

**LOVER OR CHASER: EXPLORING TRANS-FETISHIZATION
IN COMMITTED RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CISGENDER MEN
AND TRANSGENDER WOMEN**

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Abstract

Cisgender men have increasingly come out with stories about their intimate relationships with transgender women. However, studies on relationships between cis and trans persons have argued that trans women are critical of trans-attracted cis men. This comes from the accusation that many cisgender men fetishize transgender women. Trans-fetishization is used in this study as the fetishizing of trans women by cis men who overvalue the trans women's transness. The exploration of trans-fetishization is done in context of committed relationships between cis men and trans women, and highlights the perspectives of cis men in the relationships. Through an analysis of the accounts shared by Filipino men in a voiced online interview, the author analyzes how fetishism may be explored in (1) the men's motivations for entering a committed relationship, (2) their concept of an ideal woman, (3) the strategies they employ to maintain high-level of commitment, (4) and their compliance or resistance to hegemonic masculinity. The analysis reveals that men commit to relationships based on the reasons, sometimes overlapping, of material benefits, need for companionship, and the desire to move on from the dating phase by formalizing the relationship. Transness has not been a major factor and therefore, trans-fetishization cannot be accused in this context. Analysis also reveals that men were not attracted to their trans partners because of their transness, instead, their trans partners embody physical and non-physical traits similar to the men's standard for an "ideal woman." Using the investment model (Rusbult and Buunk 1993), the level of commitment of the relationships was assessed. It shows that there is a high level of commitment among the men based on satisfaction level, lack of quality alternatives, and investment of resources. Commitment in the relationships are also maintained by heteronormativity and transnormativity. Adherence to these normativities provides the author basis to assert that transness is not fetishized as an overvalued object of sexual desire. In the context of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, what may be argued as the fetish object is the adherence of the trans partners to the feminine norms. Finally, analysis shows that men, in diverse ways, comply with and resist hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, reformulated 2005) and thus undermines the accusation of trans-fetishization. At the most, the transness of their partners may only be negotiated against hegemonic masculinity. Future endeavors in this scope include an investigation of relationships between partners of different nationalities, as well as an exploration of non-monogamous and/or non-heterosexual cis-trans relationships.

keywords: transgender, fetishism, trans-fetishization, commitment, heteronormativity, transnormativity, Filipino men

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 16,356 words

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(Jet S. Evangelista)

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Because there is love for women like us.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Increasingly, cisgender men have come out to share stories about their relationships with transgender women. Stories found in the internet are often inspirational, mostly celebrating the “beauty” of the relationship, encouraging more men in the same situation to come-out, and dispelling the shame that has often stigmatized them (Moore 2015; Rohrbach 2016; Williams 2016, Cooper 2017). In the Philippines, a story of a cisgender man and a trans woman, told in the point-of-view of the former, was circulated online and in print by one of the country’s leading broadsheets (Sta. Ana 2015). Its eventual popularity led to a book version published by one of the biggest trade book publication companies the country. The couple would be featured in magazines, talk shows, and TV programs.

Meanwhile, trans women have been calling out “tranny chasers” whom they accuse of fetishizing trans women. “Tranny chaser” is a negatively-loaded label for an individual who is sexually inclined to trans persons and actively seeks them because their transness (i.e. identity, genitals) creates a specific “erotic response” (Tompkins 2013, pp. 767, 770). “Dating guides” for men who want to date trans women are all over the internet. Many of these dating rules, mostly formulated by trans women, caution men against fetishizing trans women. Transgender model and television personality, Talulah-Eve (2015), in a dating guide brimming with “don’ts,” sternly warns men not to “see me as a fetish or a novelty” citing an anecdote about a guy who was particularly interested in how she tucked her “penis.” As she was transitioning, British transgender author Juno Dawson (2017), had encounters with a guy who dated her for some kink, and another one whom she had developed a “depressing” sexual routine with. She then concedes:

...I am not a fetish, I am not a prostitute, I am definitely not your mummy. I want the same things as everyone else: scintillating conversation; dinner dates; sex; someone to moan at about Southern Rail; Netflix and chill(ed wine).

This seemingly conflicting discussion trends in trans-related attractions and relationships have prompted me to turn to a specific group of cis men—the Filipino men who are in committed relationships with trans women. The accusation of fetishism in men’s desire for transgender women is central to this research as the core topic of investigation through an analysis of their committed relationships. I believe that desires for and relationships with trans women cannot be fully engaged without investigating discursive elements (culture, social contexts, partner

interactions, individual motivations) that nuance them. As the group accused of fetishizing trans women, focusing on the men's voices will provide us legitimate handles to investigate this accusation against them.

This compels me to include in my investigation how the different expressions of commitment are framed in normativity, specifically heteronormativity and transnormativity, and how does this nuance the discussion of fetishism. Finally, the one-sided focus given to cisgender men's voices by this research warrants that I locate their position to hegemonic masculinity and how its manifestation in committed relationship with trans women nuance the discussion on fetishism. My approach hopefully takes into account the voices of trans women who do not immediately dismiss men's attraction to them as pathologizing or exploitative.

This thesis traverses the interesting intersections of fetishism, trans attractions, normativities, masculinity, and commitment in relationships. The core questions I shall address in this research are the following: How is fetishism evidenced in committed relationships of cis men and trans women? Are men's preferences for women, their decision to enter into relationships, and their strategies to maintain committed to their partners informed by fetishism? How do the constraints of various social forces complicate the accusation of fetishism in relationships? What are the new approaches that cis men in committed relationships with trans women contribute to the robust discussion of trans attraction, desires, and relationships?

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The history of fetishism as a disorder can be traced back to the end of 19th century France. Before it was taken up by Freudian psychoanalysis, it was the French psychologist Alfred Binet in the 1880s who used the term *fetish* to refer to some types of sexual perversions (McClintock 1995, p. 189; Hekma 2007, p. 1745). Robert A. Nye argues that fetishistic practices came to be the subject of medical scrutiny when the French was confronted with deteriorating status as a powerhouse in Europe and their dwindling birthrate. As a response to the latter, medical efforts turned to the study of men who were assumed to be the cause of birthrate problem. It is at this point of history when fetishism was assessed unfavorably in the context of a reproductive and heterosexual function (1993, pp. 15-16).

Sigmund Freud would adapt Binet's term and the French medical thinking on sexual perversion (Hekma 2007, p. 1746). He would however, divert to other directions in his theorizing of fetishism (Nye 1993, p. 27). Freud makes a distinction between the "sexual object" and the "sexual aim." The person sexually desired is the sexual object. The sexual aim is the desired sexual act with the sexual object (1905, pp. 135-136). He says that fetishism happens when the sexual object is substituted by another (maybe a body part or an inanimate object) that is inappropriate for sexual aim (p. 153). Fetishism becomes pathological when the fetish object goes beyond substituting the sexual object and takes the place of the sexual aim (p. 156).

In his 1927 essay, Freud claims that while fetish "adherents" recognize it as an abnormality, they do not feel any suffering from it. Instead, they enjoyed its erotic pleasures. For Freud, fetish represents "a particular and quite special penis" (1927)— the woman's castrated penis that the fetishist denies because it threatens his own penis. In the fetishist's disavowal of woman's castrated penis, he appoints a "substitute" that "inherits the interest" he has for the lost penis (Grosz in Apter and Pietz [eds.] 1993, p. 103; McClintock 1995, p. 189). This substitute, the fetish, becomes a deviated sexual aim characterized by overvaluation that causes the fetishist orgasmic pleasure. From this, we figure how Freud points out that fetishism goes outside the "normal" because its sexual aim is not copulative, and its sexual object is not the opposite sex but only a relation to it (not heterosexual) (Grosz in Apter and Pietz [eds.] 1993, p. 103).

The most resonant challenge to Freud's fetishism relevant to this research would come from feminists writers. Naomi Schor would be attributed the recognition of being the first to point out how Freudian fetishism implies that the absence of female fetishists (McClintock 1995, p. 182). However, the contention was not so much about the classification of fetishism outside normality. Instead, women questioned (albeit in very different approaches) the denial of the female sexual agency in the psychoanalytic discussions of fetishism.

In a reading of the French novelist, George Sand's works, Schor (1985) highlights scenes that suggest erotic fetishizing of women (pp. 304, 306, 308). She points out that the fact Sand was a woman author who preceded Freud, the fetishizing of women characters in the novel supports her claim that there are female fetishists (p. 303). Additionally, she argues that Sand's female characters performed gestures that would be characterized as fetishistic, and whose interactions with each other were non-conforming (pp. 304, 307). Schor goes on to say that female fetishism goes beyond the masculinity complex (describing Sand's novel characters). She cites Sarah

Kofman¹ who argues that female fetishism can be used to challenge efforts that limit women to sexual binaries, and as a strategy for women “to turn the so-called ‘riddle of femininity’ to women’s account to claim and account for themselves the “riddle of femininity” (pp. 306-307).

McClintock (1995) criticizes the denial of female fetishism in Freud (p. 182). This denial, she claims, serves to reduce women’s sexual agency to the terms of men (p. 183). She claims that female fetishism legitimizes the “multiplicity of pleasures, needs and contradictions” that it confounds the dogma of the phallus². This approach, she adds, does not only limit the role of women in the discourse of fetishism but also falls short to explain other forms like racist, nationalist and patriotic fetishes. Further, McClintock argues that fetishism should not be confined to phallic centrality but should extend its investigation to the dynamics of psychoanalysis and social history (p. 84).

Elizabeth Grosz (1993) agrees with Schor and McClintock’s position in that the psychoanalytic claim that women cannot be fetishist in the sense that they can get sexual satisfaction from mere inanimate objects is problematic. She acknowledges the political and strategic value of claiming a form of female fetishism that feminists can utilize to challenge dominant discourses, and in her understanding this is most manifest in lesbianism (pp. 101-102). Grosz presents similarities and contradictions to fetishism and lesbian fetishism. She argues that the lesbian (which she interchanges with a masculine woman or a woman suffering from masculinity complex) disavows her own castration— a connection she makes to the fetishist’s denial of women’s castration. The lesbian also has a substitute for the castrated penis, but as another woman rather than an inanimate object or body part. But while the fetishist is most pleased with his perversion, the lesbian is not. The more she feels to be equal or better than men, the more she will be ostracized. Her fetish exposes her love for another subject (a woman) and effectively introduces her to the harm of homophobia, while the (male) fetishist only has sexual gratification (pp. 113-114). Grosz’ appropriation of the Freud’s fetish as a substitute to the castrated penis will influence my use of the overvalued substitute as I deploy this to transness.

I shall use “trans-fetishization” to refer to the fetishization of trans women by cis men where transness (i.e. status and bodies) is an overvalued sexual object. This is influenced by Freud’s concept of fetish as the pathological desire for an overvalued substitute of the “normal

¹ Schor described Kofman as the “leading—if not the only—theoretician of female fetishism” (1985, p. 306).

