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Abstract: The advent of digital platforms has caused an unprecedented revolution in the world of pornography. Today pornographic platforms, or porn tubes, are the main containers of adult entertainment, making a huge variety of pornographies immediately accessible to the largest audience. Porn tubes have changed both the production and the use of pornography, so much so that the entire hard industry has been forced to rethink its business by channeling it into a new medium. This paper chooses XNXX and Pornhub, the two most visited porn tubes in Italy in 2020, as a research field to explore the transformations of Italian sexual and erotic imaginaries, focusing on the representations of gender roles and on the new sexual desires.

Keywords: platformization, porn tubes, sexuality, gender, Italian erotic imaginaries

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EXPLORING ITALIAN FORBIDDEN IMAGINARIES: RESEARCH ON THE PORN TUBES PORNHUB AND XNXX

GAIA PERUZZI and ANGELICA SPAMPINATO

The Platformization of Porn: Cultural and Technological Perspectives

Nowadays, talking about pornography means talking about porn platforms, or porn tubes, the main providers of adult entertainment. The existence of online platforms has deeply modified people's lives in the last two decades. According to Roger Silverstone, it was impossible to think of individual experience without the media even in 1999, and this seems to be the case even more today, due to the omnipresence of the innumerable digital devices in our everyday lives.

We live completely surrounded by ever more pervasive media. These are essential dimensions of daily life: they condition our experiences, they contribute to forming our individual identity, and they influence the production and attribution of meaning towards the world around us. They play a strategic role in the formation of social, civic and moral space.¹ Furthermore, because new technological devices are becoming ever more present in people's lives, with digital media such as smartphones becoming smaller and smaller, media are increasingly at our disposal, making virtually every experience subject to deep mediatization.² The Internet and the digitalization of communication have modified human experience in all dimensions of both public and private spheres: information, entertainment, business, and education.

The advent of digital platforms and the economic and social changes connected to the platform revolution have been at the center of the debate on digital media in the last decade.³ The rise of digital platforms, defined by José van Dijck, Tomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal as “programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between users” concerns many areas of society, from entertainment to e-commerce and the information sector.⁴ Among these areas there is also that of adult entertainment, whose market has been revolutionized by the recent process of platformization.⁵

Some important aspects related to the digitalization of porn and to the advent of porn tubes have already been underlined in the literature: thanks to the digital turn, porn tubes have nowadays become the main providers of adult entertainment, offering a huge variety of pornographic content, free of charge and easily accessible, to a vast audience from various types of devices.⁶ The accessibility and ease of use of new technologies have, in general, multiplied the diffusion of online content, and the number of users who access it. This has favored the diffusion of pornographic material online—not only that produced by the most well-known pornography production companies, but also that of independent production companies which, thanks to online circulation, have been able to enter even foreign markets.⁷ According to Piet Bakker and Saara Taalas, “Porn is now only a few mouse clicks away.”⁸ Giovanna Maina used the expression “porn-à-porter” to indicate the widespread use of

¹ Silverstone, *Media and Morality*.

² Drusian, Magaudda, e Scarcelli, *Vite interconnesse*; Couldry and Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*; Hepp, *Deep Mediatization*.

³ Parker, Van Alstyne, and Choudary, *Platform Revolution*; Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet*.

⁴ van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal, *Platform Society*, 4; Boccia Artieri and Marinelli, “Piattaforme, algoritmi, formati.”

⁵ Mowlabocus, “New Online Porn Industry.”

⁶ Paasonen, “Online Pornography”; Saunders, *Bodies of Work*.

⁷ Attwood, “Contemporary Pornography Research”; Attwood, *Sex Media*.

⁸ Baaker and Taalas, “The Irresistible Rise of Porn,” 110.

devices, such as smartphones, that allow people to access porn at any time.⁹ Moreover, thanks to the growth of online platforms, the viewing of pornographic material has become more accessible, since the stigma associated with sexual practices and their representation can now easily be avoided. In fact, access to these sites can take place in total solitude without the intervention of a third party to provide the material. For these reasons, the boom of porn tubes has almost completely replaced other media, such as magazines.

