

## Scripts and Sexual Markets of Transgender People on Online Dating Apps: A Netnographic Study

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# *Scripts and Sexual Markets of Transgender People on Online Dating Apps: A Netnographic Study<sup>1</sup>*

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, the LGBT community has seen an exponential increase in the use of specific online dating apps (*e.g.* Grindr and Wapa), designed to encourage meetings and affective or sexual exchanges, that have partially disrupted the traditional way of approaching studies on non-regulatory sexuality. Indeed, they changed the very meaning that some terms assumed in the past, such as “LGBT community” or “Rainbow Community” (Masullo, Gianola, 2017; Masullo, Coppola, 2020; Bacio, Peruzzi, 2017).

This study aims to answer some research questions: how transgender people use the meeting apps (*e.g.* Grindr, Wapa, Badoo); which dating apps are most used by T people and how these new “communicative and intersubjective spaces” influence, orient and determine the defining processes related to gender

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<sup>1</sup> The paper was devised and written jointly by the authors. However, for the sake of authorship, sections 1, 2, 6, 6.1, 6.2 are attributed to Giuseppe Masullo, while sections 3, 4, 4.1, 5, 5.1 are attributed to Marianna Coppola. The authors co-wrote the conclusions.

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expressivity and sexual script construction; to what extent these channels constitute spaces to meet emotional and sexual needs; and whether these spaces reflect the same discriminatory dynamics that T people experience in offline reality.

This research has shed light on how the ambivalence of dating apps for T people. On the one hand, they are places of emancipation; on the other, they perpetuate the exclusion mechanisms experienced offline.

The choice of a platform is crucial from an identity point of view and it roughly reflects the perceived stage of the user's transition process. The app is regarded as a place to find confirmation and recognition of their newly acquired identity.

Keywords: online dating apps, sexual scripts, sexual markets.

## **1. Introduction**

Addressing the issue of transsexuality is at the same time ambitious and controversial for the Social Sciences, as it engenders discourses, research questions, and processes aimed at re-elaborating social reality – as well as the languages, values, and beliefs underpinning the identities of contemporary individuals.

Overviewing the literature on gender dysphoria and non-conforming identities, it is easy to outline the physiological separation between two opposing “views” of the phenomenon. On the one hand, the essentialist and naturalist positions, which postulate a dichotomous difference between the two biological sexes (male and female) reflected in as many genders, roles, and gender expressions. They identify in heterosexuality the normative sexual orientation, functional to reproduction and the continuation of the species. On the other hand, the constructivist position, which sees gender and sexual identity as an articulated social construction merging personal factors with social and cultural influences, thus determining a wider and more varied range of combinations of genders and sexual orientations (Rinaldi, 2012; 2016).

In the constructivist approach, studying transsexuality involves a careful, systematic, and in-depth analysis of how society and culture determine identity constructions, patterns, and gender expressions (Garfinkel, 2000; Ekins, King, 2006). The identity constructions of masculine and feminine are ancestrally determined and dichotomized by somatic-bio-anatomical features. On these, following the culture of belonging, converge psychological, social, and cultural factors that dictate the set of expectations, values, practices, and communicative processes automatically assigned to each sex (Ruspini, 2009).

In recent years, new media, and particularly social media, have been paramount for the processes of reality construction and the determination of gender and sexual models and practices (Masullo, Coppola, 2020).

Specifically, the development and diffusion of the Internet provided the LGBT community with the possibility of creating a new *communicative space*. In this new space, LGBT people can meet, build personal relationships and friendships, find information, experiment with socialization processes, identify practices and practices, but above all experiment with *sexual scripts* and activate new *sexual markets* (Simon, Gagnon 1984; 1986).

Intersectionality highlighted how the umbrella term “LGBT” includes distinct identities, characterized by specific social and cultural processes. The latter place said various identities along the axis of power established by the gender and heteronormative order, crowned by cisgender, white, and heterosexual men (Bourdieu, 2014; Corbisiero 2010). This “order” oversteps the boundaries of the LGBT community and radically penetrates it. Hence instances of homonormativity, that process of integration of gays and lesbians through the absorption “of a certain heteronormative grammar that characterizes lifestyles and relational norms” (Chauvin, Lerch, 2016: 63). Transgender and transsexual people suffer a double stigma concerning their position in both the broader society and the LGB community: they are regarded as complex subjects who break the heteronormativity criteria and the hegemonic gender models (Connell, 1995; Butler, 2004).

The intersectional approach highlighted that while the normalisation of homoerotic desire helped in combating discrimination (mostly directed at white men), it also “define[d] a quasi-ethnic identity within subcultural theories”. The main effect of such theories has been to overlook “the debate on the social construction of heterosexuality and the cognitive regime imposed by the heterosexuality/homosexuality dichotomy, but also and above all to define homosexuality in terms of a universal identity category and ‘identity’” (Rinaldi 2013: 158)<sup>1</sup>.