² McClintock uses phallus to pertain to the Lacanian dominant paternal law (1995,p. 197).

sex object” (1905, pp. 153-154). I employ this appropriation of fetishism, as pathologized in Freudian psychoanalysis, because it is most resonant among trans women who accuse trans-attracted men of fetishizing trans women. Transness is the fetish object that I locate in the practices, motivations, and desires of men in my study. However, as an overvalued object, it does not substitute for anything but only represents itself. The goal is to investigate whether cis men in committed relationships with trans women challenge or reinforce the accusation of trans-fetishization. My contention is that, in different discursive contexts, the accusation of trans-fetishization can be challenged in multiple ways by Filipino men in committed relationships with trans women. I propose too that prevailing notions on fetishism need to be extricated from meanings that simply assign it stigma. Through an analysis of interviews with Filipino men, this research responds to the challenge of including cis people in more sex-positive discussions about desire and attraction for trans women (Tompkins 2013).

I acknowledge the feminist criticisms how the Freudian fetish reduces the agency of women in a discussion of sexuality. My focus on cisgender men may easily be accused of replicating male-centrism. However, I maintain, that in the context of relationship with trans women, the perspectives of cis men contribute to more wholistic discussions of the topic. Also, by positioning fetishism against normativities that will be investigated here, I will have effectively dislodged the centrality of psychoanalysis— as exactly what McClintock suggested (1995, p. 84).

1.2 Literature Review

The work of a fellow Filipina and a colleague in the local LGBTQ+ scene, Hender Gercio (2015), has been influential in this research. Gercio is critical about how studies on trans-attracted³ men clearly held a “pathological stance” towards men’s attraction to trans women (p. 14). She notes a lamentable gap in scholarly materials that address trans attraction beyond the contexts of sex work, mental illness, HIV/AIDS, pornography and fetish (p. 1). It is from these frameworks that Gercio wishes to subvert, and from her positionality as a transgender woman who have

³ Trans attraction is a term she used to specifically pertain to the erotic or sexual desire of cisgender men to transgender women (Gercio 2015, p. 2).

experienced “loving and erotic relationships” that she goes to search for a “fresh and constructive lens” that hopefully does not dismiss the desire of trans-attracted men to fetishism (p. 1, 4).

Gercio investigated how hegemonic masculinity is challenged or replicated by men in their dating profiles found in two popular transgender dating websites. Arguing men’s trans attraction as a form of “new masculinity” (p. 10), her project reveals the complex ways in which trans-attracted men position themselves to hegemonic masculinity. Her analysis asserts that trans-attracted men navigate hegemonic masculinity in multiple ways, “with some of them contributing to hegemonic masculinity’s propagation and some of them to its contestation” (p. 52). Acknowledging the limitations of the particular focus on dating profiles, Gercio suggested that, to more fully understand trans-attracted men, an investigation of their in-person dating practices must also be undertaken (p. 54).

While we both have cisgender men as subjects of research, Gercio and I differ in our approach in tackling fetishism. My goal, however is to both challenge the accusation of fetishism in relationships of cis men with trans women, and lead me to also question the stigma on fetishism—that fetishism may allow for these intimate relationships to happen and to be sustained.

Cis men and trans women relationships have been the subject of a study on mental health and relationship quality. Gamarel, et al. (2014), using the interdependence theory, examined the effects of minority stressors, anything that causes stress on individuals because of their belonging to a “socially devalued group,” in the relationship quality of cis men and trans women in intimate romantic relationships. They administered computer-assisted, self-interview technology to conduct a survey for 191 cis men and trans women couples. The survey gathered informant data on sociodemographics, depressive symptoms, relationship quality, discrimination, and relationship stigma. Results of the research reveals how trans women and their male partners have higher chances of experiencing depressive distress caused by trans-related discrimination, and thus makes individual partners perceive their relationships negatively (pp. 443-444). The interesting approach inspired my turn to study the dynamics of cis men and trans women who are intimate partners through the framework of fetishism and against the social forces that affect them. The use of interdependence theory in the research of Gamarel, et al. led me to Rusbult and Buunk’s (1993) use of the investment model to analyze the commitment level of the relationships of the cis men and the trans women in this study. My assessment of the commitment level will be based on the

satisfaction level, availability of quality alternatives, and investment of resources, and analyze how these indicators of commitment challenge fetishism in the relationships.

Finally, I reflect on Avery Brooks Tompkins' (2013) challenge to problematize the "tranny chaser" rhetoric that dominates the discussions on persons (usually cisgender) with particular attraction for trans people. By analyzing online video blogs of cisgender women who have trans-identified partners, and trans-specific conferences in the U.S., she exposes the lack of sex-positive discussions on discourses of desire for trans people. In her findings, she argues that the "tranny chaser" rhetoric denies the "erotics of transness" to render legitimacy to other "attractions" that are not sexually fetishistic. She also mentions that while this denial may be useful for trans people to live in "stealth," it may invisibilize the trans identity that is an integral part of the partners (pp. 772-773). Tompkins encourages the involvement of cis people in this discussion, recognizing that they "are not inherently incapable of taking part in sex-positive and affirming discourses about trans identities and bodies" (p. 775). I respond to Tompkins' call to a more nuanced discussion of trans attraction and relationships that considers cis people, particularly cis men in my project, as an important contributing voice.

1.3 Method

Interviewees are nine Filipino cisgender men. All of them are currently in a relationship with a Filipino trans woman. One of the interviewees, Jerry,⁴ lives in Australia but has been raised in the Philippines and keeps his identity as a Filipino. Anthony, David, Charlie, Chester, Jobby, Patrick, Byron, and Hanford all reside in the Philippines. Only two of the interviewees, Chester and David, are college undergraduates, the rest have college degrees. Chester is the only student in the group but he is doing part-time work as a performer in a bar with his partner.

I am friends with the trans partners of seven of them. The other two, David and Hanford, were referred by common friends who have knowledge of their relationships. In an attempt to diversify the range of interviewees, I looked for other Filipino men who have come out about their relationships with trans women through Facebook posts. I sent private messages to three persons

⁴ Pseudonyms were used for the interviewees and their partners for anonymity.

but unfortunately only one of them replied. That sole person, more unfortunately even, rejected my request for an interview saying:

I don't fetishize trans (women), it just so happens that I am in love with a trans (woman). Sorry and thanks for noticing (sic).

[Hindi ko kasi fetish ang trans, nagkataon lang na nainlove ako sa trans. Sorry and thanks for noticing.]

Of course, he has misunderstood my thesis objective and I tried to explain to him further the direction that this thesis hopes to track. However, he did not reply to my messages anymore.

I also created chat groups with trans women from different areas in the Philippines to provide me leads to more possible interviewees. I intentionally approached the trans women first to ask for their permission if I could interview their partners. About a few agreed to be interviewed, however, eventually backed out for unknown reasons.

My sense was that it was important that I initially convince my fellow trans women so they can help me convince their male partners to agree to the interview. A formal letter of request with an interview consent form in both English and Filipino were sent to those who showed interest in participating in the interview. The interviews were then scheduled for those who have confirmed.

I conducted nine semi-structured, voiced call interviews about my interviewees' relationships with their trans partners using Facebook Messenger which was most accessible to everyone of my interviewees. Each interview session was started with a review of the topic, and the important reminders in the interview consent. The overall conduct of the interview was very casual. The eight interviews were done in Filipino but the interviewees would code-switch to English every now and then. This should explain why some interviewees' answers are already in English without a Filipino original. The original Filipino transcriptions will be reflected to preserve the authenticity of the responses. The English translations were provided by me. Only one interview, Anthony's, was conducted in English as he was uncomfortable speaking in Filipino. Each conversation lasted no longer than one hour. Before I ended each interview, I made sure that the interviewees were given the opportunity to clarify any discussion points that might have been vague to them in case they wanted to modify the information they provided.

The first aim was to use the information shared in the interview to identify the standards of men for their ideal partners. Then, I analyze the decision points why these men agree to enter relationships. In the next chapter, I use the investment model of the interdependence theory

(Rusbult and Buunk 1993) to establish the level of commitment of the relationships. I also show in the same chapter how heteronormativity and transnormativity facilitate the maintenance of these relationships. Finally, I investigate how the men position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) as they negotiate their committed relationships with trans women. As the core problematic of this research, I will analyze how fetishism may be situated in these aspects of the relationships.

Chapter 2: Undermining fetishism in the search for ideal woman

The pathologized history of fetishism as an abnormality where the fetishist overvalues an object or, more relevantly for this research, transness, makes it understandable why a number of studies on trans women's intimate relationship argue that trans women are critical of trans-attracted men. If trans women are desired specifically (or only) for the body part that most of them feel disconnected to, there is good reason for many trans women to be offended. This chapter will explore how the men involved in this research provide different narratives of desire reflected in their accounts of the decision to commit in relationships, and that of their personal standards in looking for partners. How does their decisions to be in a relationship with their transgender partner challenge the conceptualizations of fetishism that I offered earlier?

2.1 Looking for love

Rees and Garcia (2017) presented a research that challenged the claim that the interest of the fetishist in fetish objects renders the partner sexually irrelevant. Among other things, Rees and Garcia aimed to identify the importance of partners in sexual fetish acts. Their research was done with 57 individuals with self-identified sexual object fetishism who participated in a web-based survey tool (p. 255). Results indicate that participants in the research showed there was an interest in their partners, and that their partners did not only provide sexual gratification but also romance and intimacy (p. 264). While my interviewees (at least at this point of my argument) cannot be dismissed as having fetishistic desires for their transgender partners compared to the subjects of the above-mentioned study who are with self-identified fetishes, I similarly prove in this section that the value of transgender women to their partners are beyond the sexual gratification that they can provide. I draw on Rees and Garcia's study because I want to highlight on how desire cannot simply be explained by a fetish object, something that is reflected too in the accounts of the men in my own study.

Searching for a partner for these men is diversely motivated. Their motivations, however, are definitely not driven by sexual excitement. In fact, none had sexual satisfaction in mind when asked about their desire to be in a relationship, and they to be asked about their sex lives to encourage them to open up about their sexual desires and activities. Three of the interviewees,

Chester, Patrick, and Jobby, even said that they were not actively searching for partners before their relationship with their current transgender partners. Therefore, this undermines accusations that these men sought relationships with trans women because of a fetishistic desire for a transgender body. Their reasons to be in the relationship are actually driven by different non-sexual motivations: (1) formalizing the relationship, (2) need for companionship, and (3) material benefits.

Five out of the nine men in my research said that they were already committed to the relationship and so wanted to formalize their statuses as couples. For clarity, I shall use the term “formalize” to refer to the agreement when the couples decide to move on from the dating phase (e.g. activities like eating out, watching movies) to a relationship informed by a set of commitments which I shall discuss later.

Jobby, for instance, met his partner Patty when his group was organizing the Civil Rights March in Manila four years ago. They started going out with common friends in their advocacy circle, and eventually started seeing each other apart from their usual company. Jobby was not thinking of a long-term relationship with Patty when they were in their dating phase, but eventually agreed to formalize their relationship:

Jobby: I could say that we’re like a couple already. We can be together longer, go through life’s challenges together, so push. Initially at the onset, my thinking is short term but I realized long-term is possible.

[Jobby: I could say na parang... kami na ‘nun. like kaya pala naming to be together ng matagal, go through life’s challenges together, so push. Kaya pala kahit initially at the onset, short-term ‘yung thinking ko. Posibleng long-term, kaya din pala.]

While Jobby was not initially interested in a long-term relationship, the regularity of going out with Patty and her long-term mindset for relationships facilitated Jobby’s decision to enter a new phase in the relationship. Jobby’s term “*kami na ‘nun*” can be loosely translated to English as “we are a ‘we’ already.” This suggests that their entry to a more committed relationship was just a matter formalizing their dating routine.