The complex relationship between porn and the digital turn can be interpreted from two different perspectives: on the one hand, exploring the way in which pornography affects technological processes, while on the other, investigating the role of media in those changes related to pornography and its use.

Starting with the idea that pornography has influenced technologies, an important premise needs to be made. Pornography has always been an important driver of innovation for new technological inventions: as a representation of sex and the obscene, it is closely intertwined with the evolution of media. The literature affirms that pornography itself is, and has been, an engine capable of orienting and guiding the development of media and new technologies: consider how at the end of the 70s VHS prevailed over Betamax as a video recording system, also due to the fact that Betamax, unlike VHS, did not allow the porn industry to use their media.¹⁰ Other examples include the growth of satellite TV: in France, for example, the weekly transmission of porn films was linked to an increase in subscribers.¹¹ Similarly, pornography would have been an important driving force in the spread of interactive TV in several European countries.¹² From this perspective, the study of pornography is interesting, not merely from the point of view of research on the actual pornography itself, but also from the perspective of media and technological change.

Equally, if we consider the cultural effects of technological progress, the advent of digital media is changing the world of pornography. Media have played a strategic role in the representation of bodies and gender identities, especially female; we limit ourselves here to citing the classic study of Laura Mulvey in 1975, which opened up an entire branch of research on the male gaze in the mediatic representation of women.¹³ Media have played the same role in the transformation of intimacy and sexuality, such as specific areas of the relationship between genders. Modernity and the transformations of lifestyle related to it, including a greater disengagement in intimate relationships and sex for both men and women, as well as greater sexual freedom, have been highlighted in the literature.¹⁴

The greater fluidity in the customs of individuals, typical of modernity, creates a series of new questions related to the new meaning of sexuality, roles, and expectations linked to gender roles and *sexual scripts*.¹⁵ According to this idea, media not only serve as a place for providing representation, but also play a central role as a source of social education, and indeed a regulatory map that contributes to the creation and diffusion of rules for behavior.¹⁶ For this reason, media are a useful channel for understanding contemporary changes relating to ways of experiencing sexuality and sexual practices.

Representation of the way in which relationships and sexuality are transformed are frequently found in novels, cinema, and TV series. Media narration plays a central role in giving visibility to certain categories, or in modifying the boundary of what is acceptable, and what is not. The

⁹ Maina, "Spontamenti progressivi del vedere," 123.

¹⁰ Baaker and Taalas, "The Irresistible Rise of Porn."

¹¹ Baudry, *La pornography et ses images*.

¹² Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa, *Pornification*.

¹³ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

¹⁴ Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*; Jamieson, *Intimacy*; Bauman, *Liquid Love*.

¹⁵ Simon and Gagnon, "Sexual Scripts"; Swidler, *Talk of Love*.

¹⁶ Cioni e Peruzzi, "Questioni di cuore."

contribution of the media in the construction of cultural rules is therefore undeniable, and they can have a double function: on the one hand, supporting the emancipation of customs, and hence change, or, on the other, reinforcing images of traditional behaviors and mentalities.

Our reflection on pornography starts from this assumption: the centrality of media in redefining the boundaries of morality and the role of pornographic representation, which has become mainstream media. Indeed, media play a central role in this process. The intimate has become more and more visible to the public, less private, and more represented in pop culture (music videos, performances, advertising, etc.). Sex has thus become a thing of leisure and consumption and not just a practice linked to reproduction. For this reason, some authors have used the expression “sexualization of society” or “pornification of society” to explain the incorporation of some elements, typical of pornography, into the mainstream media.¹⁷ This is possible thanks to a relationship of reciprocal exchange between media and porn, in which media borrow aspects of the glamour, danger, and prohibition that normally distinguish the world of pornography, hence giving legitimacy to porn.¹⁸

Thanks to the spread of digital technologies and the rise of porn tubes, various social actors, such as women and the LGBT+ identities and communities, have found representation and visibility within the world of adult entertainment.¹⁹ Consequently, the digital turn in relation to porn tubes is an important starting point from which to study social and cultural changes in society, in intimacy, gender roles and relationships, mediated sexualities, and forbidden or immoral imaginaries.