This separation between in-group and out-group in the LGBT community means that each transgender subject struggling with their self-determination of gender and sexuality seeks spaces to experience themselves, acquire those requirements necessary for the performance of specific roles within the various

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<sup>1</sup> Marchetti (2013) pointed out that the intersectional approach is particularly useful because it allows researchers to address those forms of discrimination until now hidden in the public sphere. Studies on social inequalities have always focused on the most disadvantaged people, on minorities within the majority, and not on marginalized people within their reference groups. The discrimination suffered by individuals within LGBT communities is therefore little explored.

relational arenas, including the cyberspace. The pervasiveness of the new media, the increasing overlap between online and offline generates more and more demand for specific research exploring these areas that for transgender people they can represent both an opportunity for “emancipation” and a context in which to experience new forms of oppression and discrimination.

In this sense, social media offer T people a wide range of tools and applications to create new acquaintances, compare themselves with other people of their culture and subculture or meet sentimental and sexual partners. There are many online dating applications dedicated to specific sexual orientations (*e.g.*, Badoo for heterosexuals, Grindr for gays and Wapa for lesbians) as well as specific gender identities (Transgender App for transsexuals, transgenders, non-binary and crossdressers). Their immediacy, confidentiality, and gratuity aim to provide a wide possibility to meet new people compared with face-to-face socialization contexts.

This research aims to investigate and understand how transgender and transsexual people use dating applications. We want to highlight how these tools contribute to their process of identity and sexual self-determination – in other words, how people who use these tools are confronted with the main gender models circulating in dating applications. We aim to highlight the strategies employed by these people to escape the potential stigmatization and discrimination since each of these applications, paraphrasing Bourdieu (2014) is a field characterized by specific stakes, specific languages and meanings. These tools, also because of their very structure, often reflect a rigid binary scheme, little inclusive towards people whose identity cannot be synthesized through rigid categories and labels (Masullo, Coppola, 2020; Masullo, Gianola, 2017).

The first section will review the current scientific literature on the subject. We will examine three key concepts: gender identity, gender dysphoria and non-binary identity, crucial to the understanding of the condition of transgender and transsexual people. Regarding the description of the relational fields that transgender women and men go through during the process of socialization to sexuality, we will refer the concepts of “sexual script” and “sexual market” developed by Laumann and Gagnon (1995). These concepts will help in constructing a reference frame guiding the analysis of the data and empirical findings.

The last section will describe the results, analysing the construction of gender models, gender expressivity, and sexual scripts of transsexual and transgender people (FtoM and MtoF) in sexual markets using dating apps.

## 2. Beyond Binarism: cisgender and transgender gender identity

By the term gender identity, Money and Ehrhardt (1972), mean the gendered consciousness that individuals have of themselves, corresponding to the male gender, female gender or ambivalently to both. Gender identity is constructed through an interrelationship with the outside world that strongly influences the way of acting, thinking, and desiring of the subjects, who adapt to society's role expectations, developing appropriate (that is, accepted and recognized) behaviours about sexual characteristics.

To identify the process of gender identity construction, Stoller (1985) coined the term "gender identity". He identified two possible outcomes: correspondence, defined as *cisgender*, in which gender identity matches the biological sex according to the binary logic of male/female, and non-correspondence, defined as *transgender*, to identify the possible constructions of gender identity out of binarism and with no correspondence between gender identity and biological sex.

To better understand the phenomena studied, it is important to distinguish between transsexuality and transgenderism. *Transsexuality* is the condition of a person who experiences a misalignment between physical identity and psychic identity. This condition is so much invalidating and all-encompassing that subjects undertake psychological, legal, and medical-surgical paths to change their body, assuming the phenotypical characteristic of the gender to which they feel they belong<sup>2</sup>.

*Transgenderism*, instead, refers to individuals who experience an inconsistency between their gender identity and the one assigned to them at birth and determined by their biological sex without, however, rejecting their body and sexual experience. They resort to strategies of social and sometimes somatic alignment, but only to a partial extent (*e.g.*, crossdressing, eliminating secondary sexual characteristics phenotypically recognizable to one or another gender). Thus, the umbrella term *transgender* represents a social and cultural macro-category to identify those who do not perceive their gender identity to be fully aligned with their biological sex (Scandurra, Mezza, Bochicchio, 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> The condition of transsexuality was for many years considered a psychological and personality disorder. From 1980 to 1994 it was included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM, versions III and IV) under the section "Psychological and Sexual Disorders", first with the term *transsexuality* and then with *Gender Identity Disorder*. After many battles for self-determination, against the social stigma due to pathologizing the transsexual condition, and for the simplification of protocols that regulate gender transitions, in 2013 the American Psychological Association eliminated transsexuality as a mental pathology and recognized it as a social disadvantage (APA, 2013).

However, there is a crucial distinction within transgender identities: those reproducing gender binarism, expressed by the polarity MtoF (Male to Female) and FtoM (Female to Male); and those that do not recognize male/female gender binarism, referred to as *non-binary* identities (Koehler, Eyssel, Nieder, 2018; Reisiner Sari, Hughto, 2019). Non-binary people do not identify exclusively with either male or female gender identity, but present fluid, open-ended, oscillating, and situational identity constructions. *Genderfluid* identities oscillate between both genders or neither at any given time; their gender expression shifts based on episodic and contextual parameters. *Agender* identities disavow closed and immutable gender belonging, constructing new gender expressivity without tracing it back to known and dominant genders (Richards, Bouman, 2016; Scandurra, Mezza, Bochicchio, 2019).