Patrick and Gina, on the other hand, first tried to date as friends only because Patrick was initially uncomfortable to be romantically involved with a transgender woman. However, Gina found this routine torturous and she told Patrick that she could not go on seeing him only as friends:

Patrick: We saw each other once in a while. Actually, one time, I was welcomed by her mom in their house. We were okay as friends. We spoke one time, and Gina said that it’s

difficult for her because she's developed some feelings for me. I admit that I had feelings for her too. I refused and we had a fight... So I called her again, we talked and fixed things up. After a few months, we agreed that we are officially a couple. That's the start.

[Patrick: Nagkikita kami once in a while. Actually, dumating din 'yung time na winelcome ako sa bahay nila, ng mom niya... Naging okay naman kami as friends. Nag-usap kami one time na nahirapan na si Gina sa sitwasyon naming kasi may feelings talaga siya para sa akin, Inadmit ko naman na kahit papaano, may feelings ako for her... Umayaw ako, nagkaroon kami ng konting away... So tinawagan ko siya ulit, nag-usap kami, that's the time na naayos na namin. After a few months, napag-usapan na lang naming na naging kami na talaga. Parang official na. 'yun 'yung start.]

Patrick's effort to patch things up with Gina suggests that the constant communication that they had and the eventual "feelings" he had developed for Gina were just waiting to be formalized, something that Gina demanded.

In Anthony's account, when he first dated Hera, he was immediately drawn to her "intellect" and to her ability to "carry a conversation." After about five dates, Anthony felt that Hera was someone he would like to be with more exclusively:

Anthony: ... We were in the car, we came from one of her friends' birthday celebrations, if I remember correctly. And I just asked her... I just said that, "hey, you want to get together?" And she was like, "okay."

Companionship was also highlighted by most of my respondents, seven out of nine of them to be exact, as a major factor in their decision to be in committed relationships with their partners. Friendship, sharing similar "wavelengths," and common interests characterize the companionship that the men found attractive in their partners. It should be noted that sexual gratification was not mentioned in any of the men's responses.

When asked if he was actively looking for a partner before he met his trans partner, Jerry admitted that part of his decision to enter the relationships is his need for company. He has a "fear of being alone, sleeping alone." He would even spend nights with women he described as "friends with benefits" because he did not want to be alone. While this was not the main reason of him committing to a relationship with his transgender partner, Jerry's constant need for company served as a backdrop for his search for a partner which led him to meeting Trina in a bar in Manila.

Byron admitted to have sexual attraction to transgender women before he knew Nikky, his current transgender partner. He knew at the onset that Nikky is a transgender woman when they

matched in an online dating application but his decision to pursue her had nothing to do with her being transgender woman at all:

Byron: Usually, everything in Tinder is sexualized, inappropriate, and conversations are more about sex. But when we talk on Tinder, it's more like a conversation with someone you know for a very long time. It's like catching up. She told me a lot of stories about herself, what she's done in the past. I got interested in that. When we talk, it felt that I'm talking with a very old friend or someone that I know really personally... I'm looking for someone who could actually be in the same wavelength as I am.

[Byron: Usually, sa Tinder, everything is sexualized, inappropriate, more on sex ang usapan. Pero sa amin, when we talk on Tinder, it's more like a conversation with someone you know for a very long time. So parang catching up lang. She told me a lot of stories about herself, what she's done in the past. Dun ako naging interesado sa kanya... When we talk, it felt that I'm talking with a very old friend or someone that I know talaga personally... I'm looking for someone na could actually be in the same wave length as me.]

It is interesting too, that Byron differentiated his need for a companion from wanting to be in a relationship:

Byron: What I'm looking for is a companion. Not a relationship or attraction. What I'm looking for in a relationship is the companionship itself.

Byron's disposition may be explained by his statement how he sees Tinder more as a venue to meet partners where attraction and relationships are sexual. His intentional use of "companionship" instead of "relationship" suggests his refusal for his relationship with Nikky to be sexualized.

David found the ideal companion in Issa, his girlfriend for six years now. David and Issa were colleagues at work and had been in the same circle of friends for a time before they became partners. David's feelings for Issa developed as they got closer and closer, spending nights together with other friends when going out to drink. Issa was a familiar presence and David was comfortable being with her:

David: When we got drunk, I slept over. I got used to being with them, being with her. I felt safe and felt like nothing bad would happen to me. I was comfortable being there. Then we started texting. I admitted to her that I liked her, and I didn't like anyone else.

[David: Kapag nag-iinom, dun na lang ako, dun na lang ako natutulog. Parang nasanay na lang ako na lagi ko silang kasama, lagi ko siyang kasama, na parang ang safe-safe ko, walang nangyayaring masama. 'Yung kumportable ka palagai 'pag andun ka. Tapos nagtext-text kami. Parang napaamin na lang ako sa kanya na gusto ko siya, ayaw ko na sa iba.]

Material benefits may also be a reason why men enter relationships with transgender women. I cite Chester's example where my interviewee was materially benefitting from his transgender partner. I include this motivation in this chapter as a point of reinforcement of my argument that, contrary to Chester's case, relationships with transgender women are not only sexually motivated and that reasons for commitment are not purely 'romantic' either.

Chester has been in a relationship with transgender women before he met his current partner, Dee. When asked about the circumstances that led to his relationships with transgender women, he is not apprehensive to share that his transgender partners provide for him. He shares this about his first transgender fiancée:

Chester: We started to talk, she would load my mobile phone... When we became a couple, for six months she supported my dancing, she gave me allowance, transportation fare, food, money to buy new clothes.

[Chester: Nagkausap-usap na, niloloadan na niya ako... Nung naging kami, for six months, support siya sa pagsayaw ko, binibigyan niya ako ng pang-quota, pamasaha, pagkain, pambili ng damit.]

He also explained how the generosity of his current partner was key for him to "fall" for her:

Chester: When you are always together, you fall (in love). Of course, she is kind, she always treats me out... She drags me to places after her shows, to restaurants, to eat food I have not tasted before. I benefit from it. It makes me happy.

[Chester: Kapag lagi mong kasama, nafo-fall. Siempre siya, ang bait niya, lagi niya akong nililibre... Sinasama pa niya ako after ng show niya, sa mga kainan. Mga restaurants, mga hindi ko pa natitikman na pagkain. Nagbebenefit ako. Natutuwa ako.]

This kind of information is something that would usually be denied by many Filipino men who have relationships with transgender women. I would suggest that Chester voluntarily shared the information with me to allow me to read his motivation in favorable terms. Chester's point may underscore the fact that entering the relationships might not have been possible without the material benefits in spite of his attraction to his partners. I suspect that he uses this as explanation strategically to counter possible criticisms regarding his masculinity (I explore masculinity further in Chapter 4). Either way, Chester's point can be a basis for me to argue that his relationships with transgender women was not motivated by fetishism.

While the interviewees would initially mention one of the three reasons why they agreed to be in committed relationships with their trans partners, they would also suggest that their decision was a combination, especially of the need for companionship and the need to formalize the relationship. Such is true for Anthony, David, Patrick, Jobby, and Byron. Chester was the only one who mentions material benefits as factor in entering the relationship, however, he still said that he enjoys being with his partner and it is a factor why he is in a relationship with her.

The interplay of these three reasons for entering the relationship does not suggest anything about sexual gratification by the interviewees. Transness has not been mentioned as well as a factor that convinced these men to commit to the relationships. However, transness can be further complicated in the context of material benefits: will the acquisition of material benefits a considerable factor in a cisgender man's decision to be with a trans woman? Will material benefits be required by a cisgender man from a non-trans woman in a relationship? This may be more adequately explored in the discussion of commodity fetishism where economy takes centrality. Unfortunately, this research falls short to explore fetishism beyond my strategic appropriation of the concept.

2.2 The ideal woman

How do men visualize their ideal woman and what are the efforts they take to search for them? If trans-fetishization is to be accused of men who are attracted to trans women, or in this case, men who are in relationship with trans women, this should be reflected in their vision of what an ideal partner is, or the manner in which they search for their potential partners. In this section, I attempt to locate trans-fetishization in how the men describe their ideal woman, and their accounts of how they met their partners.

In her study, Gercio (2015) expresses concern over how trans-attracted men in transgender dating sites “can cross too easily” to fetishization and objectification of transgender women (49-50). The men in my research differ from Gercio's in at least two ways. First, my interviewees did not turn to an online transgender dating site to look for partners. Anthony and Byron met their partners in Tinder, an online dating application, but Tinder does not specifically and only cater for men looking for trans women. Charlie and Hanford met their partners in Facebook but on different situations. Charlie and his partner were linked through common friends in Facebook. Hanford

actively went to a Facebook page of a local transgender organization. I maintain that his effort is not at all similar to going to an online dating site because a Facebook page is an unusual site to find relationship partners and that Hanford himself denied looking for a partner there. He said that he came from a break-up and joined the Facebook group to seek advice and ask for sympathy. However, the intention to join a Facebook group of transgender women may be interpreted as Hanford's search for "transness." He makes clear though, that his intention was not for any type of sexual gratification. This makes trans-fetishization difficult to accuse of Hanford. The rest of my interviewees met their partners through common friends, in a bar, and in the local activist circle.

Second, most of my interviewees did not have a trans person in mind when they were asked about their ideal woman. I argue that, in so far as it is the non-physical standards that men singled out to have for their ideal woman informing their choice of transgender partner, I do not see an "incessant" fetishistic attraction to their transness (that Gercio attributes to the men in her study).

Four of the interviewees began enumerating non-physical qualities when asked what they look for in a partner. For Hanford and Anthony, sharing similar interest were ideal for a woman. Hanford's attraction to his partner was mainly because they had similar "ideology... likes and dislikes." The women in Anthony's immediate surrounding were unattractive to him because they did not share his interest in politics and social issues. David has no preference when it comes to physical qualities but says that his ideal partner is someone who will dedicate her time and attention to their relationship. Patrick has no standards too and only says, "*basta love ko na*" (as long as I already love her). Chester wants someone who is kind, understanding, and open-minded.

Physical traits were mentioned by the interviewees but were not as emphasized as non-physical traits were. Charlie described that his preference for a high-bridged nose was "*mababaw lang*" (shallow), against his preference for someone who is sweet and who can be compatible with him. Anthony mentioned he prefers women who are tan-skinned but stresses more on his preference for someone who has "intellect" and can "carry a conversation." Chester's preference for a pretty face and big breasts came after he mentions his preferred non-physical traits in a woman. Jerry said he was attracted to girls who are petite, cute, "girly," and who are not taller than him. It was only Jobby who flatly answered his basis is only physical appearance for his "crushes" (women he has crush with).

I asked the question about their ideal women at the earlier part of the interviews, or before I asked them if and how they were looking for partners before they entered their current relationships. The question would either be phrased as, “What do you usually look for in a woman?” or “Describe your ideal woman.” The question was phrased and was ordered in the interview as such to see if the interviewees would mention anything about transness or even anything particular about their trans partners. Based on the responses, transness is not in the intelligibility of the “ideal woman.” The “ideal woman” is not a trans woman. It should be asked then, if their trans partners were not the ideal women they were looking, what attracted these men to their trans partners? What made them commit to a relationship with these trans women?