Research on Italian Porn Tubes: Objectives and Methods

Though several aspects related to the digital turn and its implications have already been analyzed, there is, as of yet, no research that maps in detail both the cultural and technological changes linked to the advent of porn tubes.²⁰ Several relevant aspects, such as the offering of new services, the categorization of material, and the recurring images in porn tubes, remain unexplored.

In this research, we started from the idea that porn tubes have revolutionized the world of pornography, having become nowadays the main providers of adult entertainment, offering a huge variety of pornographic content easily accessible to a wide audience and almost completely replacing other media. Being such giant containers of adult content, porn tubes are the obvious starting point in order to understand contemporary porn culture. Our intention is to begin outlining the main features of the current Italian porn landscape by mapping the pornographic content (services, videos, and interactions) made available in the new era of platforms.

More specifically, we intend to focus on two case studies: XNXX and Pornhub. According to the data traffic analysis site SimilarWeb (one of the leading international companies releasing web data), these were the two most visited porn tubes in Italy in 2020. For this reason, albeit neither of the platforms are Italian—Pornhub is Canadian while XNXX is based in Czechoslovakia—they were selected for the present research.²¹

¹⁷ Attwood, “Sexed up”; Attwood, *Mainstreaming Sex*; Smith, “Pornographication”; McNair, *Mediated Sex*; McNair, *Striptease Culture*; McNair, *Porno? Chic!*

¹⁸ Attwood, “Sexed up”; Attwood, *Mainstreaming Sex*; Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa, *Pornification*; McNair, *Porno? Chic!*

¹⁹ Biasin, Maina, e Zecca, *Il porno espanso*.

²⁰ Paasonen, “Pornification and the Mainstreaming of Sex”; Attwood, *Mainstreaming Sex*; Saunders, *Bodies of Work*.

²¹ The lack of data on users and consumption is a classic problem of porn studies, obviously linked to the fact that it is a marginal world in terms of the canons of public morality, sometimes bordering on illegality, and thus its patrons demand anonymity. With the advent of porn tubes, the situation has not changed. The platforms tend to either not release data or to release only part of it, in relation to the number of users who visit them. Specifically, XNXX does not provide any data

Considering the lack of research on porn tubes, in Italy at least, we decided to explore the world of contemporary Italian porn tubes following three main lines of research: mapping the exclusive services of the Italian version of these two platforms; investigating the categories on offer on these porn tubes; conducting an analysis of the representation of bodies and of sexual practices.

Firstly, we started mapping the types of services these platforms offer: porn tubes of the most viewed websites in Italy and, indeed, in the world—but why have porn tubes almost completely replaced other media for the dissemination of adult content? What types of services make them unique, and have they enabled this process? What are their distinguishing features? These platforms are configured as complex structures, with a highly articulated architecture. This is an element that greatly complicates any research activity, since within the platforms a number of actions are possible in which the role of the user is decisive. As previously mentioned, this is a general process that involves all kinds of platforms.²² However, as underlined by Ritzer and Jurgenson, the porn industry was a pioneer in shifting from consumption to prosumption.²³ It is this possibility for users to choose the modalities of interaction within the platform, by selecting some options rather than others, that has undoubtedly changed the way in which the content is offered. We can imagine that this also corresponds to a change in the use of the same content. The user has effectively assumed a central role within these platforms and participation is no longer limited to mere viewing; rather, thanks to open content creation typical of platforms today, users can be creators as well as users of content. We therefore felt it useful initially to map the types of services and characteristics that porn tubes offer, identifying their distinguishing features. In order to do so, we carried out an analysis of the interfaces, of the various sections of the menu, and of the services offered by the two platforms. This first step was conducted during November and December 2020.

