

**Transgender Sexuality:
Porn, Legislation, and the Public Body**

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Abstract

This research seeks to explore the correlation and any possible causation between the increased viewership of transgender pornography and increased anti-trans legislation in the United States. It will achieve this through the modality of autotheory, with which I will critically analyze my own lived experience as a trans man with a focus on sexual spheres. To accomplish this, I will apply thinking of many philosophers and critical theorists such as Micheal Foucault, Judith Butler, and Simone De Beauvoir to unpack my own contexts. This research will also draw from existing scholarship on topics of and surrounding transgender pornography studies.

Perhaps most importantly, my work will centre trans peoples and bodies as the topic of conversation, rather than discussing the *effect* of our bodies on cisgender sexual partners, and broader cis-dominated culture. In employing autotheory as the method of analysis, I will reclaim agency and power in both epistemic and personal storytelling.

Introduction

“So, like, does this make me bi?”. Thus spoke the man in my bed at 2 in the morning on a school night. *Amazing!* I thought. *I cannot wait to have this conversation again.*

“Nope.”

“Oh...”

“Hey, I’ve got class in the morning, you should probably go.”

An elegant ending: sending the poor shmuck home to handle his crisis on his own time, I don’t owe him a dissertation. Here is how the next few days will unfold: he will tell his friends; ask around to see what consensus the council reaches. Then, update his Grindr profile to say “bi-curious” – maybe he does like women. A friend will talk some sense into him, tell him it’s a one-off and that I’m really a good-looking guy, there’s nothing to worry about. In three days or so, he’ll move on after some appropriately liberal epiphany on the fluid, multifaceted nature of sexuality.

All this for a mediocre 15 minutes I'll never get back.

~

I am transgender because I was born with a woman's body and am a man. Therefore, my identity as trans is contingent upon my body. If trans identity functions this way, would not then the identity of a sexual partner be thusly contingent? No, the man referred to above is gay – in sleeping with me, he slept with a man; therefore, his identity was not defined by my body. I argue this is because of the categorical uniqueness of trans bodies. It is this uniqueness that generates confusion and shame for many cis people when viewing trans individuals in a sexual nature (Billard). However, such an exploration is almost always centered around the implications of trans bodies upon cisgender people. This is problematic, for it perpetuates the sentiment that trans bodies, therefor people, exist as a means to an end¹, not the ends in and of themselves. That our bodies are a shameful, somewhat dangerous playground for cis people to explore *themselves* – our bodies do not belong to us, they are pushed into public domain.

Assisting in this publication of our bodies is the porn industry, trans categories of which have been skyrocketing in popularity since 2021 (Pornhub). This research would seek to identify any correlational or causational relationship between viewership of trans pornography and increased anti-trans legislation – with a focus on the United States. It would also attempt to describe how the existence and function trans people in the sexual sphere serves as a representation of larger socio-sexual morals. This would be done not solely with a focus on the impact of trans bodies unto cis people, but with the primary concern being trans people and bodies themselves.

¹ The “ends” in this case would be his “appropriately liberal epiphany”. For in that moment, I did not exist as a person, with all the agency and rights which that affords me. I was a signifier; a mode of exploration and thus was entitled to different dignities.

