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Photography and Pornography in 19th Century Italy: A Historical Perspective on Media and Sexuality

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Abstract

Although pornographic photographs can reveal the impact of the photographic medium on sexuality and its imaginaries, they have barely been considered as sources or themes in historical research. Considering the context of late 19th-century and early 20th-century Italy, this article explores photography's central role in disseminating pornographic material, its close link to shaping the definition of pornography itself, and its impact on redefining sexual imaginaries. The first part of the article provides an overview of the history of the Italian debate on pornography and the political responses to this phenomenon. It focuses particularly on the role of photography in these events and in shaping this context. Between the late 19th century and the years of the Great War, in fact, pornography became a serious topic of public debate in Italy and many other European countries. Many associations and politicians participated in anti-pornography movements while photography and postcards became the most popular and accessible medium for sharing images. The second part of the article explores pornographic imagery widely represented in photographs, particularly that depicting lesbianism and zoophilia. It compares this imagery with that found in other cultural productions dealing with sexuality, such as literature, visual arts, and scientific publications circulating in Italy. This article is based on archival sources, including police reports on pornographic materials, journal articles, and moralistic and scientific writings published in Italy during the analyzed decades.

Keywords

Sexual imaginary | Pornographic materials | Sexology | Modern Italy | Sexual representation

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Introduction

Did the photographic medium change, influence or radically transform sexual imaginaries when it became popular and accessible to everyone? Although this question is not new to the field of the history of photography, a comprehensive answer is still lacking. A historical examination of erotic and pornographic photography could provide insight into the relationship between media and sexuality. In 1987, Abigail Solomon-Godeau posed questions about the historical relevance of erotic photography that are still waiting for answers:

> Did photographic technologies themselves engendered demand and supply, or did they rather fulfill a pre-existing demand? [...] were such photographs a variant of pre-existing forms or a new form altogether? Is erotic and pornographic photography, considered in relation to older precedents, best understood as technologically different but representationally the same, or fundamentally different in both senses? (Solomon-Godeau 1990, 222).

Exploring the theme of pornography also means tracing and identifying the general elements of sexual imaginations in a specific context. The concept of pornography as a body of knowledge and a set of scenarios and fantasies has been examined in the context of the growth of the pornography industry and film production during the 1970s (Stoller 1975) and it has recently been revisited in the fields of history of sexuality and queer studies (Escoffier 2021b, 247; 2021a, 3). These fantasies and imaginaries of desire, which can be called “pornographic imagination” (Sontag 1967), have a dual nature being both fiction and fact. They mirror how sexuality was conceived, even if the represented behaviors are not common sexual practices (Sigel 2025). For this reason, pornographic materials play a key role in historical analyses of the relationship between sexuality and its representations in the media.

This article addresses the above issues through an analysis of the spread of pornographic photographs

in Italy between the late 19th century and the Great War. During this period, pornography became a serious topic of public debate in Italy and many other European countries. Associations and politicians participated in anti-pornography movements, while photography and postcards became the most popular and accessible medium for sharing images. During these decades, scientists and intellectuals devoted significant portions of their writings to sexuality in relation to modern society, morality, and recent advances in medicine and science. Their perspectives intersected and conflicted with the depictions of sexuality disseminated by so-called pornographic materials.

In order to answer the main question posed above, this article presents two groups of case studies in two parts. The first part analyzes the history of the Italian debate on pornography and the political responses to this phenomenon. It focuses particularly on the role of photography in these events and in shaping their context. The second part explores representations of sexual behaviors and sexual imaginations by comparing sexological descriptions with photographs. In particular, it discusses how pornographic photography transformed what sexologists described as illness and pathology into desire, with a focus on lesbian intercourse and a comparison with zoophilia.

Pornography: a Photographic Phenomenon?

Although classic historical literature on pornography traces its origins back to the early modern period (Hunt 1993), or even to archaeological discoveries in Pompeii and Herculaneum (Kendrick 1987), the earliest recorded use of the term “pornography” in Italy in its modern sense dates to no earlier than 1880.

A newly–formed word, coined in Paris to indicate not only all the filth that is printed in books and in certain newspapers, but also the drawings of these and other figurines, all of which the Parisian people, who have always enjoyed them so much, have become

so fond of in recent times (*Corriere della Sera* 1880).[1]

When presented this way, pornography was not just a rewording of pre-existing phenomena such as obscenity; it represented an entirely new social threat. In 1886, another *Corriere della Sera* article explained that:

> Each era has its sins: the sixteenth century had obscenity: we have pornography. Obscenity is better less harmful because it is frank, superficial, has momentary effects; while the second is insidious, idealises vices, often usurps tears due to sacred affections (Nervi and Pozza 1886, 2).