Secondly, it is well known that porn tubes, as with all platforms, are enormous containers for an immense number of videos. We also know that porn tubes offer a vast selection, catering to various desires and categories, so what type of representation do gender identities and sexual orientations have within these platforms? How do these contribute to redefining the ever-changing boundary of the acceptable/deviant and the moral/immoral? How are the sex categories organized? Therefore, our idea was precisely to explore the criteria used to organize and list those videos published on the porn tubes, in order to understand what categories and sexual imaginaries are built and reproduced by these porn tubes, in the interaction between supply and demand of porn content.

Considering the enormous amount of unexplored material available for research, we decided to begin with the most immediate method of content analysis, that is the linguistic study of the names of the sections into which videos are categorized. We collected and analyzed the labels from the two porn tubes: 100 for Pornhub, 2000 for XNXX. This step of the research was conducted from January to March 2021. After having studied the names of the sections into which porn videos are organized, we moved onto the visual analysis of the videos. The third and final step was the analysis of gender images and roles in the previews of the “Categories” in the default version of the two platforms. Starting from the assumption that porn tubes are a means of circulating enormous quantities of content, understanding what types of visual representation they offer could be an interesting starting point through which to reconstruct the prevailing narratives and representations of genders and sexualities in the porn world. In this exploratory study, we decided to observe the video previews of

regarding the influx of users, while Pornhub publishes an annual report. However, the data released does not provide specifics in terms of access from individual countries and is not verifiable by external sources. Therefore, we are not guaranteed their reliability. Consequently, it is common practice to resort to other sources (see Rodeschini e Zecca, “Pornflix”). Our choice fell on SimilarWeb since it is a leading company in the web analytic sector, with over 800 employees and offices in six continents.

²² Boccia Artieri e Marinelli, “Piattaforme, algoritmi, formati.”

²³ Ritzer and Jurgenson, “Production, Consumption, Prosumption.”

all the categories. Our research questions were related to the visual representation of bodies and sexual practices in these previews: how are bodies represented in porn tubes? What are the recurrent images and stereotypes of women's bodies? And those of men? We analyzed the images of women and men in the 207 previews (45 in Pornhub and 162 in XNXX). This step of the research was conducted from March to May 2021.

The Online Supermarkets of Sex: on the New Services of Pornhub and XNXX

In carrying out the first step, we browsed the platform services, reviewing all sections of Pornhub and XNXX. In particular, we analyzed the interface and menu sections, namely the main menu, as well as the header and footer menus of both web sites.

The layout of the two platform structures appears rather similar, though with differences both regarding the individual menu items and the graphics. Pornhub appears more orderly and concise in the arrangement of content than XNXX: Pornhub has 100 categories and 45 video previews on its homepage, while XNXX has 2000 categories and 162 video previews. Both platforms make recurring use of explicit images to attract the user (naked bodies, sexual practices, etc.). This is a sort of immediate showcasing of the content that the platform has on offer, designed to capture the user's attention from the very first visit and enable easy identification of tastes, in order to subsequently reprogram the interface based on previous interaction.

Examining Pornhub in more detail, the main menu lists a wide range of sections: videos and their subsequent categorization; content filters enabling users to search for their favorite pornstars livecams (i.e., the possibility of watching live videos featuring pornographic models or sections dedicated to the search for photos and gifs). As for the special features of this platform, certain sections of the header menu stood out, such as a section dedicated to the sexual well-being of users, "sexual wellness," as well as that dedicated to statistical data regarding views. This is content which would indicate that, albeit Pornhub's main focus is the world of sex, they somehow go beyond pornography intended merely as the obscene representation of a niche market, and are potentially aimed at a wider audience, made up of casual browsers or those looking for educational information (contraception, sexual disease prevention, etc.). Another particular feature of Pornhub concerns the presence of a section in the main menu entitled *Community*, which brings together those users with an account on the platform, creating a virtual meeting point. The creation of a user community could be seen as an attempt by the platform to take a step towards normalization, looking to other social platforms outside the pornosphere, such as Facebook and Instagram, through which to upload content, express preferences, and meet people online. In addition, on Pornhub there is a search button that allows users to filter the content according to what it is they are searching for: *Videos*, *Photos*, *Members*, *Pornstars*, *Gifs*, *Cam Models*. Other features include the *Upload* button, through which content may be uploaded onto the platform, *Upgrade* to switch from the free version to the premium version, the *Login* button, and finally the *Sign up* button to create an account. The footer menu of Pornhub, in addition to certain information required by law (such as the privacy policy, the legislation protecting the copyright and conditions of the service), also contains other interesting items, including sections dedicated to contacts with companies or individuals who wish to collaborate with the platform. In this footer menu there are also references to Pornhub blogs and the press section (i.e., spaces where articles and news on the platform's activities are published). There is also reference to the section dedicated to sexual well-being and a specific section dedicated to pornography for the visually impaired, thus making pornography even more mainstream and accessible. Finally, there is the section dedicated to