For completeness, we must add a third dimension to sex and gender identity: *sexual orientation* understood as emotional, relational, and sexual desire/attraction towards people of the opposite sex (*heterosexuality*), of the same sex (*homosexuality*) or both (*bisexuality*). As some authors suggest (Blumberg, 1984; Feinberg, 1996), biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation are three sides of sexual identity. For some individuals, these may not be aligned according to the heteronormative understanding. Therefore, among transgender people, there can be homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual individuals.

### **3. Sexuality as a construction of social reality: the theory of sexual scripts and sexual market**

Within the constructivist model, Erving Goffman was among the first who addressed the issue of sexuality as an autonomous social and cultural construction with a complex structure in its own right rather than as a residual and marginal aspect of social behaviour. The founding father of the dramaturgical approach disagrees with the vision of a closed, schematic, and analytical gender identity construction; instead, he sees gender as a “portrait”, as a representation and exhibition of gender scripts pre-disposed and organized by culture and society for *masculine* and *feminine* (Goffman, 1990).

Goffman’s theory, known as *gender displays*, opened the way for other “interpretive” theories of sexuality. Among these, stands out Gagnon and Simon’s theory of *sexual scripts* (1984), developed within the symbolic interactionist approach. Taking up the constructivist assumptions on sexuality, it considers social and sexual behaviours as scripts that are constructed, consolidated, fed, and socially recognized.

Sexual scripts can be regarded as “cognitive structures produced by the union of different complexes of structured concepts, configuring a stereotyped, organized and adequate sequence of actions that recurs in certain circumstances, in a given context, to achieve a certain purpose” (Rinaldi, 2016: 86-87). According to the authors, sexual scripts are *maps of meanings and behaviours* established by reference groups and adapted by individuals to contextualize (and in many cases normalize) their behaviours, experiences, and performances. These constructions manifest themselves on three distinct levels: (a) the *cultural level*, the cultural and social framework within which they are enacted and oriented; b) the *interpersonal level*, i.e., the behavioural patterns enacted towards other individuals, constructing sexual coordinates that orient, direct, and facilitate sex-oriented interpersonal interactions; c) the *intrapyschic level*, that is, the set of feelings, emotions, and experiences contributing to the acceptance and assimilation of sexual scripts by the individual (Gagnon, Simon, 2005).

Gagnon and Laumann (1995) later expanded the theory of sexual scripts, inserting it into a broader theory that emphasizes the role of social networks and socialization processes in the construction of a broader sexual arena where individual sexual scripts construct a more articulated and complex *theatricalization of sexual behaviours*. The authors advance the theory of sexual markets, according to which every sexual activity involves “social transactions” within dyadic or multi-subject relationships. These transactions construct the rules, norms, aberrations, limits, and correction systems of sexual behaviours considered appropriate and consistent with the cultural reference frame<sup>3</sup>.

In both face-to-face interactions and web communities, sexual markets are organized in and by *marketplaces*: the physical or virtual places where individuals can implement sexual scripts. Here, they can provide information about their *sexual capital*: the set of physical, affective, psychological, and erotic characteristics that confer erotic value and translate into *sexual coordinates* to

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<sup>3</sup> Gagnon and Laumann (1995) identify five factors that determine the construction of sexual markets: a) *social networks*: made up of networks of interpersonal relationships, both real and virtual, within which the subject can initiate processes of *social and sexual interaction*. They are influenced by affinity and correspondence (ethnicity, religion, ideologies, geographical belonging, etc.); b) *physical space*: it represents the geographical boundaries (real and virtual) within which a process of partnering can be expressed; c) *sexual culture*: the cultural construction of the sexual, it can be internal, relating to specific social and cultural groups, and external, relating to combinations of rules, roles and expectations regulated by the macro-culture of belonging; d) *sexual scripts*; e) *institutional environments*: religious organization, the educational and pedagogical system, the normative and legislative system, which contribute to the construction of the rules and norms that draw the line separating *normative* from *aberrant*.

guide and direct sexual behaviour, both one's own and that of others (Green, 2014).

#### **4. Methodology**

Based on the theoretical considerations above, our research aims to answer the following questions:

- How do gender models, gender expressivity, sexual scripts, access to and use of sexual markets differ based on the specific medium used by LGBT persons (Badoo, Grindr, Wapa, and Transgender app)?
- Do transgender women (MtoF), transgender men (FtoM), and non-binary individuals differ substantially in their use of dating apps? Do these differences reflect dissimilarities in the construction processes of gender models, gender expression, and socialization to sexuality?
- Do the models highlighted reflect the dominant criteria in society (hegemonic masculinity/femininity, heteronormativity, gender binarism) or are there elaborations of new gender models and new identity constructions?