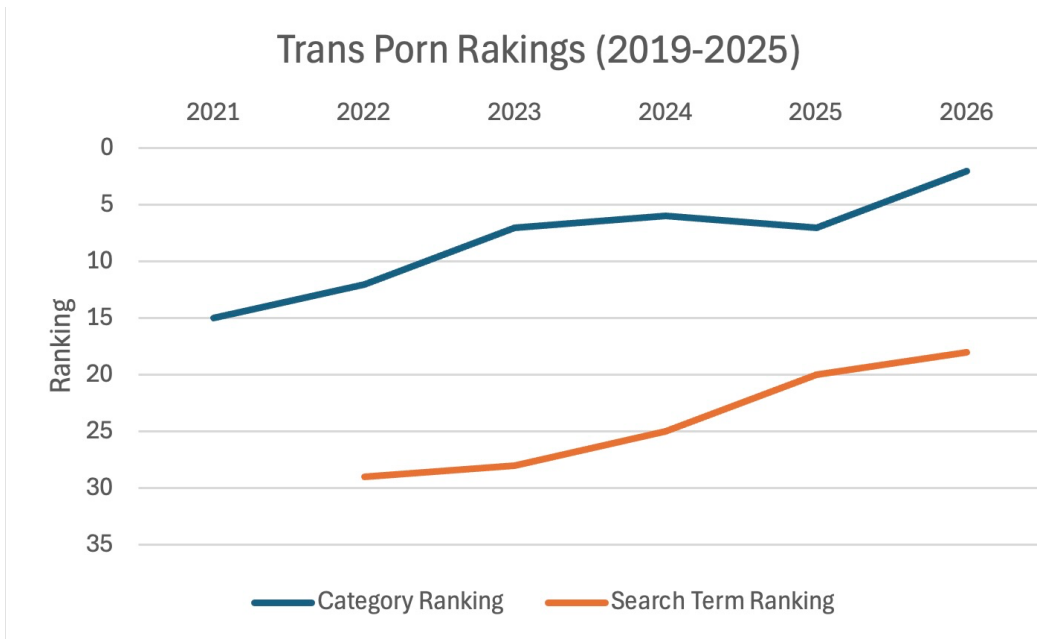


Fig I

(Transgender pornography rankings from 2021-2026, as released annually by PornHub)

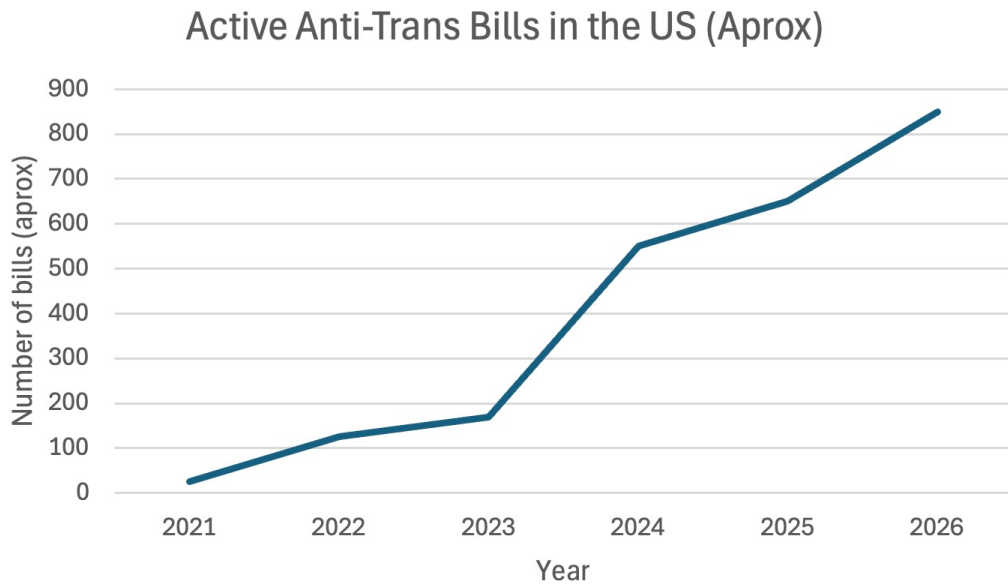


Fig II

(Approximate number of anti-transgender bills in the United States from 2021-2026 as released annually by Trans Legislation Tracker)

In 2019, Thomas J. Billiard conducted a groundbreaking study on the psycho-social consequences of cis viewership of trans porn. He analyzed the relationship between trans porn consumption by cis men and attitudes of the consumer towards trans people. It hypothesized that regular viewing of trans content would subsequently increase the consumer's empathy towards trans people, for engaging regularly could humanize an otherwise underrepresented, often demonized demographic (Billiard). Interestingly, the study veered thinking in a different direction; with results concluding that though frequency of viewing did result in a more positive participant view of trans people, it was "statistically significant but substantively weak" (Billiard). However, the study centred around participant reports of sexual shame regarding their viewing habits and its effect on their prejudice. Ultimately demonstrating that content consumption may not hurt cis perception of trans people, but the shame that often accompanies these preferences does (Billiard).

Why were participants ashamed? There is nothing inherently more shameful about trans porn than any other. A 2021 article published in the Archives of Sexual Behaviour interrogated this dichotomy of the simultaneous fetishization and imposition of vulgarity upon trans bodies, each aspect existing with an expectation of shame: trans people should be ashamed of their bodies, and cis people should be ashamed if they like it (Anzani). Furthermore, this study focused on the *effects* of trans bodies on cis people, not the value or complexity of trans bodies in their own right.

Research Question(s)

What is the relationship between increased consumption of transgender pornography and increased anti-trans legislation, focused predominantly in the United States? How does the lived

experience of trans individuals, when critically analyzed through the mode of autotheory, serve to broaden our understanding of the larger sexual sphere as well as the trans sexual sphere?

Methodology

This would be a largely textual research project. However, I also seek to explore the theories behind this topic using my lived knowledge through the mode of autotheory (Zwartjes), drawing partly from the styles of authors such as Billy-Ray Belcourt and Maggie Nelson.