Anthony, Charlie, Jerry, Jobby, Patrick, Chester, and Hanford consider attractive in transgender women physical traits that may be described as stereotypically feminine. Jobby, Jerry, Chester, and Hanford explicitly said they found their partners physically attractive and how that had been crucial in their interest to pursue a relationship. For Jerry even, a gender affirming surgery was a requirement for acceptability, otherwise, he would not have entertained the idea of a relationship even if he found Trina physically attractive (translation in parenthesis):

Jerry: I told her many times if she still has that, *kung hindi pa siya operated* (if she has not gone through surgery), I would never ever even consider, even think about it, *na* (that) I would date her. That’s a definitely no.

Aside from the physical traits, some trans women fit the men’s “ideal” standards of non-physical desirability. Anthony found Hera intelligent and he could talk with her about his interest in politics. Jobby thinks Patty is very matured and likes her for it. Patrick enjoys conversations with Gina. Byron was initially attracted to Nikky’s witty Tinder profile. Chester enjoys being with Dee because she is funny. Many of these qualities are very similar to the non-physical qualities that the men look for in their ideal woman.

Therefore, the similarities to the “ideal woman,” both physical and non-physical, make trans women desirable partners too. At least for the interviewees, transness is not a quality that is actually desired in women. The interviewees did not commit to the relationships because their partners are transgender. In this context, trans-fetishization cannot be accused of the men in this research.

Chapter 3: Normativities in Commitment

In the previous chapter, I investigated the accusation of trans-fetishizing against cis men at the early stages of their relationship with their transgender partners by analyzing their personal standards for their ideal women. In the first part of this chapter, I use the investment model to define commitment and establish that the partners are committed to each other. Then, I explore how heteronormativity and transnormativity inform the maintenance of commitment, and the course of the relationships in general. I then use normativities to investigate how such committed relationships undermine or affirm the accusation fetishism on men who have relationships with transgender women.

3.1 Analyzing commitment through the Investment Model

From a discussion of the thought processes of the men to move on from the dating phase (i.e. hanging-out with each other, eating out together) and after they formalized the relationship, I now turn to the discussion of how the relationships with their trans partner are maintained. Though I probed on factors that motivated the interviewees' decision to commit to the relationship, it will only be in this chapter that I will look into the ways how this relationship, from the time it has been formalized from its dating phase, has been maintained. To make this difference explicit, I adopt Rusbult and Buunk's (1993) definition of commitment as the "experience of dependence on a relationship" that represents a desire to maintain long-term togetherness (p. 180) which, in their use of the investment model, can be maintained if there is a high satisfaction level experienced by the partners, lack of quality alternatives that drive the partners away from each other, and a considerable amount resources invested by the partners (pp. 175, 181-184). Though they were unfortunately able to incorporate gender identity in their analysis, Rusbult and Buunk maintain that the investment model has demonstrated its generalizability as it has been previously used to analyze commitments in heterosexual and homosexual relationships, dating relationships and marriages, friendships, and job commitment and turnover decisions (p. 189).

Satisfaction in relationships is achieved when the relationship is favorably assessed and when the partner "fulfills important need." It may be evaluated based on previous relationships, observation of others' relationships, and a comparison of how the relationship benefits or

disadvantages the partner (pp. 179, 181-182). The men's answers to my questions about sex life, previous relationships, and what they find good about their relationships reveal that there are various reasons why they feel satisfied with their relationships with their trans partners.

David finds his relationship with Issa easier to manage compared to his previous relationships with other cisgender women. He feels more satisfied in his current relationship with Issa because he does not have to "prove" himself to his partner's parents, there is only the two of them in the relationship:

David: It's easier to handle our relationship compared to the previous ones. Of course, with women, it's difficult to prove yourself to the parents. Issa is independent, there's nothing to prove. You agreed to it, she agreed to it, then it's okay.

[David: Mas madaling ihandle ngayon 'ung relationship namin as aming dalawa kumpara as dati. Kasi siyempre 'pag babae, unang-una sa magulang. Mahihirapan ka i-prove ang sarili mo... 'di gaya ngayon, si Issa independent. Wala na kailangan i-prove. Ginusto mo na, ginusto na niya, okay na.]

Furthermore, sex with his past cisgender girlfriends was also complicated for him for the fear of accidentally getting them pregnant and the eventual responsibility that he thought he was not prepared for. I take that to mean that he enjoys a level of sexual liberty with Issa that he never had with his past cisgender partners:

David: She's a woman, right? There's still the fear that I might get her pregnant. It's difficult because you're also not accepted (by the parents)... ..there's no fear because we will lose nothing, we will gain nothing. We're both active (in sex). The fear is doing it with a woman, I could say that I was not ready to have a kid. I could live with them but I am scared of the obligation.

[David: Kasi 'di ba babae siya? Andun pa rin 'yung kaba ng baka may mabuo. Makabuntis. Kasi 'di mo rin masabi gawa nang 'di ka rin tanggap... ..wala nang masiyadong takot gawa ng wala naming mawawala, walang magkakaran. Parehas naman active pagdating sa ganun. Basta andun lang 'yung kaba pagdating sa babae, masabi ko rin na hindi pa ako handa na magkaron ng anak. Handa lang ako na magsama na kami. Pero 'yung obligasyon as ganun, siguro dun ako natakot.]

In describing his sexual satisfaction with Issa, David uses the term *babae* (woman) as a genitally female person whom he can get pregnant in penetrative sex. Throughout the interview, David would use "trans" to refer to Issa. Therefore, in his vocabulary, "trans" is different from "woman" who is genitally female.

David's satisfaction with his relationship with Issa also reflects in his happiness for Issa's thriving career. He talked about this when asked what he likes most about their relationship. I assume here, therefore, that he attributes the development in Issa's career to their relationship.

David: ...her successful career today, in her chosen work. We have a happy relationship. We do not desire for an extravagant life. We only want what is enough.

[David:... 'Yung pagiging successful sa career niya ngayon, sa ginusto niyang tabaho. Masaya relasyon namin sa ngayon. 'Di kami naghahangad ng masiyadong magandang buhay. Sa'min 'yung saktong buhay lang.⁵]

Maturity makes Anthony's relationship with Hera different from his past relationship. He contextualizes maturity in his partner's ability to make decisions for them as a couple, and her capacity to engage in "intellectual" discussions:

Anthony: My current partner is mature. I mean, in all relationships sometimes we're immature but she is mature... But yeah, one, she's mature, generally speaking-intellectually and emotionally mature... Intellectually speaking, she can keep a good conversation... I just enjoy being with her. I mean, I'm happy with her. I'm happy being with her.

Byron's satisfaction in his three-month relationship with Nikky also comes from what he sees as a challenge to engage people regarding relationships like his:

Byron: ...I find it challenging because I do have the room to defend myself, and defend my relationship with Nikky. At the same time, educate them about the circumstances that we're going through, and share with them that I'm much more happy (sic) with Nikky rather than my exes. Now, I feel contented.

In, Hanford's case, though, his preference for his current transgender partner over his past cisgender partners is peculiar in comparison with the other respondents' answers because he believes his trans partner understands him as a man and in the same breath he says that women are more difficult to understand:

Hanford: It's like, she understands the feeling of a man. Unlike women, they are difficult to understand.

[Hanford: Kumbaga, naiintindihan niya kung anu 'yung feeling ng isang lalake. Unlike kapag mga babae kasi, mahirap intindihin.]

⁵ *saktong buhay* loosely translated in English is "exact life." This phrase is used as a colloquial for "simple life."

This is curious because Hanford acknowledges Jenny's male sex assignment as a factor that facilitates better understanding. While transness plays a factor in Hanford's satisfaction with Jenny, this satisfaction is not sexual and therefore does not fit this study's definition of trans-fetishization. Throughout the interviews, Hanford and most of the other interviewees would interchange transgender and *bakla*, a Filipino term for the genitally male gender-crossing individuals (Garcia 2008, p. xvi; 2013, p. 55). I tackle this as I discuss in Chapter 4 of this study.

Byron and Hanford both describe sex with their transgender partners as "more exciting." Byron looks forward to a "continuous learning" having been involved with a transgender woman for the first time. Sex life for Hanford is happier with his transgender partner because there is "thrill and excitement." He affirmed that touching his partner's genitalia makes their sex more exciting than his previous sex experiences with his cisgender partners.

In the introduction, I contextualized the use of trans-fetishization as a desire where "transness" of a transgender woman becomes the fetish object that provides sexual gratification. The excitement that characterizes Hanford's satisfaction with his sex life may easily be pronounced as fetishistic. After all, he feels sexual gratification (excitement) in the transgender body (touching his partner's genitalia). However, his sexual gratification is only achieved in contact with the body of his current partner, Jenny, and not with the body of any other transgender women. He claims he has not been attracted to any, trans or non-trans, women since he had the relationship with Jenny. This is similar to Rees and Garcia's findings that some fetishists recognize their partners as persons and their sexual satisfaction cannot be experienced with just anyone (2017, p. 264). But again, it is inconclusive if Hanford over-inscribe value in Jenny's genitalia which is imperative in my definition of trans-fetishization. This ambiguity should warrant further exploration of Hanford's satisfaction in his relationship with Jenny before it could be read as fetishistic.

Alternatives are understood as anyone or anything that pulls away an individual from the relationship. Alternatives may be (a) another person whom one can establish a new relationship with, (b) just dating, or (c) not getting involved with anyone at all. It can also be realized in the form of concurrent alternatives like hobbies or being with peers (Rusbult and Buunk 1993, p. 182). The couples in this study show their commitment to each other by making sure that they manage the threat of quality alternatives.

Unpleasant encounters with cisgender women, in previous relationships or dating experiences, not only become a basis to compare satisfaction levels but also become the standard by which other cisgender women and transgender women are assessed as alternatives. Before being with Issa, David pursued another work colleague who was rumored to have had non-serious affairs with several other men. David lost his interest in this co-worker and turned his attention to Issa:

David: I don't like women anymore, I like transgender (women) now

[David: ...Ayaw ko na sa babae, gusto ko na sa transgender.]

On his birthday and their 10th anniversary, Hanford caught his fiancée for ten years cheating on him with her boss. This painful experience led him to look for someone who could give him attention and “sympathy.” While fending off quality alternatives was not explicit, Hanford’s turn to a Facebook group of transgender women is suggestive of how he is declining cisgender women as quality alternatives.

The level of commitment in David’s pursuance of his former colleague and in Hanford’s ten years with his ex-girlfriend shows that the two of them are capable of maintaining high level of commitment. However, their bad experiences with cisgender women made turned their attention to trans women. This challenged the accusation of trans-fetishization particularly in their case. Their turn to their trans women partners was in the context of having bad experiences with cis women and not in active pursuit of a sexually gratifying trans woman.

Arrangements that couples established would also naturally fend off quality alternatives. Eight out of the nine men either initiated or agreed to making their relationship exclusive. Byron and Nikky agreed to uninstall online dating applications from their mobile phones and deleted their ex-partners from their contacts. Six of the couples live together, a Charlie and Patrick are with their transgender partners’ families. David would bring his friends at home to drink so he would not have to spend the night over anywhere else in case he gets drunk.

The couples’ efforts to set-up mechanisms that discourage alternatives suggest that the men in the relationships are committed to their transgender partners. The refusal of the men to open up to possible cisgender alternatives also undermine the accusation that commitment to their transgender partners are fetishistic. Their unfavorable experience with previous cisgender partners

opened the doors for them to explore relationships with trans women. However, this implicates trans women as the alternative choice if men's relationships with cis women fail.