We are aware of the methodological limitations, including sampling and the reluctance of transgender people to participate in research (due to inhibitions and difficulties in talking about aspects related to their gender identity and sexual practices and experiences). Therefore, we decided to use a mixed approach following the netnographic approach (Masullo, Addeo, Delli Paoli, 2020) which involved the use of different online/offline qualitative techniques (Kozinets, 2010) namely:

- Covert observation of about 300 users' profiles in the dating app for transgender people (*Transgender app*) selected according to a non-probabilistic reasoned-choice sampling procedure<sup>4</sup>;
- Semi-structured interviews with 30 privileged witnesses. We selected the interviewees from the self-help group of a centre affiliated with the ONIG (National Centre for Gender Identity, that promotes the welfare of transgender and non-binary people). We interviewed 18 MtoF and FtoM heterosexual transsexuals (11 women and 7 men) and 12 homosexual transsexuals (7 men and 5 women).

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<sup>4</sup> This type of sampling is used when the phenomenon to be studied is strongly characterized or limited to certain areas or individuals. The units are chosen based on some of their characteristics. We decided to select profiles following the indications that users entered in the app regarding their gender identity. To allow for comparisons – although not statistically representative of the population studied – we selected 100 profiles of MtF people, 100 of FtM people, 100 of non-binary people.

The covert analysis of the 300 profiles on the dating app included an observational grid that examined *age*, *residence*, use of *nicknames* (e.g., avatar, identity pseudonym, or own name), *profile photo* (e.g., face, sexualized body parts, non-sexualized body parts), *profile construction* (biographical presentations, psychological and character dimensions, explicit coordinates for the sexual market).

The semi-structured interview touched on the following aspects: a) motivations for choosing a particular dating app; b) media consumption in terms of frequency and mode of use; c) aspects related to socialization to sexuality and experiences between online and offline; d) discriminations experienced in these virtual communication spaces (e.g., body shaming, slut-shaming etc.).

#### ***4.1 Badoo, Grindr, Wapa e Transgender app: a description of the most widespread dating apps among T people***

To better clarify the characteristics of the “virtual” sexual markets in which T people transit, it is essential to first describe the media platforms and their main attributes. These constitute specific frames hosting the various self-presentation strategies of the users (highlighted by the characteristics of the profiles) and the interactions between users (mainly through “likes”, “taps”, or private messaging).

The wide range of dating apps in the social media landscape allows users to choose an “online sexual market” beforehand, based on the characteristics of the *erotic and sexual* object for which the app is specialized. Therefore, there are specific online dating apps for heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and transgender people.

The dating app *Badoo* falls into the first category, with mainly *heterosexual* users. It allows them to create an accurate profile from both an expressive and an instrumental point of view. The former through the albums, which can hold up to 10 photos; the latter by pointing out their sexual orientation, type of partner required, physical and psychological characteristics, hobbies, and preferences. *Badoo* also allows users to gold-list or black-list their contacts. Furthermore, in addition to features shared by other dating apps (such as geolocation and instant messaging), it allows them to know which other users viewed their profile, as well as their preferences, to create clear and unequivocal coordinates of the sexual market between users.

*Grindr* and *Wapa* are the most widespread dating apps for homosexual and bisexual people (the former for gays and/or bisexual men and the latter for lesbians and/or bisexual women). They share important features, such as geolocation, instant messaging, and self-presentation. The geolocation of users

allows, e.g., for invisibility in their hometown and at the same time to search for potential partners in a designated area. The short bio gives them the possibility to introduce themselves biographically and explicitly state the physical, sexual, and psychological preferences of the partner sought. The main difference between the two is Wapa’s lack of selectivity because, unlike Grindr, there is no possibility to blacklist users and avoid being contacted by unwelcome and unwanted people.

*Transgender App* is one of the two major dating apps specifically for transgenders, transsexuals, crossdressers, and non-binary people. Its features are similar to those of other dating apps, but it allows for several combinations of gender and sexual orientation. Users can present themselves as Trans Men (Transsexual person FtoM), Trans Women (Transsexual person MtoF) and Non-Binary and can describe their sexual orientation by choosing between heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual. This wide range of combinations allows users to clearly and specifically define their gender coordinates and sexual orientation, to facilitate the search for possible partners. The biographical presentation section allows users to type up to 300 characters, thus inserting physical, psychological, relational characteristics and providing information about the gender model and gender expressiveness – or, in the case of non-binary people, the non-adherence to dichotomous binary gender models.

Table 1 summarises the specificities, similarities and differences between the dating apps considered here:

*TABLE 1. Comparison of the dating apps analysed.*

Dating App	Gender	Sexual orientation	Free of charge	Immediacy	Geolocalization	Selectivity
Badoo	Mainly cisgender	Mainly heterosexual	Y	Y	Y	Y
Grindr	Mainly cisgender	Mainly homosexual and bisexual	Y	Y	Y	Y
Wapa	Mainly cisgender	Mainly homosexual and bisexual	Y	Y	Y	N
Transgender app	Mainly Transgender	Mainly heterosexual	Y	Y	Y	Y

## 5. The analysis of *Transgender App*'s users: invisibility and anonymity vs self-determination and experimentation

As mentioned above, we analysed 300 profiles among *Transgender App*'s users. We selected them by using gender as the only search filter: trans woman for MtoF, trans man for FtoM, and non-binary<sup>5</sup>.

