinity and manhood being performed by transmen. This shows a need to redefine masculinity as a whole as it is not simply the presence of a bio-penis that makes one a man.

The concept of multiple masculinities and of being able to define one's own masculinity can relate to Edelman and Zimman's study on transmen's sexuality. As with my own study, they also discovered that transmen are self-defining their bodies and selves. Specifically, they are changing the ways in which we connect genitalia to gender (Edelman and Zimman, 2014). Both sex and gender in this way become queered. It is possible for one to have a bio-vagina but to still refer to and define one's genitals as a dick (Edelman and Zimman, 2014). Again, this does seem to play into some heteronormative expectations of masculinity—that a man must have a penis to be a man—however, the lack of transmen posting in r/FTMPorn who have undergone bottom surgery (I did not see a single one) reveals that there is still queering taking place. That is to say, these transmen are defining and actualizing these terminologies in relation to their bodies and creating new forms of masculinity. While some of the men in this group seem to be employing a masculinity that says: a man may have a penis but this penis need not be biological. Other transmen seem to be going further with how they queer masculinity, enacting a masculinity that appears to say: one does not need to have a penis *at all* to be a man. This speaks to the variation among transmen in how they think of themselves and their bodies in relation to their identity as men. However, the penis as a symbol of manhood persists in its influence.

Continuing with this phallic-based discussion, there are also a number of posts that include reference to *someone else's* genitalia. Specifically, to a bio-penis. I did not see a single post that referred to a bio-vagina during this study. While no poster made it clear if they were

referring to cis-men specifically with this, there is a few transmen that employ the language of a “*real*” cock when referring to this “other” bio-penis. This is not seen in the majority of the posts however; this dialogue appears to be somewhat problematic within this community as it appears to implicitly mark transmen’s cocks as “not real” when compared to a bio-penis. While I do not see any backlash given to the posters that use this sort of language, it clearly reveals that there are still some conventional gender hierarchies being played out based on genitalia even among some transmen.

There is a specific GIF that is on r/FTMPorn that during my data collection, received much higher traffic and upvotes than any other post I have seen in this community. This video-GIF portrayed one transman with two transwomen participating in a threesome with one another. All three of these individuals’ genitals are non-surgeried and the ways in which they performed sex seemed to fit into conventional pornography guidelines (bio-penis inside bio-vagina). While the genders are being queered in this case, there is still an almost uncanny similarity to heteronormative pornography in how they structured this scene. The transman is on the bottom while the two transwomen appear to play the tops and more dominant roles. It appears to be that because there is such a lack of mainstream pornography including both transwomen and transmen that even while trying to break the porn-norms these individuals still had to borrow from a preexisting social script for sex. Pornography online has been a main source of learning about sex and how to have sex for people across all genders. We all know that it is problematic but it seems to be even more so for transgendered individuals. Specifically, transmen who, aside from a few niche websites, have little to no professional representation at all. Until there becomes more mainstream representation of trans sexualities for trans people to borrow scripts

from, there will probably continue to be a strong influence from heteronormative conventional pornography within these communities.

Creation of Safe Space for Trans Sexualities

While I have brought up a few points before on how r/FTMPorn has become this virtual safe space for transmen to explore their sexuality, I feel it is important that I provide a focused explanation of this finding. Through community policing, the ability to remain anonymous, the power to control the definition of one's body and self, and the representation of a variety of transmen, r/FTMPorn facilitates a crucial space for transmen. Cisgender and transgender individuals alike face influences from the media. However, transgender individuals do not have the luxury of having ready-made social scripts that many cisgender people do have access to. Additionally, because r/FTMPorn is an online location, there is also the removal of physical violence as a threat when trying to understand one's desires and body.

r/FTMPorn's focus is on being a site for pornography for transmen but it goes beyond this. While objectification is often what we fear happening to those who involve themselves in pornography, this community serves as a source of body positivity and desire rather than as a source of negativity and objectification. Transmen who do not participate in a group like this may not feel as though they are desirable based on the lack of recognition of transmen in the mainstream world. Even if one is active in a general trans-community, there is a very real possibility that sexuality and body discussions are not brought up for fear of causing distress to someone else. r/FTMPorn is filling in the gap of a much-needed space for transmen that is not afforded to them otherwise. Just as trans people have to support one another when it comes to transitioning legally, they also have to support one another when it comes to developing self and

body confidence. Although there is involvement of some non-trans individuals in this space, they are required to interact by the rules: that is, being supportive of those transmen who are literally putting themselves in a vulnerable position in a public social space.

It's Complicated (A Conclusion)

Analyzing the interactions that occur on r/FTMPorn in addition to the literature on online exhibitionism has led to the conclusion that things are very complicated and in flux for this group. Transmen are utilizing spaces like r/FTMPorn to explore their bodies and their sexuality. They are defining themselves, playing with their identity and are experiencing a sense of desire from others. There is no singular, uniform group of transmen that are interacting in these spaces: the variation in self-described language and in presentation of the body really reveals this to us. Clearly, as this community is continuing to grow, there is a need that this group is meeting. Transmen, just as any other human, need to have space to try and understand and explore their bodies and identities. While mainstream expectations have pushed the notion that trans individuals are dysphoric with their bodies (which does appear to be true) this does not address the problem. r/FTMPorn is however, addressing this problem in a way as the vast representation of trans bodies allows for transmen to feel normal. Beyond that, it is crucial that trans people are able to explore their sexuality. Just because one has discomforts with their body does not mean that they do not desire or experience sexual pleasure. There is a fostering of body positivity and self-confidence within this community that is often wrongly labelled as deviant by the mainstream world.

I think that if I had more time or were to do this study over again, I would attempt a mixture of a content analysis and in-depth interviews. While I have been able to garner a lot of

information, I think to really draw stronger conclusions to how this community is affecting transmen I would need to hear it from them personally. I would ask specific questions regarding body confidence and self-confidence to get a clearer picture of this phenomenon. However, I do feel that since this study began from my own personal experience with r/FTMPorn and the confidence I gained from utilizing this platform that I still manage to showcase this connection. Focusing on other online transgender communities beyond nude-sharing communities would also be important to look at in order to better compare online and in-person groups and to compare what is gained between a nude-sharing and non-nude-sharing group. Overall, transmen as a group need more research on them. This will not only benefit transmen themselves but the body of knowledge on gender as a whole, specifically in regards to men and masculinity.

My study contributes new information to our knowledge of online exhibitionism and transmen's specific involvement in this phenomenon. While it is impossible for me to draw concrete conclusions based on this study, I have provided the groundwork for future studies to continue delving into these topics. Specifically, a quantitative survey or in-depth interview-based study of transmen in spaces such as r/FTMPorn seems to be the next logical step in filling in the gaps in the literature. I also suggest that transwomen, nonbinary, and intersex individuals be focused on in future studies surrounding online exhibitionism as I suspect each critical group will have their own sets of norms and specific issues. In general, I think that more studies on "pornotherapy" will help with changing our perceptions of what nudity and pornography can do for us, especially for those of us whose bodies and identities are not considered conventional or heteronormative. I suspect that similar findings will be found in other nude-sharing communities among marginalized people that have been found among transmen in my study. While I do not think that we will escape the trappings of conventional, heteronormative porn yet, I do think that

further studies will push against the primarily negative narrative that has been tied to nudity. Pornography will continue to influence all of us but if we can begin to be the ones who are creating this pornography for ourselves, as transmen are doing in r/FTMPorn, we may be able to change the ways that it affects and influences us. Pornotherapy may not be a widely considered topic yet, however, it may just hold the key to us having the control to define our own body and sexual desires without having to feel objectified.

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