The arrangements mentioned earlier not only secure the relationships from the temptation of quality alternatives, they also suggest that couples have invested material and non-material resources in the (building of the) relationship to manifest their commitment to each other. Living together, for example, will require a lot of patience from both partners, and adjustments to their personal sense of space and privacy.

Six years ago, Charlie had to leave his home to stay with Yarrie and her family. He does not only have to deal with them, he also felt the need to share their expenses and give them financial support if he gets extra commission from work. Byron and Nikky moved together so that they may be able to dedicate more of their free time to each other especially since they have different work hours.

Personal sacrifices characterize many of the interviewees' investment in their relationships. Most of them had to come out to their families even at the possibility of being admonished by their relatives. It took time for Byron's brother to accept his relationship with Nikky, and he is still currently dealing with an aunt who is against their relationship. Jobby also has to deal with a "happy-clappy" aunt whom he is trying to convince to get to know his partner first before she judges the relationship.

Individuals become increasingly bound to their partners the more they invest in their relationships. The bigger the investment, the bigger the cost of ending a relationship. Therefore, the above examples of investments of convenience, time, and personal sacrifices further increase commitment (p. 184). By the logic of the investment model, the investments of the interviewees will make it difficult for them to end the relationship. The value of investment determines the level of commitment in their relationships. Aside from satisfaction level and the lack of quality alternatives, what is valued is the investment, not sexual gratification from transness, that the interviewees put in to maintain high level of commitment.

3.2 Normativities revisited

Butler defines "normative" as "ethical justification, how it is established, and what concrete consequences proceed therefrom," and as banal enforcements of certain gender ideals. She

describes “normative” as “pertaining to the norms that govern gender” (1999, p. xx). In “Undoing Gender,” Butler (2004) examines gender as a regulated concept. Norms govern this regulation. She describes norms as the “normalizing principle” that informs social practices. It is through norms that practices and actions are recognized in the social domain (pp. 41-42). For Butler, regulation moves through these norms where it does not only operate as an enforcement but also as a tool of normalization. Regulations are manifest in concrete forms such as laws and policies, but are also abstractly manifest in norms (pp. 40 and 55). Butler uses this definition of regulation as the maintenance mechanism of gender norms. The same idea behind Butler’s will also be employed in various definitions of heteronormativity as the mechanism for the enforcement of heterosexuality, and transnormativity for an acceptable brand of transness.

Heteronormativity refers to different systems that produces heterosexuality as the given, unquestionable, constant, “natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon” (Kitzinger 2005, 478). I shall reference this and appropriate Butler’s definition of regulation to define heteronormativity as the designation of heterosexual ideals and practices as the norm that must be observed and produced in the relationships I investigate in this study. The focus of queer theory on heterosexuality as expected institution that creates inequalities allowed for the theorization of heteronormativity (Schilt and Westbrook 2009, pp. 440-441).

Transnormativity on the other hand, includes a set of norms for race, bodies, physical appearance, decorum, and productivity among others as standards by which transgender people acquire a certain degree of social acceptance (Skidmore 2011, Aizura 2011, Irving 2008). I specifically use transnormativity to refer to different standards of transness by which the transgender women in this research were made intelligible as “women” by their partners.

I then I analyze how the coherent employment of heteronormativity and transnormativity does not only play a crucial role to sustain a high level of commitment in relationships but also both undermine and reinforce the workings of accusation of fetishism in cis men’s attraction to trans women.

Schilt and Westbrook (2009) examined the interactions of “gender normals” (non-transgender people) with transgender people in public and private, sexual and non-sexual situations to explore if and how heteronormativity is maintained. They concluded that interactions remain to be heterosexual and require opposite genitals (especially for private sexual interactions) and opposite gendered behavior and maintain gender hierarchies where feminine-coded characteristics

are devalued (p. 460). Apart from the prior knowledge of the transgender status of their partners before they got involved in the relationship, the men's accounts in my research are similar to the "gender normal" practices in Schilt's and Westbrook's study. The ways in which the interactions of the men and their transgender partners are recounted are very heteronormative.

Marriage was mentioned in passing by Jobby and Byron as they look forward to the future with their partners. Jobby reflected on how different their future would be compared to other couples who would have the benefits provided by a state-recognized marriage. Byron mentioned marriage in the context of having to brush-off family members who were against his transgender partner. Jerry and Trina, meanwhile, have filed government-required documents for the their partnership to be recognized by the Australian government.

An allegiance to the maintenance of the nuclear family is seen as a heteronormative practice. Non-heterosexuality may only be accepted if it did not threaten the primacy of the family (Skidmore 2011, p. 273). A number of interviewees had to confront with their partners the issue of wanting to raise a family, and by this, they meant having kids. Hanford and his partner plan to adopt kids to establish a family. While some like Patrick and David have dropped the aspiration and sought contentment in a childless household with their partners, Chester plans to pursue fatherhood with another (non-transgender) woman:

Chester: But Dee said, "You can look for a spouse, one of these days." She's open to that possibility. I have a life goal to see my own child, have my own family, see how it is to raise a child.

[Chester: Pero sabi ni Dee, "one of these days, puwedeng maghanap ka na ng magiging asawa mo." Open naman siya sa ganun... May goal ako sa buhay na gusto kong makita yung sarili kong anak, magkaroon ng sariling pamilya, panu bumuhay ng bata.]

Hanford even still subscribes to very heteronormative roles for men and women in relationships:

Hanford: Being a man, you should always think ahead. You prioritize your partner. You lead the relationship. You provide... They (women) ideally manage the finances. As men, we give money and the women budget it. They think of strategies until we grow up.

[Hanford: Being a man, parati kang advance mag-isip. Ikaw 'yung nagbibigay ng priority sa partner mo. Ikaw 'yung nagli-lead sa relationship. Ikaw 'yung nagprovide... Sila 'yung marunong magmanage ideally as financial. As man, kami 'yung all-out sa pagbibigay ng pera tapos ang girl, sila 'yung nagbudget. Sila 'yung nagiisip kung paano ang strategy until we grow up.

When asked how having a relationship with a transgender woman affected their self-perception, everyone expressed very affirmatively that they never questioned their sexuality. All of them asserted that they remain “straight.” While I discuss more thoroughly masculinity in the next chapter, I throw in the following quotes to highlight how the men, in choosing woman partner and affirming their “straightness” may be seen as contributing to heteronormativity :

Byron: I didn’t question myself, “Am I considered as gay? Am I considered as bi?” I still consider myself as straight guy, cause she considers herself as a girl. I think there’s nothing wrong with it cause she considers herself as a girl. I never questioned my sexuality.

Chester: My relatives told me that if I do it with gays, I will get infected. That’s not true, (I’ve) proven and tested (it). I just don’t want to tell them that I’ve been with trans (women) and other sex (gay men) yet I didn’t become one.

[Chester: Sabi ng mga kamag-anak ko, pumapatol ka sa bading, alam mo ba nakakahawa ‘yan? di naman totoo yun, proven and tested na. Ayoko lang sabihin sa kanila na ang dami ko ng pinagdaanan sa trans, sa other sex. Pero di naman ako natuluyan.]

Jerry: In terms of sexuality, 100% I can tell you I’m 100% straight. That’s why I told her, and I told you, that if she still has the male organ, I won’t be attracted at all because I am attracted with her femininity. I’m attracted with her personality which is actually attached with her being femininity (sic), the female attributes. If she got that (male organ), I don’t think I’d be able to live with that. What I questioned was if I really liked her. Do I like her as a woman or is it because she’s well-known in the Philippines?

[Jerry: In terms of sexuality, 100% I can tell you I’m like 100% straight. Kaya nga sabi ko sa kanya, sabi ko rin sa iyo, if she still got the male organ, I won’t be attracted at all. Kasi I am attracted with her femininity. I’m attracted with her personality which is actually attached with her being femininity, ‘yung attributes ng isang babae. If she got that, I don’t think I’d be able to live with that... Ang kinekwestyon ko ay, “do I really like her?” Do I like her as a woman or is it because kilala siya sa Pilipinas?]

Jerry’s insistence of his heterosexuality, his “100% straight” sexuality, goes beyond his own self-appreciation. To actualize his heterosexuality, he requires his transgender partner to have already gone gender affirming surgery. This leads me to investigate how transnormativity goes hand in hand with heteronormativity as an enabling and crucial maintenance mechanism of commitment in the relationships.

Different forms and levels of regulations pervade the acceptability of transgender people. These transnormative regulations compel many transgender women to undergo surgical procedures to “improve” their looks, to “cut a nice figure.” These procedures that seek to

approximate feminine “beauty” is considered desirable and aspirational for many transgender women (Aizura 2011, p. 509). Transnormativity also entails that transgender people contribute to the society. Irving (2008) investigates the construction of transgender bodies as social subjects that can only appeal to the mainstream if they are productive in the socio-economic sense (pp. 18-17). The same set of standards (and more) is evident in how the transgender women in my study are viewed by their partners.

I have presented earlier how some of the men were drawn to their partner’s intellect, brand of politics, or ability to carry-out intelligent conversations. Charlie, for example, decided to meet Yarrie for the first time because she was from a reputable university and looked like a “decent enough” person. These are arguably productive (i.e. able-minded) qualities that also inform transnormativity.

Also earlier, I mentioned how Jerry’s heterosexual security required his current partner to have a (neo)vagina. In fact, he informed Trina several times before committing with her in a relationship that she has to be post-op, otherwise the relationship would not be possible:

Jerry: ... I told Trina many times before that if she’s pre-op, it’s a no, it’s not for me.

[Jerry: ... sinabi ko kay Trina many times before na if she’s pre-op, hindi talaga, it’s not for me.]

This demand for a vagina before transgender women may at least be in the romantic intelligibility of men is not different from the larger society’s demand for transgender women to bear the aesthetic and bodily standards of femininity. This is no less challenged by the other men in this study.

While they did not find vagina a necessary body part, many of the interviewees shared that their attraction was also largely due to their partner’s feminine qualities. Chester remembered the first time she saw Dee who reminded him of the American singer Beyoncé. Jobby described his partner, Patty, as *kababaihan* which literally translates to “womankind” in English.

Above all, I would contend that the decision of the men in my research to start a committed relationship with their transgender partners was aided by the fact that all their partners were feminine-presenting. It can be argued that relationships would even be impossible if the transgender women presented themselves otherwise. For one, this is actually true in the case of Jerry.

If normativities function as regulation to “*make(s) regular*” and as “*discipline and surveillance*” to herd social subjects to a favored set of norms (Butler 2004, p. 41), then the compliance to heteronormativity and transnormativity of the couples in this research would have granted them if not total, some level of what is deemed as “normality.” By this logic, the apparent heterosexuality of the relationships as may be suggested by the male identification of the interviewees with women as their partner of choice, and their adherence to very heteronormative ideals make their sexualities normal. Their partners’ observance of transnormativity alleviates the pressures of heteronormativity. How does this complicate the accusation of fetishism? In the observance of heteronormativity and transnormativity, has transness been inscribed value more than it should have (i.e. vis-à-vis the transgender person)? Has this been a source of sexual pleasure?