We selected the profiles between September and October 2020; the average age of their owners is 32.4 years, and they are geographically located mainly in the North (65%) rather than the Centre (15%) and South (20%).

Regarding the *nicknames* used, most of the selected profiles – about 57% – use *avatars* (words formed by letters and numbers that do not directly recall recognizable aspects of their identity, such as *kimera78*, *jojo34*). This agrees with the literature: the cyberspace guarantees anonymity and invisibility. Both aspects are crucial in the early stages of socialization to sexuality or when the main purpose of using the app is accessing the sexual market (Bacio, Peruzzi, 2017; Masullo, Coppola 2020). 38.5%, instead, use a *pseudonym* that could (as well as not) be associated with the chosen neo-identity (e.g., Michela, Kevin, Jacopo etc.). We noticed this aspect mainly in the more linear profiles, with a clear identity and gender expressivity.

The remaining 4% of the profiles of transgender people choose to use the first and last name associated with the new identity, without resorting to pseudonyms or avatars. Data are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. *Analysis of the nicknames.*

List of nicknames	%
Avatar (mia1212; solosesso; oratrav)	57,0%
Pseudonym (Michela, Kevin, Jacopo)	38,5%
Name and surname with new identity (AntoniaGallo, LucaPalo)	4,0%
Other	0,5%

Our analysis shows that anonymity and invisibility are reinforced the choice of *profile pictures*. Indeed, about 40,5% of users do not have a profile photo. 41% upload pictures with the new identity (for example, MtoF use photos phenotypically female, while FtoM use photos phenotypically male), while 11% use photos consistent with their biological identity. Only a minority shows sexualised (legs, lips) or non-sexualized (eyes, gaze, etc.) body parts. The data are summarised in Table 3.

<sup>5</sup> We accessed the app through an *ad hoc* profile which did not contemplate the possibility of interacting with the other users, both for ethical reasons and because LGB people, particularly transgender people, are often victims of sexual harassment by fake profiles.

TABLE 3. Analysis of the profile pictures.

Profile pictures	%
Personal photo with new identity	45,0%
Personal photo with biological identity	11,0%
No photo	40,5%
Photo with sexualised body parts (e.g., mouth, legs)	3,0%
Photo with non-sexualised body parts (e.g., eyes)	0,5%

The choice of the profile picture opens interesting hypotheses about self-presentation. Online, T people can overlap as much as possible the personal desirability (to be as much as possible corresponding to the chosen gender) and the social recognition (to be recognized by others as a “woman” or a “man”). This is far from marginal, as users often recur to filters and other expedients in aid of what the literature calls “passing for normal”. In other words, they try to reduce the distance between what they want to represent in terms of gender expression and what is perceived by others based on phenotypic and bodily characteristics (also depending on the stage of the transition process) (Rinaldi, 2013).

The analysis of the *presentations* shows that in 34% of cases the application is mainly used as an *online sexual market* (Laumann, 2005): this virtual space is used to build sexual coordinates and erotic capital by inserting in the self-presentation their sexual search and offer (for example: *Looking for a man to satisfy now*, *Oral sex now*) to simplify, streamline, and shorten the negotiation time of the sexual encounter (Bacio, Peruzzi, 2017).

The construction of relationships and friendships (12,5%) and the explication of personal and psychological characteristics (9,5%) represent the second polarization towards the construction of a clear interaction aimed at identity formation and socialization to sexuality.

The data are reported in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Analysis of the self-presentations.

Self-presentation	%
Sexual market coordinates	34,0%
Biographical presentation	5,0%
Personal and psychological characteristics	9,5%
Request for relationships and friendships	12,5%
Quotes	7,5%
No presentation	6,5%

Although not representative of a population, for the reasons outlined above, the data show how the self-determination process is played between the dyads invisibility/anonymity and determination/clarification. On the one hand,

the chat is experienced as a dark side of real life, where one's identity is often camouflaged, and it is possible to fish in the sexual market or find information without ever revealing one's identity (or doing so only when necessary). On the other hand, the web is an emancipatory opportunity for growth, experimentation of the new identity and, at the same time, a real-life test of the processes of socialization to sexuality and the construction of one's new identity.

### ***5.1 Analysis of the users by gender: between “hyperwoman”, alternative masculinity and definition processes***

To better understand the differences in the construction of gender models and gender expressivity in online sexual markets by transgender people using *Transgender App*, we cross-referenced data on profile photos and presentations with gender variability considering 3 subgroups: trans women (MtoF), trans men (FtoM) and non-binary people.

Regarding the choice of profile pictures, MtoF (n=100 profiles) are polarized towards anonymity (no photo 38.2%) or a photo portraying the new gender expression (phenotypically feminine photos, 49.5%). On the one hand, it highlights the desire to remain *covert*, considering the virtual tool a possible relational space in which to finalize a specific need (sexual) without ever running the risk of being recognized offline. On the other hand, it shows the possibility of experimenting with both one's new identity and communication patterns.

The analysis of the presentations of MtoF reinforces the perspective of a predominantly online sexual market function. About 43.7% of their presentations provide information about the sexual performance provided, the sexual target sought and explicit references to sexualized aspects of their bodies and femininity (*only oral now, slave for real men, seeking submissive slave, fetish&oral*).