the change of language as well as that redirecting users to the social channels of the platform: *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *YouTube*, *Reddit*, and *Discord*.

Moving on to examine XNXX, unlike Pornhub, a pop-up appears before the homepage becomes visible, warning that it is an adult site and requiring the user to confirm that they are over 18 years of age. XNXX also differs aesthetically from Pornhub. In fact, XNXX appears less refined with its use of very bright colors. In addition, XNXX has a menu with so many items that it reaches the bottom of the page, making it very lengthy to scroll completely. On the right-hand side of the XNXX platform, there are several buttons: *Language*, relating to the change of language, *Content*, which refers to the individual categories of the videos, and a button where the user can change the type of content they want to view: *heterosexual*, *homosexual*, or *transsexual* content. Upon access to the platform, users are directed by default to the heterosexual category, an indication that the content is aimed principally at a heterosexual, male audience. Similarly to Pornhub, XNXX also lists a wide range of services in the main menu: *Videos*, which can be found both in the “best of” and “hits” sections, where trending videos are recommended, and in the *Tag* section, where users can choose a video based on keywords. As with Pornhub, users on XNXX may filter content by searching for their favorite porn stars, and there are sections dedicated to live webcams with models, as well as photos. However, we also found three additional elements on XNXX: the *Sex Stories* section, the games section, and the forum section. These are extra services aimed at offering an experience that goes beyond the mere video, in which users can actively participate and concretely interact: through game play, the publication of their own erotic story, or writing a forum post. A further element of difference between the two platforms is the presence of a sidebar, that is, a side menu in which XNXX has inserted all the categories on the site that are, at the same time, visible in the body of the page. As for the arrangement of the content, XNXX provides important information on the way in which the content is presented within the platform: the sidebar explains that the menu updates are based on user activity. After the first access, in which the content is listed in alphabetical order, content is organized based on previous user interaction. As for the Footer menu, XNXX’s generally appears thinner than that of Pornhub: there are buttons that redirect to content such as images, gifs, and stories, others relating to the terms of service, to the request for removal of content and to the privacy policy, as well as applying to collaborate with the platform either by purchasing advertising space or by applying as a model for adult content. Regarding contacts, this platform, unlike Pornhub, provides no information on a press office, on social channels, nor on data relating to its flow of users.

Despite their differences, it is undeniable that these platforms have redesigned the world of porn. In contrast to the past, porn tubes offer users not only an incomparable amount of material, but also of services which, on the whole, seem aimed at detecting the tastes of the public and encouraging their preferences and reactions. In short, these platforms seem the ideal world for the diversification of content, favoring on the one hand the direct interaction of users through open content creation, and on the other a subsequent, constant updating and an unprecedented diversification of the material.

Porn Desires and Practices: An Initial Mapping of Italian Imaginaries

For the second step—the exploration of contemporary sexual practices and imaginaries—all the names of the sections into which porn videos are organized and offered to visitors on Pornhub and XNXX were analyzed. We considered the names of these sections in porn tubes as instruments of categorization, or labelling of the sexual imaginaries: they allow users (and researchers) to find videos of specific sexual practices or physical characteristics of the actors, and hence create and reflect the categories of contemporary sexual attractiveness and desire.

Pornhub divides videos into 100 categories, while on XNXX there are 2000. After having identified all the categories, we studied them, and then we organized them into seven macro categories, by merging all similar categories together.²⁴ By “similar,” we mean referring to the same practices, characteristics, or situations. These macro-categories are the most original and important result of our research. They represent the elements that outline a map of categorization of desire and forms of attraction in the world of porn.²⁵ We illustrate them below.