Using Freud’s sexual aim and sexual object to determine normality (1905, pp. 153-154), the relationships in this study are both fetishistic and not fetishistic. They are fetishistic in the sense that the sexual aim is not copulative. On the other hand, they are not fetishistic because the men’s sexual object is the opposite sex, or at least those who identify as, live, and embody the opposite sex assignment.

Transnormativity, as lived by the transgender partners, compels them to abide by the aesthetics, decorum, and embodiment of the feminine norm. These are feminine norms that even non-transgender women adhere to. The same makes transgender women intelligible as women by the society in general, and by their male partners, in particular. The overlapping of transnormativity and heteronormativity makes transgender women desirable partners of men. Based on this analysis, I assert that, against the backdrop of heteronormativity and transnormativity, transness is not an overvalued object that produces sexual gratification for men. What has aided romantic and sexual satisfaction is the norm of femininity—how it is manifest in appearance, self-identification, body, and behavior. It is the transgender women’s femininity that is ascribed great value by their male partners.

Chapter 4: Confronting Filipino hegemonic masculinity in relationships with transgender women

The interviews are considered to be the interviewees' self-referential understanding of their participation in the relationships, these become useful data to analyze how the men situate themselves in relation to masculinity. My focus towards masculinity, in this chapter and departing from two other normativities discussed earlier in this research (heteronormativity and transnormativity), allows for a more expansive scrutiny of men's perspectives that is a core objective of this project. I am conscious of however, that this approach may be interpreted as automatically attributing hegemonic masculinity to the interviewees simply because they are men—a known criticism against the concept. This assumption has been addressed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 839-841) arguing for that hegemonic masculinity defines a subject within a discourse that men take up strategically in different situations. While hegemonic masculinity will be explored in the interviewees' accounts of their relationships, I do so against the context of their Filipino culture.

Connell (1987) defines hegemonic masculinity as patterns of practice in relationships that are “centered... on the global dominance of men over women” (p. 183). In recognition of the diversity in ways masculinities may be manifested, Connell breaks down the power relations of masculinities to provide a framework by which they may be analyzed through hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization. In her 1995 work, Connell revisits the 1987 definition and explicitly describes the normative character of hegemonic masculinity as that “which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” to guarantee the dominance of men over women (1995, p. 76-77). In 2005, responding to criticisms, Connell and Messerschmidt acknowledged that the earlier conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity needed reshaping of some of its key features: multiplicities and hierarchies, dynamics of global processes by including the study of embodiments, and the relations within practices of masculinities in particular regional and local sites (pp. 847-853).

For this chapter, I shall utilize hegemonic masculinity as the pattern of practice adhered to by men to keep intact their “honored way of being a man” (2005, p. 832). I use my interviewees' stories to analyze how they comply or resist hegemonic masculinity. Aside from its outdated configuration (as raised by its critics), I purposely divert from the employment of hegemonic

masculinity as an enforcement of men's dominance over women to give me some space to investigate the frequent yet unintended conflation by many Filipinos of the transgender woman and *bakla*— a Filipino term argued to pertain to genitally male gender- and sexual-variant persons to include those who identify and live as women, male-to-female transvestites, and homosexual men (Garcia 2013). I expound on this in Section 5.2 because I believe this implicates greatly resistant and complicit practices of men to hegemonic masculinity.

4.1 The Filipino standards for “being a man”

Connell and Messerschmidt stress the importance of culture in how hegemonic masculinity is actualized in different levels of interactions. Hegemonic masculinity practiced at the local level (i.e. interactions in family, community, organizations) represents regional level hegemonic masculinity (i.e. culture or nation-state). They posit that regional level hegemonic masculinity “operates in the cultural domain... provides a cultural framework that may be materialized in daily practices and interactions” (2005, pp. 849-850). The importance of culture was the motivation behind study of Lease, et al. (2013) on hegemonic masculine ideologies in the Turkish, Norwegian, and American contexts. The results of their research affirm the importance of culture as a force that affect understanding of masculinity and attitudes towards gender roles. My focus in Filipino men in this research makes it imperative, therefore, for me provide a backdrop of how hegemonic masculinity operates in the Philippines through the macho culture.

Machismo in the Philippines is characterized by virility and strength. *Macho* is the term that would often describe a man who is strong, brave, daring, and attracted to women (Valledor-Lukey 2012, 15). The *macho* (man) is the standard by which Filipino men are measured. Machismo is the masculine hegemony that pervades in Philippine culture. Historical accounts show that machismo was imported by the Spanish colonizers in the 16th century to the detriment of Filipino women and gender-crossing individuals who performed important roles and enjoyed reverence in their respective communities (Garcia 2013, pp. 52-53). Spanish colonization brought along the indoctrination of Roman Catholicism that would force itself as the only source of moral dogma informed by ideals of feudalism and patriarchy, and would serve as the foundation for misogyny and homophobia that persist to this day (Hega, et al. 2017, p. 1; McSherry, et al 2014, p. 6).

Tan (2001) suggests that the post-colonial political history should be an important information to consider in discussions about Filipino sexualities. The country's political and economic turmoil during its transition from the dictatorial-military rule of Ferdinand Marcos to the recovery from his ouster and to the neoliberal policies by the succeeding administrations had influence on Filipino sexual culture. Events in history would differently shape constructions of sexualities, including masculinities, in different areas of the country (pp. 119-120). The culture of machismo, where women and feminine-coded behaviors, identities, and sexualities suffer constant devaluation, will persist through the country's colonial, dictatorial, and post-dictatorial ordeals. It is important to note that machismo in contemporary Philippine culture, however negatively loaded, remains to be unquestioned at the least, and celebrated at the most, by the larger Filipino public. The election into presidency of the likes of Joseph Estrada and Rodrigo Duterte may partly be attributed to this sparing attitude towards machismo (Teehankee and Thompson 2016, p. 126).

In line with the macho culture, Filipino men are expected to conform to culturally specific masculine norms. Family takes primacy in Philippine culture. This is manifest in the expectations of men to be fathers, and as fathers, to be the primary (material/financial) provider and protector of the household. They are expected to treat with their wives, other women, and elders "respectful deference" but only in because they are expected to do so. Physical and emotional strength are also barometers of Filipino masculinity expected of men (Rubio and Green 2009, p. 62; 2011, pp. 79-81). These cultural expectations also indicate how the Filipino men are under duress to be heterosexual and cisgender (fathers), economically productive (provider), and physically desirable (protector, strong). This is the kind of hegemonic masculinity I use as framework to evaluate compliance and resistance of the interviewees of my research.

4.2 The transgender and *bakla* discussion

Garcia (2013) argues that during the American colonization period, Western notions on gender and sexuality were promulgated by means of an educational system deployed in the English language. These concepts would easily append themselves in indigenous concepts that they were most comparable with despite cultural inaccuracies. Thus, the Filipino term *bakla*, which more accurately pertains to genitally male-bodied individuals who have female identities, have sexual relations with men, or do gender-crossing, has become the "homosexual" man (pp. 53-54). The

contemporary *bakla*, as the term used to provide Filipino translation for “gay man,” would be renounced by many Filipino transgender women activists who argue that *bakla* invalidates the female identity of the transgender woman (Fontanos 2014). As a Filipino woman and an advocate for transgender rights, I agree with Garcia that imported knowledge should be engaged with critically but not totally dismissed (Garcia 2013, pp. 59-60). I agree with him too, that similar to the way “queer” was reclaimed as an empowering label in the West in the 1990s, that the *bakla* should be rehabilitated from its colonized bastardization that made it a pejorative term and disentangle it at the same time from the Western “gay man” that renders it an inaccurate representation. However, I also acknowledge that many Filipino transgender women who felt affinity to the term “transgender” will now find it insulting to be called *bakla*. In its problematic currency, I would also find it uncomfortable to be called *bakla* myself.

The transgender discussion has definitely spilled to more mainstream audiences. In 2015, one of the leading local TV networks launched a drama series featuring a transgender woman lead (Villano 2015). The show was an original in many ways. Firstly, never before in the Philippines had a transgender woman character led a drama show in the afternoon primetime. Secondly and perhaps more relevantly to this research, there was a conscious effort in the program to showcase a romantic angle with a cisgender man without homosexualizing him. Transgender awareness in the country has increased (albeit rather trivially) with the election of Geraldine Roman, a transgender woman in the parliament in the 2016 National Elections — which is considered by many Filipino LGBTQ+ activists as a historic political development (Billones 2016). For a brief period after the 2016 National Elections, Congresswoman Geraldine Roman would appear in TV interviews and in online and print magazines mostly talking about being a transgender woman and her transgender advocacy.

Despite the growing visibility of transgender (woman) – *bakla* discussions in the mainstream, and despite my intentional repeated use of “transgender” throughout the conversations, most of the interviewees would still use *babae* (woman) distinctly from “trans,” and even mix transgender (woman) and *bakla* in various ways:

David: The manner I handled my relationships with women, of course, I also treat her (Issa) as a woman.

[David: Kung papano kong hinandle mga relasyon ko sa mga babae, siyempre tinuturing ko na rin siya na babae.]

Patrick: I have an idea that she's not a girl, that's she's transgender...

[Patrick: May idea na ako na hindi siya girl, na transgender...]

Charlie: Trans are moodier. Yarrie is my first girlfriend whose trans, so I'm not sure. But her mood is something else. It's worse than a woman's.

[Charlie: Mas moody kapag trans. Ewan ko ah. Sabagay first gf ko na trans si Yarrie. Pero Malala kasi ang mood niya. Mas grabe pa sa babae.]

Charlie: I am fair, I'm not the typical gay and straight who asks for allowances...

[Charlie: Patas naman ako, hindi ako 'ung typical na beki⁶ at straight na naghihingi ng allowances...]

Chester: It's okay. It's natural for *bakla* to be like that. Even if you prohibit them from doing it, they won't be able to resist.

[Chester: Okay lang. Natural na po sa mga bakla 'yung ganun, kahit pagbawalan mo, hindi nila naiiwasan.]

David and Patrick refrained from using *bakla* to refer to their partners but for moments like above, they differentiated their partners from "women" or "girls." *Mas maganda pa sila sa babae* ("they're more beautiful than women") is also common yet insensitive remark of flattery that Patrick and Hanford also mentioned at one point in their respective interviews referring to transgender women.

Jobby: (Sex) was a factor but it was manageable. It's not the hetero kind but it's fine.

[Jobby: It (sex) was a factor pero kaya naman eh. Hindi lang siya 'yung hetero kind, kaya naman.]

Jobby, at the same time, described having sex with his transgender partner as "not the hetero(sexual) kind" which stands in contradiction to his self-proclaimed heterosexuality. I presume that his use of "not hetero" was a descriptive for sex with his partner whose body is genitally-male, and differentiates the body from the (her partner's) gender identity. To his credit, I believe that his choice not to use "homosexual" as a descriptive was done with intent, and gives

⁶ *Beki* is a Filipino gay lingo for *bakla*.

us room to investigate how the heterosexual-homosexual binary is challenged in the perspective of men in relationships with transgender women.

The transgender-*bakla* conflation, especially in the case of the interviewees of this research, is more about the difficulty in reconciling “Western transgender” with long-held notion of the local *bakla* than about their “confused masculinities.” The men in this research are definitely not confused about “being men.” This should be clearer through an investigation on how they comply with or resist hegemonic masculinity.