The analysis of the profiles (picture/s and presentation together) suggests a convergence towards a *hyperwoman* model. It confirms what Turolla pointed out: transsexual women recognize and assume a role and a well-defined sexual identity only when they embody the sexual object desirable by the hegemonic masculinity, cisgender and heterosexual (Turolla, 2009).

Not all MtoF, however, use the dating app as a “sexual arena” where to seek erotic-sexual experiences and manifest their sexual appeal. Indeed, 9.2% seek serious and stable friendships and relationships. In their self-presentation, 10% rely on relational and psychological characteristics and 15.5% on the narration of their personal story. The latter group also reference oftener to a “normative” construction of femininity reminiscent of a structure of gender roles based on the model of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2011). This idea of femininity sees the woman as sweet, compliant and looking for the

satisfaction of her gender expressiveness in interpersonal relationships (e.g., *I am the girl next door; I am simple, I am sweet, and I am looking for a man who makes me feel protected; I am lovable, and I make my partner feel important*).

Table 5 shows data from the analysis of the profile photos and user presentations of transgender women.

TABLE 5. *Analysis MtoF.*

<b>Profile Photo and Presentation</b>	<b>%</b>
No photo	38,2%
Personal photo with new identity	49,5%
Personal photo with biological identity	7,8%
Photo of sexualised body parts	3,8%
Photo non-sexualised body parts	0,7%
<b>Presentation</b>	
Sexual markets coordinates	43,7%
Personal story	15,5%
Request for relationships and friendships	9,2%
Personal and psychological characteristics	10,0%
Physical description	1,0%
Quotes	4,2%
No presentation	6,4%
Other	10,0%

The results regarding the presentations and profile photos of transsexual men (FtoM) show a different polarisation. About 59% of FtoM users (n=100) analysed use photos explicitly portraying their new identity, assuming natural and non-sexualized poses. Regarding self-presentation, FtoM users emphasize their search for friends (25%) and use quotes (20.6%), an aspect emerging only in a residual form in MtoF.

FtoM users seem to use the app to create an “alternative” masculinity to the hegemonic one of heterosexual cisgender men. Against the “traditional” view of masculinity – *i.e.*, the white, virile, patriarchal, and heterosexual man – transsexual men focus more on aspects related to psychological and personal traits, provide information about their lifestyles and interests. Table 6 shows the cross-tabulations of profile photo and presentation dimensions for FtoM users.

The data also show that the dating app has a different function for T people with a nonbinary identity than binary transgender identities (MtoF and FtoM).

While the social, imaginative, and cultural representation of transsexuality is recognized, stereotyped, and with a well-defined sexual identity, the knowledge, defining, and identity processes of non-binary people become nuanced, unclear, and often misunderstood and overlaid with other non-normative identity constructions.

TABLE 6. *Analysis FtoM.*

<b>Profile Photo and Presentation</b>	<b>%</b>
No photo	59,5%
Personal photo with new identity	40,5%
Personal photo with biological identity	0%
Photo of sexualised body parts	0%
Photo non-sexualised body parts	0%
<b>Presentation</b>	
Sexual markets coordinates	4,7%
Personal story	20,6%
Request for relationships and friendships	25%
Personal and psychological characteristics	4,7%
Physical description	16,6%
Quotes	19%
No presentation	7,1%
Other	2,3%

The analysis of profile photos and presentations of non-binary people (n=100) who use *Transgender App* shows a *defining function* of their non-normative identity. 38% of the non-binary users analysed use androgynous personal photo as a profile picture, while the remaining 60% use no profile picture at all. Regarding their self-presentation, a portion of the sample describes themselves in more detail, recalling aspects related to their life story, (34, 3%). As we will show through the semi-structured interviews the data point to a strong tendency to explain the meaning of non-binary identity, not always understood even within the T community. Table 7 shows the data for non-binary users:

TABLE 7. *Analysis Non-Binary.*

<b>Profile Photo and Presentation</b>	<b>%</b>
No photo	60,0%
Personal photo with new identity	38,0%
Personal photo with biological identity	2,0%
Photo of sexualised body parts	0%
Photo non-sexualised body parts	0%
<b>Presentation</b>	
Sexual markets coordinates	14,6%
Personal story	34,3%
Request for relationships and friendships	14,2%
Personal and psychological characteristics	0
Physical description	11,9%
Quotes	7,1%
No presentation	16,6%
Other	1,3%

## **6. The main sexual scripts highlighted by the interviews: between selectivity and nomadism**

The choice of a specific dating App represents, for the analysis conducted here, much more than a way to shed light on the identity processes activated by transgender people. Indeed, it also allows “to identify promptly the structure of the online social formations in which they find themselves and the nature of the shared cultural forms” (Caliandro, Gandini, 2019: 12)

We initially focused on *Transgender App* as we thought it to be among the virtual spaces most used by T people. Subsequently, the interviews allowed us to expand our gaze to the multiplicity of resources used by T people online. Alongside this application, T people make constant use (alternatively or concomitantly) of several online dating platforms, particularly Badoo, Grindr, and Wapa. In addition, the social network Facebook is a space in which T-persons – albeit not exclusively – look for sentimental and sexual partners. Therefore, much more than for other identities included under the LGBT umbrella (Masullo, Gianola 2017; Masullo, Coppola 2020), transgender people show a certain “nomadism” between one platform and another. This aspect allows us to detect at the same time elements concerning the identity strategies of T people and the cultural and interpersonal scripts that users mobilize and bring into play on dating applications.