The categories are as follows: “normal” sexual acts; physical sexual characteristics; extreme sexual practices; gender diversity; physical characteristics; nationality and ethnicity; fiction and game. Let us now analyze the macro categories in detail.

We defined the first category “normal sexual acts.” This contains the sexual acts that are considered “normal” in common opinion, or “vanilla,” referring to a whole series of more common sexual practices, excluding kinky sex. The category includes many labels that refer to the following activities: male masturbation, female masturbation (whether performed by self or other), oral sex (both genders), foreplay, vaginal penetration, and orgasms.

We succeeded in distinguishing labels that refer to male and female within this macro-category. We imagine that the presence of a substantial number of categories related to male masturbation is an element of opening for new audiences, such as straight women and gay men.

The category “physical sexual characteristics” contains all the labels in which there is an explicit reference to sexual bodily characteristics (such as male and female genitals, breasts, buttocks) or in which women are referred to using synonyms of sexy girl/prostitute. Within this category, all the labels make explicit reference to sexual desire and attraction: referring vulgarly to those parts of the body that recall sex acts, as well as names by which a person (usually a woman) is labeled in reference to their role in sexual activity. The category is thus full of slang expressions, such as “pussy girl,” “slut,” “whore,” all referring to women.

The third category that we identified is “extreme sexual practices,” including all those sexual practices considered non-conforming/unconventional (anal, double penetration, sexual practices involving more than two partners, domination, etc.). More specifically, we included here all references to hardcore/rough sex, intended as a particularly violent sexual act, for both sexes.

All references to non-heterosexual sex have been included in the macro-category “gender diversity” (i.e., in which explicit reference to the LGBT+ community appear in the various sub-categories: gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans—which includes transsexual, transgender, transvestite, and queer). This is an interesting element, as we know that before the advent of porn tubes, the LGBT+ community had no space within which to see non-heterosexual sexual practices and desires represented.

In this sense we can therefore affirm that the great diversification of content is favoring the representation of increasingly varied and diversified practices and ways of experiencing intimacy.

The category “physical characteristics” regards those labels in which there are references to physical characteristics, such as hair color and age, with no explicit reference to sex. In particular, two subcategories emerged: body shape (fat, thin, curvy) both for men and women; body characteristics, such as hair color, piercings, tattoos; body parts (hands, feet, legs); age. In these categories, we also

²⁴ For the categorization, we excluded some labels not useful for our study, such as those referring to external sites (Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.), production companies of videos or tools, conjunctions/prepositions/generic adjectives and viewing formats, and digitally mediated ways of experiencing sex (where the medium is not a central element in the category, but refers only to the mode of use), such as subtitled, HD, 1080. The categories were reconstructed based on the case with fewer variables, namely Pornhub. Those of XNXX can also easily be traced back to these same categories, which seems to us further confirmation of their validity.

²⁵ There are labels in different languages on both platforms. We therefore decided to merge all categories with synonyms, which refer to the same sexual practice.

added the reference “man” and “woman.” An interesting element regarding the categorization of physical characteristics is the lack of categories referring to eye color. It is an interesting element, if we consider that eye contact is an element of central importance in relationships and love affairs.

Another category is “nationality and ethnicity” and contains two sets of labels: nationality (city, nation); skin color and ethnicity (Black, Caucasian, etc.). An interest in the “exotic” still seems to be an important factor in categorization, given the large number of labels referring to South America, Japan and the Middle East. Ethnicity as an element of categorization demonstrates that users look for specific kinds of content related to country of origin and physical characteristics related to nationality.

The final category is “fiction and game” since it contains roles, places, and situations in which sex and sexual practices take place as a sort of game/staging, as well as all digitally mediated practices in which the medium plays a central role within the sexual experience (POV, webcam, etc.). Within this category we find heterogeneous labels, in which play, stage fiction, or sex mediated by digital media are an integral part of the sexual experience.