4.3 Dealing with hegemonic masculinity: compliance and resistance

Connell discusses hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization as ways in which multiple masculinities relate to each other. This was to highlight how not all men may be able to religiously adhere to hegemonic masculinity. Nevertheless, she argues, the majority of men still benefit from hegemonic masculinity without necessarily being its flag bearer. She uses fatherhood and marriage as examples to clarify this point (1995, pp. 79-80).

In my discussion of heteronormativity in Section 4.2, I already addressed that my interviewees’ inclination to establish a family was an issue that the couples were confronted with. David, Patrick, Chester, and Hanford have had to confront the question of having a family. This is especially interesting about Chester’s desire to establish a family of his “own,” for him to experience what it is like to raise his own kid. His desire for a heteronormative life has been accepted even by his partner as an impending reality that will eventually end their relationship (if it does not end for any other reasons). Hanford wants to comply to this masculine expectation too. His plan to establish his nuclear family appeals to the heterosexual expectation but adoption would seem to undermine the cisgender expectation.

Patrick and David who resigned to a life without children (or a family) can be considered as resistant to the expectation. But their resistance did not come after they have been convinced that raising a family has less value than being with their partners:

Patrick: I am always asked why I don’t find a wife, why don’t I raise my own family and kids. But I tell them, that she (Gina) was given to me, I accepted that. I accepted that I will not get married, that I will not have kids. I am happy and okay, I don’t need it.

[Patrick: Lagi sinasabi sa akin bakit hindi ako mag-asawa, bakti hindi ako magkaron ng sariling pamilya at anak. Pero sinasabi ko naman na, parang kami na eh, siya na ‘yung binigay sa akin, tinanggap ko na. Tinanggap ko na na hindi ako ikakasal, hindi ako magkakaanak. Masaya na ako, okay na ako, hindi ko na kelangan.]

David: It’s okay even if the time comes when no one will take care of me, that’s still far in the future, anyway. I think it’s okay with a transgender (woman), I don’t think I will look for others (women). We’re always together and have all the time to ourselves. Time is what I desire anyway. She’s by herself and has nowhere else to go. She has no other vices, her vices are my vices. We like the same things.

[David: Bayaan mo na. kahit pagdating ng panahon kung walang mag-aalaga as akin, matagal pa naman ‘yun eh. Okay na siguro sa isang transgender, ‘di na siguro ako maghahanap ng iba. Parang kami na lang ang magkasama ngayon, hindi na mauubusan ng time. ‘Yun naman ang gusto ko eh, ‘yung time, gawa ng mag-isa na lang siya, wala naman siyang ibang pupuntahan. Wala naman siyang bisyo. Bisyo niya, bisyo ko rin. Parehas lang naman kami ng gusto.]

While Patrick has totally accepted that he will not have a family in the future, David does not totally rule out having a family but his partner’s desirability outweighs this concern. Unlike Chester whose mind is made up about having a child and ending his relationship with Dee in the future, David recognizes that he has the luxury of time to make a decision about his welfare in the future, and enjoy the pleasures of being with Issa in the meantime.

Hegemonic masculinity in the Philippines is also actualized in the repudiation of homosexuality. While the interviewees cannot be seen as homophobic, their response to strongly assert their “straightness” and (perhaps rightly so) celebrate the femininity of their partners expose the hegemonic masculinity at play.

On the basis of his adoration for his partner’s “intellect” and ability to carry an “intelligent conversation,” I asked Anthony whether he would have swiped right on his partner’s Tinder account if she had indicated she was a gay man:

Anthony: I wouldn’t date someone who’s a gay man because, they’re man and I’m a man, I’m not gay.

Even if his hypothetically gay partner presented very femininely, Anthony said he would still refuse. Obviously, the self-identification as a woman of his partner was crucial to Anthony’s decision to date her. The “intelligent conversation” that seemed to be very important in the

beginning of our interview was now overshadowed by the need for him to secure his heterosexuality.

All other interviewees said too that they are “straight.” None of them even expressed if question the of (hetero)sexuality was important to begin with. Byron who said that more than anything, it was about how he felt so connected to his partner like an “old friend,” insinuated how homosexuality may be “wrong” when he said that “there’s nothing wrong” with having a relationship with his partner who identifies as a woman. On the extreme end, Jerry did not only require self-identification from his partner, he required a vagina to entertain the idea of a relationship with Trina.

When making the interviews, the most difficult questions were the ones concerning my interviewees’ sex lives. Aside from the understandable discomfort of disclosing very intimate details in their relationships, the interviewees were very careful in their selection of words. I attribute this to the fact that I am friends with most of their partners and that sharing intimate details with me would be embarrassing for them . Also, they were aware that the interview would be used in a scholarly research and there was an effort noticeably from Anthony, Byron, Jobby, and Jerry to observe “academic” decorum. But I would go further and interpret the discomfort and the tip-toeing as an index of some internal struggle to negotiate their lost sense of cisnormativity in the relationship.

Sex, among other things, is unavoidably partly a discussion about bodies, and bodies in contact. For eight of the nine interviewees, whose partners have not had, or would never have gender affirming surgery, the sexual act is not an easy topic compared to talking about being “straight” where their partners’ gender identification would suffice to claim ideal masculinity. Jerry, the only one who made sure that his partner should have a vagina, would presumably have an easier time dismissing the pressure of cisnormativity — a privilege that the rest of the interviewees do not have.

A claim to cisnormativity in the relationship is a lost cause but can be renegotiated through sexual roles. Charlie, Jerry, Jobby, Patrick, and Chester either outrightly or implicitly mentioned that they are the penetrative partner in sex — the conventional role practiced by men in most cisgender relationships. Jobby had the most interesting phrasing to capture this type of negotiation:

Interviewer: When it comes to actual sex, are there differences (between sex with transgender and non-transgender partners)?

Jobb: Well, yeah, physical act, where you should insert it, it's different.

[Interviewer: Pagdating sa actual sex, mayroon bang differences?

Jobby: Well, yeah, physical act, kung saan siya ipapasok, different siya.]

To claim adherence to the hegemonic masculine expectation of heterosexuality was easier than to admit non-compliance (or failure of compliance) to cisnormativity. The transgender bodies of their partners put into question their sexualities that they were already able to defend with their “straightness.”

There are a few statements during the interviews that I wish to position in this argument. In Chapter 2, I discussed Byron and Hanford's “excitement” in the novelty of having sex with a transgender woman (they never had intimate encounters with transgender women prior to their current partners) but left undiscussed how this excitement, especially the touching the partner's genitalia in the case of Hanford, would have been open to questions of fetishism. Similarly, fetishism may be linked to Chester's satisfaction in his partner's performance of fellatio. Finally, this statement by Patrick that would definitely create an impression of fetishism:

Interviewer: How did you overcome your desire for a vagina?

Patrick: We had that discussion, one time. Gina contemplated on getting a surgery. After some time, I told her, “The surgery may put you in danger. I am okay.” But for me, I won't be ashamed in telling you, I am somehow a pervert.

[Interviewer: Papano mo na-overcome 'yung ganun? 'Yung naghahanap ka ng vagina?

Patrick: Minsan naging topic naming 'yun. Naisip din ni Gina na mag-operasyon. Pero siguro after some time, sabi ko, “delikado 'yun as life mo, okay lang naman ako.” Pero for me, hindi na ako mahihiyang sabihin, pervert naman 'yung dating ko.

I want to position Byron and Hanford's excitement on having sex with their transgender partners, Chester's fellatic satisfaction, and Patrick's self-confessed “perversion” in the context of negotiating cisnormativity. How is cisnormativity negotiated if sex with trans bodies is enjoyed in the first place? Patrick's statement would be useful in this analysis.

Patrick's statement was made as a response to the question of how he coped up with his desire for a vagina that he preferred his sexual partner to have. This meant that his eventual enjoyment (that he described as “pervert) came after much contemplation. He had to process the importance of his desire for a vagina and his partner's well-being and came to a decision that the

latter was more important. Patrick's enjoyment had to come after much negotiation and the eventual compromise of the cisnormative expectation. This is true with Byron, Hanford, and Chester who would not have enjoyed sexual pleasures had their partners presented themselves like (stereotypical) men.

Against hegemonic masculinity, cisgender men have to negotiate their relationships with cisgender women. There were factors that helped make this negotiation less abrasive. These factors made it easier for the men to overcome their doubts and discomfort about being intimate with transgender women. Motivations for entering in and maintaining relationships as discussed in earlier chapters like need for companionship, material benefits, lack of quality alternatives, perceived heteronormativity, and transnormativity are such factors. Additionally, my interviewees mentioned other factors that may help in making resistance to hegemonic masculinity less difficult:

(Anthony) ..I still would have swiped right (in Tinder) because for me, even if you minus the school part (even without his exposure to LGBT issues because of university education), I was raised to respect everyone. I mean for as long as you're not a murderer or a drug lord or whatever. I was really raised to just respect everyone, period, right? So for me, you know, again, I'm just attracted to women, period.

Being taught to respect other people was helpful to Anthony's accepting attitude for transgender women. However, as he also said that it is important that a person must be a of an unquestionable moral background. Exposure to LGBTQ+ issues and LGBTQ+ persons was also helpful for the others. Before he met his partner, Jobby was involved with Amnesty International where he got trainings about LGBTQ+ issues. He admits that it might not have been possible for him to accept Patty as a woman had it not been for the trainings he had attended. Jerry said that having a gay best friend gave him an "open mind." Patrick grew up with a gay nanny. He said that he had conversations with his nanny and never felt disgusted by him. Hanford was encouraged by the fact that he had male friends who have transgender partners.

4.4 Fetishism in Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemony is the power dynamic that informs men's adherence to practices that keep their masculinities intact. As I have presented, men can reject or adopt multiple manifestations of hegemonic masculinity to negotiate their relationships with their transgender partners with as little

damage to their “manhood” as possible. So how can then transness be fetishized in a scenario where negotiation has to happen about hegemonic masculinity in a relationship with a transgender partner?

I refocus on the overvalued object of sexual desire that characterizes my employment of trans-fetishization. If hegemonic masculinity compels the prevalence and protection of the man as heterosexual and cisgender especially in cultures where masculinity is the standard, then transness cannot be the overvalued object for the men in this research. In fact, transness can only be negotiated through heteronormativity and transnormativity for it to be acceptable against the force of hegemonic masculinity.

Sexual gratification, as I have argued in the previous chapter, are not gained in the transness of their partners but in their successful performance and embodiment of feminine typologies. Byron, Hanford, and Chester would not have been “excited” or satisfied with their sex lives had their partners presented themselves otherwise. They would not have been in the relationship, in the first place. Patrick would not have enjoyed his being “perverted” if his partner had not been feminine-presenting too. Further scrutiny would also be helpful to locate fetishism in Patrick’s statement, “*pervert naman ‘yung dating ko*” is loosely “my approach is perverted.” Patrick did not identify as pervert, a character that usually fits the fetishist. He said that his approach (to sex) was perverted—a descriptive that would be more synonymous to venturesome than fetishistic in the context where he mentioned it.