Regarding sexual scripts, (Gagnon, Simon, 1995) the interviews show that they are structured in two polarised forms, to which we can add a mixed “third” one. The first is the “predator”: those who use the app mainly as a “field” in which to find potential sexual partners. Although our sample is not, strictly speaking, representative, this model seems to be more corresponding to MtoF women, although it is also found in FtoM profiles and secondarily in non-binary ones.

Personally, I use Transgender App because at this stage I am interested in sex and with this App I'm sure to find someone without fail! I find sexually interesting people and, furthermore, I'm the one choosing and selecting!  
(Julia, 33, MtoF, Rome).

A second profile is the “sentimental-romantic” one. The use of the “sentimental” code aims at attracting users looking for a sentimental partner online.

I would like very much to fall in love, to find a woman who is able to go beyond the body and beyond the difficulties, who can see in me a real and

complete man, this app allows me to open myself slowly and to be able to give the best version of me. (Jimmy, 27, FtoM, Rieti).

Both the above scripts depend on how the profile is constructed. The first script emphasizes “sexual” aspects (*e.g.*, the pictures); the second one highlights aspects related to the individual, their story, without explicit references to practised or desirable sexuality.

The last profile is the mixed one, in which the script varies depending on the situation and the interlocutor. This aspect shows the negotiation inherent in sexual scripts, that are readjusted online depending on the contexts and partners (Rinaldi, 2013), as shown in the following excerpt:

I use the app mostly for sex, and I must say that I have found many sexual partners and have accumulated a lot of experience as a new woman, although I must say that there are not always people only interested in sex, I have also established friendships and interpersonal relationships, I change the form of my identity according to the person I am in front of, remember the movie “As you want me”? That’s how I am! (Helena, 33, MtoF, Terni).

As highlighted above, most of the interviewees show, shall we say, “nomadic” tendencies between the various dating applications. The reason for this “nomadism” is twofold. On the one hand, to increase their chances of finding a partner; on the other, to stem the obstacles they encounter in the sexual markets due to discriminations about gender and heteronormativity. On the latter issue, and therefore on the characteristics of sexual markets, we will treat separately the interviews with heterosexual transgender persons from those with homosexual transgender persons, to coherently orient the data provided by the analysis.

### ***6.1 The choice of heterosexual transgender and transsexual people: between heteronormative processes and sexual market selectivity***

The interviews show that transsexual and transgender people who want to start a process of *normalization* and placement in society – following the explicit and implicit rules of heteronormativity – tend to choose a prevalently heterosexual dating app, such as Badoo. However, they often omit their transgender status in their self-presentation, an aspect that is found in both MtoF women and FtoM men:

Which app I use? Badoo, because I don’t like dedicated apps, they make me feel ghettoized! And then, let’s face it, I look feminine, so in my Badoo profile

I don't explicitly say that I'm a MtoF, when and if I go out with a person I met on the app, I'll say it when I feel safe! (Stella, 32, Rome).

The choice of a predominantly heterosexual dating app, while being the most desirable environment for T people to look for a sentimental or sexual partner, has many disadvantages. Not stating their transgender condition implies the need for a longer interaction to explain their characteristics of gender and sexual identity and to manifest their sexual coordinates in the virtual sexual market. Moreover, it is not uncommon to run into discriminatory phenomena (*e.g.*, online shaming) by transphobic people or, more generally, those who do not recognise non-normative identities and sexualities.

Before seeing Ginevra in person, we chatted on Badoo for 7 months, I tried to let her know me for what I am, to show her the man in me. We met in person and liked each other but when I told her I was a transgender man she started crying and left. She blocked me everywhere. I was so ashamed of myself (Ivan, 33, Rome).

People often join Transgender app after having been disappointed in other apps aimed at heterosexuals, hoping that people there will be more "predisposed". This choice has two advantages: the *selectivity of the online sexual market* and the speed of interactions. However, the interviewees report that they more frequently find people seeking casual sexual experiences or reinforcing stereotypes and stigmatizations towards transsexual and transgender people.

I don't waste my time on apps for straight people at the risk of also being called a fag or being mistreated. On Transgender app I cut to the chase, and it's rare I don't meet someone. It's like going grocery shopping in a vegan store, if you're vegan it's easier to find what you need in the dedicated stores! (Katia, 28, Rome).

The interviews also revealed an unanticipated aspect: the possibility of bisexuality as a "free zone" for online sexual markets. A minority of heterosexual MtoF sign up to dating apps for homosexual males (*e.g.*, Grindr) and look specifically for bisexual men, as they are considered a borderline category between hetero- and homosexuality.