An aspect that immediately sprung to our attention is that some of these categories explicitly refer to practices and activities that recall sexual acts, or to characteristics that are often connected to the sexual sphere (physical sexual characteristics, “normal” sexual acts, extreme sexual practices, and gender diversity), whereas others refer to characteristics and entertainment activities that, in this context, are obviously sexualized, but which ordinarily need not be: physical characteristics, nationality, fiction and game. What emerged is the significant presence of labels with no explicit reference to sex: fantasy is a central element in the viewing of pornography. Role-play, locations, situations, but also physical characteristics with no explicit reference to sex (such as feet, toes, legs) are important elements of categorization in the division of labels, sometimes more so than the sexual practices themselves.

We can hypothesize that the vast amount of adult content now readily available has given rise to increasingly specific and diversified categories, such as those referring to a particular physical characteristic, to play, or those in which the sexual experience is mediated by digital media.

A number of interesting elements have come to light during this research. Firstly, as we had already noted from the onset, there is an enormous amount of content on porn tubes: labels on both platforms contain pages and pages of videos. We also found that ethnicity and skin color are elements of categorization in label division: on both platforms, we found several labels dedicated to nationality and skin color (in particular referring to the female protagonists), supporting the fact that pornography still appears to be primarily aimed at a heterosexual male audience. Bodies are displayed as if in a shop window, whereupon users are able to carry out a very rapid search in order to find what they are looking for to fuel their pleasure.

We also discovered that age plays a central role in categorization. We can trace this finding back to the importance of fantasy in the representation of contemporary sexual practices: in many categories, the emphasis on the age difference between actors and actresses is notable (young women with old men, young men with old women, and noticeable age differences also within gay couples).

In addition, though we note a huge number of categories referring to a different public, such as the LGBT+ community—the de-heterosexualization of categories is a process that is emerging, albeit very gradually—there is still a disproportionate presence of content aimed at heterosexual men. We can deduce this since in both porn tubes most labels featured female descriptions (blonde girls, Black girls, etc.) and women are the protagonists of the sexual acts, proof that pornography is still a world prevalently for men.

For our third objective, namely the analysis of bodies and genders on the two selected porn tubes, we chose to analyze the video previews on the homepages: 162 video previews on the XNXX homepage and 45 on Pornhub. Technically, the previews on both platforms transform from a static image to a short live frame when the cursor is made to hover over them.

The video previews of both XNXX and Pornhub are all rather explicit: live frames with images of full penetration or oral sex, in which female and male bodies appear mostly naked, or in skimpy underwear. Operationally, the fact that all this content is continuously updated by the platform makes it complicated to carry out an analysis. However, from the content that we were able to observe, a great variety of sexual practices were represented in these previews.

Whereas only a few selected video previews are shown on Pornhub (45), XNXX instead shows a page full of video previews (162), making the homepage very lengthy to scroll down, yet at the same time providing an instant overview of the content on offer. Thanks to this particular homepage structure, the previews visible on XNXX are more than triple those of Pornhub.

As far as representation of the content is concerned, we did not find great differences between the two platforms. Despite a greater number of videos available on XNXX, the results for Pornhub are comparable. In both cases, there are images depicting penetration and sexual practices of various types, with both professional and amateur actors and actresses as the protagonists of differing cultural origins, ages, and sexual orientations. Furthermore, on both platforms, video previews depict dissected and faceless bodies, with attention focused mainly on the female who almost always appears at the center of the scene; thus, it might be inferred that the viewers of this content are mostly men. Indeed, upon viewing all the previews on both platforms, we immediately noted a predominance of female images (greater than half on both platforms), combined with highly stereotypical female representation: women typically in a passive role or subjected to the acts. Another important element is the strong presence of sectioned bodies, with emphasis on women's faces and sexual organs—breasts, vagina, and buttocks—while male representation is confined to genitals and hands. Although, as previously mentioned, within both platforms we did in fact find a wide range of categories and sub-genres, the previews of the videos visible within the individual sections still reveal a vast majority of content designed for the male gaze, as highlighted in the famous perspective introduced by Laura Mulvey.²⁶ Proof of this is the disproportionate presence of female bodies, often shown faceless and placed in the center of the frame, submissive to the male, white, heterosexual (active) men.