In summary, I would draw primarily from my lived experience, as seen on page I, then analyze that experience in a rigorous academic context. In doing so, I would employ theories of evolving sexuality and progressive sexual history, such as that of Foucault, Butlerian theories of gender performativity, and Beauvoirian object/subject relationships. These lines of thinking are especially topical and could serve to inform shame felt by heterosexual people who are attracted to trans bodies.

See below an example of the sort of autotheoretical analysis I will be conducting in this paper:

9-16-26

I think I have this general impression of innocence people pick up on. People like it, for they want to ruin it—me². Get as close to the taboo as possible while maintaining (always) plausible

² Here you can see a transgender experience of Beauvoir's outline of the object/subject relationship (Beauvoir), though it is further complicated by gay male gender dynamics. The trans "object" is used as a means to the ends of exploration or the "ruining" written here—beingness as an individual is flattened into perceived usefulness to cisgender sexual partners. However, this exists to varying degrees within different gay male sexual dynamics, trans or cis. There is prolific stigma and objectification of the receptive sexual partner dating back to ancient Greeks. Beauvoir spoke to this from a feminist perspective, famously stating that "one is not born, but becomes a woman.". For Beauvoir (and other feminist thinkers) sexual receptiveness contributes heavily to this, reenforcing notions that sex is a thing men take and women endure (Lopes). In speaking to *ruin* in this passage, I was evoking similar themes, but in doing so, it is necessary to acknowledge that in my role as a passing trans man, I am subject to male privilege: I am the Beauvoirian *Subject*, while also occupying space as the object in intersections of sexual and gendered interactions.

deniability. I am attractive in the grotesque, the forbidden. My anatomical discrepancy an entrancing, unmentionable thing to be peaked at through fingers.

Here, we can see a diary entry (auto) footnoted with critical analysis (theory). Whereas this will not be the only methodology I will employ, I seek to display a similar mixture of authentic creativity and rigorous academic engagement.

Background

Though this paper will be the first to address this specific intersection of issues, there has been impactful scholarship surrounding transgender sexual spheres. As referenced above, the Billiard study was foundational to this field of work, as was the research of Sophie Pezzutto and Lynn Comella on the topic of transgender representation in porn. Additionally, though recently controversial, the trans adult performer Buck Angel has made many contributions to conversations around this sexual sphere; both formally and informally (Sofia Pavanello Decaro et al.). However, though these scholars have made strides in the general field of transgender studies, shifting this work to an autotheoretical modality will further serve to centre and legitimize the lived experience of trans individuals.

Interdisciplinary Focus and International Relevance

I chose to focus this study on the USA for a number of reasons. Firstly, Pornhub is one of the most trafficked sites worldwide, and the United States is their largest userbase (Pornhub), therefore, the data provides the clearest picture of American viewing habits. Similarly, this anti-trans legislation is more prolific in the US than it is in Canada. Not to say that such bills do not exist in Canada, but they are sparser (Ahad). Finally, the United States is in a time of social and political crisis – the most vulnerable of populations are being attacked (Kleinfeld), and I believe research that focuses on these areas is especially important.

However, I would not be able to travel into the country as a part of research, because of my trans identity and American citizenship.

This topic is highly interdisciplinary. Existing in the nexus of sociology, philosophy, and critical theory, it would be incomplete and foolish to approach this study from a singular disciplinary lens.

Outcomes and Impact

Regarding the final product of this research, I would produce an autotheory research paper, 20 pages in length. This paper would provide a blueprint for further study, thereby broadening a field of study for an often-underrepresented demographic. This is highly relevant, for the trans community is especially vulnerable, and I believe in the importance of telling our own stories in academic and non-academic contexts.

Timeline

Working within the timeline of the Laidlaw research summer, I will conduct rigorous theoretical research into the writings of relevant philosophers, thinkers, and critical theorists. This research will be sustained throughout the 6 week period but will be interspersed evenly with personal writings and reflective analysis. I anticipate the undertaking of these personal writings to be emotionally taxing, as they require radical and unapologetic honesty surrounding sensitive subjects. To accommodate for this without compromising the honest integrity of the work, I will ensure there is even distribution of personal and academic analysis.

At the end of the research period, I will spend the remainder of the summer completing the deliverables of a 20-page paper, 6 slides, 2 posters, and summer research reflection.

Role of Research Advisor

Through the duration of this project, I would be in contact with my research advisor who would assist me with finding sources, working through ideas, and formatting a research paper. To conduct my research, I would make use of the UofT libraries, as well as accessible online resources.

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