When I get bored with transphobic heterosexuals on Badoo or Meeting I use my Grindr profile, in the end you can find a bisexual man, and I will know if he is really bisexual or gay. I don't like gays, I prefer bisexuals who, even if they like my masculine side, are surely looking for me because of my feminine

exterior, then you know if you sign up to a chat like Grindr, you can't really be straight! (Keita, 21, Rome).

The same phenomenon did not emerge for FtoM who, on the contrary, are particularly keen on underlining their belonging to the male gender and abhor people who subscribe to dating apps for lesbians accusing them of “scarce identity security”. This aspect could be associated with rigid self-determination processes of male transsexuality, still little recognized and superimposed on sexual orientation or gender expressiveness ascribed to lesbians (e.g., “butch”, “tomboy”, etc.) (Masullo, Coppola, 2020).

### ***6.2 The choice of dating apps for homosexual transgender and transsexual people: leaving anonymity behind and embark on a self-determination journey***

The use of a dating app for homosexuals is often seen as a transitional moment. It goes hand in hand with – and in some cases stops at the end of – the transition process. However, it can also be a preferential environment for homosexual transgender people, who see in *Grindr* or *Wapa* those markets most appropriate to their emotional and sexual needs.

We should keep in mind the methodological limits in studying such a specific and invisible social category within the LGBT community. This said, our research shows that transgender people encounter many difficulties in dating apps for gays and lesbians, as this context generates discriminatory attitudes. Therefore, after many disappointments, homosexual T people choose to migrate to an app dedicated specifically to transgender people. Since they are anonymous, invisible, and lack a specific acknowledged identity recognized (first and foremost within the LGBT community and, by extension, in society), the choice of this sexual market, circumscribed but perceived as less discriminatory, seems in some cases forced:

Well, it's not easy to make people understand that gender identity is independent of sexual orientation, people are surprised that a woman can become a man and still like men, they say if you liked men, you should have remained a woman! There is a lot of ignorance! (Christina, 22, Rome).

I tried to socialize on Wapa, but as soon as I said I was a MtoF they blocked me. A lesbian girl, in my opinion, a TERF (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist, author's note) even wrote to me violently that we are not women! Therefore, I prefer dedicated apps (Valentina, 24, Rome).

Homosexual transsexuals seem to incur in more relational and socialization difficulties than heterosexual ones. There is a general confusion in the defining processes of gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression even in the LGBT community; it is difficult to cognitively and socially elaborate a gender transition path and, at the same time, be homosexual. This causes double stigmatization: as transsexual people overcoming the gender binarism that sees gender identity as based on somatic-biological connotations; and as a homosexual person after the transition path, seen as a basic inconsistency, as doubly non-normative.

This happens also on *Transgender App*, which is the most inclusive app for homosexual T people. It leads us to conclude that any sexual market considered here would turn out to be “performing” to the extent that it explicitly or implicitly establishes rules of access, characteristics of erotic capital, etc. Indeed, many T people abandon online dating apps precisely because of their rigid rules and categorizations, choosing other virtual environments where it is possible to bring into play their full identity. Among the most chosen are Facebook groups specifically for T people. Here, the interactions are less formalized than on the dating platforms, since the bulletin boards, the personal profiles (the possibility of being able to insert more photos and share daily thoughts) ease the passage from “identification” to “individuation”. It is, therefore, easier, to overcome stereotypes and prejudices, paramount for establishing deeper friendships or sentimental/sexual relationships. Conversely, in other contexts, such as the apps we examined, these types of relationship are “prevented” from the very beginning (Mucchi Faina, 2006).

I used to be on Badoo, but then I unsubscribed. Every time I chatted with a guy the moment I said I was a transgender girl it ended badly, they called me deviant, faggot and pervert. It's depressing. I prefer to meet people on Facebook, I've joined groups of transsexual people, at least there I know what I can find! (Leila, 24, Rome).

## **7. Conclusions**

Our research has shed light on how the ambivalence of dating apps for T people. On the one hand, they are places of emancipation; on the other, they perpetuate the exclusion mechanisms experienced offline.

The choice of a platform is crucial from an identity point of view and it roughly reflects the perceived stage of the user's transition process. The app is

regarded as a place to find confirmation and recognition of their newly acquired identity.

Dating apps are also – per the theoretical premises adopted here – virtual sexual markets in which transgender people put their erotic capital at stake (Laumann, Gagnon, 1995; Simon and Gagnon 1986). However, the analysis of the interviews revealed a certain rigidity in the apps in reflecting behavioural patterns and sexual coordinates (*interpersonal scripts*) inspired by a genderist and heteronormative model (*cultural scripts*) within which transgender people apply their sexual scripts. This rigidity is often experienced as a problem (*intrapsychic script*) especially by non-binary or homosexual T people. Hence the use of other applications or social networks alongside Transgender App (in the case considered here, Facebook).

Nomadism among the various online dating Apps had already been highlighted in the relevant literature and related to identity (Braidotti, 2002). In the cases examined here, it results also from the discrimination suffered by those whose gender and sexual identity cannot be easily framed in these virtual habitats. These discriminations also allow us to shed light on a topic today still little explored in LGBT Studies, namely that of the many differences under the apparently inclusive umbrella of the term “LGBT”. In the future, queer and intersectional theory – here only partially considered – will better allow us to explore the issue.

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