What is interesting, however, is that in addition to the traditional elements of pornographic material, such as representation of heterosexual sex (with a focus on the female body and male pleasure) and the practices of self-stimulation, we also found substantial representation of homosexual sex (both male and female), sex between transgender people, group sexual practices, as well as sex between people of different ethnicities and ages. It seems to us a clear sign of a process of diversification, that is, the de-heterosexualization of pornographic content.

Indeed, from our analysis, what emerges is that the great diffusion of pornographic content on porn tubes has in some way rectified this previous lack of representation of certain types of sexuality, making them now easily accessible to all, as well as breaking down geographical barriers and eliminating the necessity of third parties in obtaining pornographic material. However, this process of de-heterosexualization of the pornosphere would appear to be a slow and gradual one. This would explain why, for example, although within the respective homepages of the two platforms there is an ample, diversified variety of content, it is, however, close-ups of female buttocks, or subjective scenes in which the viewer finds himself impersonating the male role, which are still predominantly present.

²⁶ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

In conclusion, despite the great variety of sexual practices represented, we cannot fail to highlight, in this first phase of analysis, the fact that in both platforms we still see many more female than male bodies, confirming what has already been claimed by Brian McNair, according to whom mainstream pornography is undergoing a process of diversification of content, yet is still predominantly populated by content for heterosexual men.²⁷

Conclusions and Future Perspectives

The three research actions carried out have highlighted a series of elements that can be summarized as follows: on the one hand, we are witnessing a popularization of pornography, thanks to almost entirely free access to a wide range and a huge variety of services, contents, and sexual categories; on the other, the persistence of old stereotypes.

Though this process of popularization of pornography that has taken place thanks to porn tubes has already been highlighted by the literature, the innovative aspect of our work lies in providing a detailed mapping of the new services offered by porn tubes, which distinguish them from other media.

The level of popularity linked to the boom of porn tubes has deeply altered the pornographic offer, making a whole series of services available to users—games, forums, and the possibility of becoming part of a porn-themed community. This, to date, has had no precedent in other media, such as magazines and videotapes.

The sheer volume of such content also brings with it a massive dissemination of the sexual practices represented and the possibility for various and diversified categories to find visibility within these platforms, thus making them the perfect medium to favor a great plurality of content.

Furthermore, our work on categories represents an unprecedented attempt to categorize pornographic desire. In fact, the analysis carried out is a first attempt at exploring the imaginary of new desires and the new pornographic landscape, through the analysis of categories, which we imagine to be a reflection of the contemporary categories of desire and attraction.

From the research, we obtained seven categories of forms of attraction, some of which are explicitly linked to sex, others not. We also noted that within the labels of the two platforms, both men and women are represented. Though we are witnessing a process of diversification of content, we cannot fail to notice the persistence of stereotypes related to the “classic” world of pornography, such as the large number of categories dedicated to the female figure, and the disproportionate presence of sexualized and passive female bodies in the video previews, compared to men who always appear active and dominant. These elements suggest that, although we are witnessing an expansion in the world of pornography, the contemporary Italian pornosphere is still predominantly intended for a heterosexual, male audience.

Though we consider our research to be highly innovative for the way in which it was carried out, in particular with regard to the analytical approach on sexual categories and the visual representations of the video previews, we do recognize the limits of this work, which has focused mainly on labels and video previews. As far as research perspectives are concerned, a whole series of possible leads to be explored has invited a more in-depth analysis of porn categories, with certain areas requiring further exploration (i.e., the relationship between sexualization and ethnicity, and the relationship between sexual practices and fetishism). It might also be useful to carry out other types of research (i.e., the analysis of videos, using a software support, considering the enormous amount of content, as well as an analysis of the editorial policies of porn tubes)—perhaps even an audience

²⁷ McNair, *Porno? Chic!*

analysis—in order to start collecting elements on porn tube users and their interactions within these platforms.

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