In the current dictates of hegemonic masculinity, transness cannot be overvalued, it cannot be fetishized. Especially in the Filipino cultural context where heterosexuality and being cisgender are barometers of “being a man.” Transness can only be negotiated in masculinity. This negotiation may compromise masculinity but the men in relationships with transgender women find ways to adopt its other meanings and maintain their position (albeit somewhere behind the front line) in its hegemony.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

I have presented in this research that cisgender men complicate the accusation of fetishism in their heterosexual committed relationships with transgender women. I have shown this in various ways using information derived from interviews with the Filipino men who are presently in a relationship with a transgender woman. Firstly, the idea of fetishism as sexual gratification felt from the overvalued transness (i.e. identity, body) of trans women is undermined in men's concept of an ideal partner, and the reasons why they enter a relationship. Analysis shows desirable and feminine physical and non-physical qualities were factors that make a woman ideal for a committed relationship. Men consider the following factors when they entered committed relationships: an existing relationship just needs to be formalized, need for companionship, and material benefits. Transness is irrelevant in men's search for an ideal partner and in their decision to agree to a relationship with their trans partners.

Secondly, practices of the couples reveal high level of commitment of their relationships. This is consistent to the investment model which suggests that satisfaction level, lack of availability of quality alternatives, and investment of resources are crucial to maintain commitment in relationships. Men assessed their current relationships with their trans partners more favorably than the relationships they had with non-trans women especially in terms of sex and family-related issues. Satisfaction was also achieved in the perception of success in partner's professional life, and how the relationship presented itself as a new challenge to be endeavored. Unpleasant experiences from previous relationships with non-trans women was interpreted by some as lack of quality alternatives to the current relationship and kept them committed to their trans partners. Personal sacrifices like leaving their homes to be with their partners, and being in conflict with their families had to be made by most of the men. Sacrifices interpreted as part of men's investment in the relationship bind them increasingly to their partners. These factors provide motivations, where transness is once again lacking, in entering a relationship

Aside from this, commitment in the relationships are maintained by regulations that normalize them. I demonstrated how the relationships in this research adhere to heteronormative and transnormative regulations. Adherence to these normativities provides us basis to assert that transness is not fetishized as an overvalued object sexual desire. In the context of heteronormativity

and cisnormativity, what may be argued as the fetish object is the adherence of the trans partners to the feminine norms.

Lastly, I explored how hegemonic masculinity, uniquely characterized by Filipino gender and sexuality norms, is actualized by men as they enter and maintain committed relationships with their trans partners. I have shown how men, in diverse ways, comply to and resist against hegemonic masculine expectations. By doing so, I have explained how, against the backdrop of hegemonic masculinity, trans-fetishization becomes rather problematic. At the most, the transness of their partners may only be negotiated against the standards of hegemonic masculinity.

I acknowledge the many limitations of this research. For one, the conclusions made here can only represent the nine men who participated in the research. While fundamental similarities provided me handles to assess the core topics of fetishism, a larger sample of interviewees would have surely yielded more interesting and diverse data for analysis. Diversifying sources of information through collection of stories from social media posts, online and printed stories, and TV interviews will also enrich the discussion.

I was also unable to investigate the dimension of regional and ethno-linguistic identities especially in expanding the discursive nature of Filipino hegemonic masculinity. Northern regions would have very different cultures compared to regions in the south. Same can be said for different ethno-linguistic groups. Though I have briefly explained how gender and sexuality norms may vary in different areas in the Philippines depending partly on the effects of the political and economic realities, I was not able to investigate it thoroughly.

Age, educational background, and socio-economic status of the interviewees were also very cursorily brought up. I believe that a more wholistic investigation of the core topic would have been arrived at if these were explored. Furthermore, comparisons could be an interesting direction for future projects. For example, how is fetishism challenged or reproduced by Filipino men of different generations?

Many Filipino transgender women I know are also in relationships with non-Filipino men. Race would have been an interesting dimension to venture given the existing literatures on race fetishism, orientalism, globalization, and colonial and post-colonial societies. The interracial character of relationships with provide new sets of information that will expand discussions on fetishism and committed relationships between cisgender men and trans women, and will create new directions to approach heteronormativity, transnormativity, and hegemonic masculinity.

The research featured only monogamous relationships. Filipinos in polyamorous relationships remain to be scarcely discussed, even more so in the context of fetishism. Finally, investigating fetishism and relationships through more diversified interviewees based on sexual orientation and gender identity may also provide new arguments. Future research on heterosexual relationships between cisgender women and trans men, and trans men and trans women; homosexual relationships between cisgender women and trans women, and cisgender men and trans men; and other configurations complicated by diverse sexual orientations and gender identities should contribute greatly to the growing local discussions on desires.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

What do you usually look for in a woman?

How many committed relationships have you had before your present one? Before meeting (your (trans) partner)?

How long did the/these relationship/s last?

What is/were the reason/s of your break-up?

Have you ever been in a committed relationship with a transgender woman before?

If yes, how many relationships with transgender women have you had?

Where and how did you first meet with your current partner? Who pursued who?

Were you immediately attracted to her or later?

What attracted you to her?

Was the attraction sexual? Romantic? Merely curious?

When did you know that she is transgender? How did you take that?

How long have you been in the relationship with (your partner)?/ How long was your relationship with (your partner)?

How did you come to be living in a committed relationship?

Do you have any rules?

Can you say anything about the arrangement in the relationship? Do you live together?/How often do you meet?

What are the things you do together?

What are the usual stuff you fight over?

How do you resolve conflicts?

How does your relationship with her compare to your previous relationships in terms of sex, romance?

What is the best thing about being with (your partner)?

What is the worst thing about being with (your partner)?

Would you say there is a difference between having a transgender partner and a non-transgender partner?

What are the common reactions you get from people about your relationship with her? Does your relationship with (your partner) change your perception of womanhood? manhood?

Appendix B: Interview Consent Form in English

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Thesis research of Meggan Evangelista, Master of Arts in Gender Studies Candidate Central European University

This is to certify that I, _____, agree to participate in the research being conducted by Meggan Evangelista, Masters Candidate at Central European University. My participation in this project is voluntary, and I may refuse to participate, withdraw at any time, and/or decline to answer any questions without negative consequences.

A. PURPOSE

I have been informed that the purpose of this research is to investigate how the perception of fetishizing of transgender women is challenged by Filipino cisgender-heterosexual men who are or were in committed relationship with them. This research is being performed for a master's thesis under the supervision of Erzsébet Barát, visiting professor at Central European University.

B. PROCEDURES

The interview(s) will be recorded and the audio from the interview(s) will remain in the private care of the researcher for transcription purposes. Written transcripts will be included in the final publication of the research, unless otherwise indicated by the interviewee, and all files of the audio recordings will be erased at the conclusion of the research process. Interviewees will be provided with a copy of the audio files if so desired. In the resulting papers and publications, the interviewee will not be identified by her/his name, a pseudonym will be used in place of her/his real name.

C. RISKS

There are **minimal risks** to participation in this interview. However, the interviewee can withdraw their participation from the interview at any time without prejudice. During the interview the interviewee may request to stop the recording at any time to discuss or clarify how she/he wishes to respond to a question or topic before proceeding. In the event that the interviewee chooses to withdraw their participation entirely from the project during the interview, any tape made of that particular interview and any previous interviews will either be given to the participant or destroyed, along with any transcripts made from previous interviews.

If so desired, the researcher will provide the interviewee with copies of the recorded interviews, and any/all related papers and publications written by the researcher.

D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION (please initial to give consent)

_____ I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time without negative consequences.

_____ I agree to have my interview(s) recorded

_____ I agree to the release of the transcript(s) of my interview(s) for the purpose of publication

_____ I request copies of _____ all recorded interviews, _____ the final publication of the research

To be sent to me at the following email address:

_____ I request to be informed of any future attempts the researcher pursues to publish the research following submission of the master's thesis

E. INTERVIEWEE'S COMMENTS

Please identify below any desired restrictions related to the collection and publication of information from your interview(s).

Appendix C: Interview Consent Form in Filipino

PATUNAY PARA SA PAHINTULOT

Tesis ni Meggan Evangelista, para sa Master of Arts in Gender Studies Central European University

Pagpapatunay ito na ako, si _____, ay sumasang-ayon na makilahok sa pananaliksik ni Meggan Evangelista, kandidato para sa Masterado ng Central European University. Ang aking pakikilahok as proyektong ito ay boluntaryo, na maaari akong tumanggi at tumigil kailan ko man naisin, at maaaring hindi ko sagutin ang anumang tanong na walang negatibong kahihinatnan sa akin.

A. LAYUNIN

Napabatid sa akin na ang layunin ng pananaliksik na ito ay upang siyasin kung paanong hinahamon ng mga cisgender at heteroseksual na mga lalakeng Pilipinong may kasalukuyan o nakaraang relasyon sa mga transgender na babae ang pananaw ng fetichism sa mga transgender na babae. Ang pagsasaliksik na ito ay isinasagawa para as tesis pang-masterado as ilalim ng pagpapatnubay ni Erzsébet Barát, isang visiting professor ng Central European University.

B. PAMAMARAAN

Ang panayam (mga panayam) ay ire-rekord at ang audio file mula sa panayam (mga panayam) ay mananatili sa pangangalaga ng tagapagsaliksik upang maisalin. Ang mga nakasulat na pagsasalin ay isasama sa paglalathala ng tesis, maliban kung tumanggi ang kinapanayam, at lahat ng audio recording ay buburahin sa pagtatapos ng proseso ng pananaliksik. Ang mga kinapanayam ay bibigyan ng kopya ng audio recording kung hihilingin. Sa paglalathala, hindi gagamitin ang mga tunay na pangalan ng mga kinapanayam, gagamit ng pseudonym (code name) kapalit ng kanilang mga tunay na pangalan.

C. MGA PANGANIB

Napakaliit ng panganib sa pakikilahok sa panayam na ito. Gayunpaman, maaring umurong ang kinakapanayam anumang oras ng walang pananagutan. Habang kinakapanayam, maaring hilinging ihinto ang pagrekord kung may nais siyang linawin sa mga katanungan o sa paksa bago magpatuloy. Sakaling nais umurong as proyekto ng kinakapanayam, lahat ng recording ng kasalukuyan at nakaraang mga panayam ay ibibigay as kinapanayam o sisirain, kasama ang anumang pagsasalin mula sa mga nakaraang panayam.

Kung hihilingin, bibigyan ang kinapanayam ng mga kopya ng narekord na panayam, at lahat/anumang mga dokumento o paglalathala ng tagasaliksik.

D. MGA KONDISYON NG PAKIKILAHOK (paki-check ang mga blankong guhit para as inyong pagsang-ayon)

_____ Naiintindihan ko na maaari kong iurong ang aking pagsang-ayon o itigil ang aking pakikilahok anumang oras na walang negatibong kahihinatnan sa akin

_____ Sumasang-ayon ako na i-rekord ang panayam as akin.

_____ Sumasang-ayon ako sa paggamit ng naisalin na dokumento ng aking panayam para as paglalathala.

_____ Humihiling ako na makakuha ng _____ kopya ng lahat ng rekord ng aking panayam, _____ kopya ng tesis as email address na ito:

_____.

_____ Hinihiling ko na ako ay maabisuhan kung gagamitin ng tagasaliksik ang tesis na ito matapos itong maisumite para sa kanyang master's thesis sa hinaharap.

E. MGA KOMENTO NG KINAPANAYAM

Maaaring isulat ang anumang nais na limitasyon kaugnay ng pangongolekta at paggamit sa publikasyon ng iyong mga datos mula sa iyong panayam.

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