Although the term "pornography" was absent from Italian debates before 1880, similar concerns were raised over a decade earlier, a few years after the Kingdom of Italy was established in 1861. In fact, obscene materials, specifically photographs, were the subject of a circular issued by Minister of the Interior Giovanni Lanza in 1865:

> the most noble art of printing and photography is being used as a filthy and corrupt market, for the sake of sordid and dishonest earnings. [...] All honest and discreet people recognise and lament the harm that the dissemination of these obscene figures and these small volumes of licentious narratives cause to the youth, and how much such licence contributes to corrupting and fomenting in the young vices and fatal habits that are harmful not only to morals, but also to their physical and intellectual development; and truly such foul speculation is unworthy and intolerable in a civilised people of noble and free aspirations. The corrupting of customs marks decadence in the nation.[2]

Similarly, the following year, the periodical *Il Brenta* denounced: "Novel and Photography […] now have unfortunately acquired the reputation of deviating people from the paths of the just and honest and of leading them

1 This quote and all the other following quotes form Italian texts are translated by the author.

2 Giovanni Lanza' s circular of 17 April 1865 is quoted in Wanrooij (1990, 20).

to immorality."[3]

The central role of photography in disseminating obscene materials became even more apparent in the late 19th century. In Italy, pornography was not only a topic of public debate but also the primary cause of mobilization among intellectuals and moralists. With the *Public Security Law* of 1888 and the *Zanardelli Penal Code*, which was approved the following year, offenses against modesty and good morals, such as displaying images, were punishable by fines and imprisonment. However, these measures were not considered sufficient to stop the spread of pornography. For this reason, a general meeting against pornography was held on the 12th of April 1891 in Milan. Diverse political figures belonging to various organizations participated, ranging from socialists to Catholics. That same year, to promote these anti-pornographic efforts, a single issue of the journal *La Pornografia* was published; in one of its articles, Giulio Calchi Novati specified that it was intended as pornographic

> any impudent manifestation of an obscene thought, made by means of the press and any other mechanical or chemical contrivance designed to reproduce figurative signs (plastic, photography, painting, etc.) (Calchi Novati 1891, 1).

Although photography was mentioned here as just one of the media among the vastness of pornographic materials, it was a constant presence in denunciations of this phenomenon and ignited public debate on pornography with news related to its circulation. During a period when social medicine was analyzing all types of living and working environments in modern society, and sexology was expanding as a field of study, Alfredo Niceforo reported the following testimony in a survey of boys boarding schools:

> I was also aroused by prints of naked women that I could procure for myself, and before whom I performed the onanistic act;

3 This quotation from *Il Brenta* of 18 January 1866 can be found in Zannier (1993, 2: 11).

but later the same arousal was also given to me by portraits and prints of naked men, as long as they were young and well-made (Niceforo 1897, 35–36).

Postcards were the most popular item in the dissemination of pornographic material. In July 1901, the Typographical-Library Association sent a memorial to the Ministries of the Interior, Education, and Grace and Justice aimed at curbing the circulation of "picture postcards with indecent figures" (*Corriere della Sera* 1901, 2). Less than one year later, newspapers reported on a Milan police raid targeting "picture postcards that were too free with regard to morality," which led to the arrest of eight dealers (*Corriere della Sera* 1902, 2). At the Second Italian Meeting for Public Morality in 1906, one of countless conferences on fighting pornography during that period, Angelo Valmarana denounced the dissemination of pornographic postcards and illustrated some of its elements:

Some postcards are embossed, some are the work of the draughtsman, but most are photographs [...] Some photographs then represent and excite in the beholder the worst aberrations and the most immoral perversions. Some postcards finally form series showing a sequel of successive obscene acts, as in a cinematograph (Valmarana 1906; Lega per la moralità pubblica 1907, 62–64).[4]

The most relevant case of photography during the decades of struggle against pornography is undoubtedly the scandal involving the German photographer Wilhelm von Plüschow. In May 1907, the Public Security Commissariat of the Trevi district in Rome was notified that, the previous year, a twelve-year-old boy had been deceived by the photographer, lured to his studio, and drugged. Once he awoke, the boy realized he was on the photographer's bed and that he was without trousers, with a viscous substance on his back, especially around his anus. Despite his shock, the boy was convinced to return to the studio

4 This quotation can be found also in Wanrooij (1985, 26–33).

for payment over the next two years. On other occasions, he and other young boys received similar treatment and posed as models for homoerotic pictures. However, Plüschow was no stranger to scandal or the police. In 1898, obscene photos were found in his former studio (*Avanti!* 1904, 3). Following the revelations of 1907, Plüschow was convicted of corrupting minors and using photographs for indecent purposes (Falco 1919, 5). This episode shocked public opinion and received harsh commentary, as evidenced by Lino Ferriani's article published on the front page of the newspaper *Battaglie d'oggi*:

> These facts are far worse than the camorra, the mafia, hooliganism, and woe to the nation that draws a veil over them and does not courageously aid justice – which cannot accomplish everything by itself – in striking down the guilty. At the German photographer's, over 2000 obscene photographs of boys and girls were found, including groups, which would, I believe, have made even Aretino and Casti blush, those 2000 photographs represent two thousand victims, two thousand children ruined forever (Ferriani 1907, 1).

From that point on, police documents regarding these materials were classified with a specific code and labeled as pornography. Although this case would be classified as pedopornography today, the term was not used at that time. Instead, Plüschow's case was considered the most serious example of pornography. Since Giovanni Lanza's 1865 circular, obscenity and pornography have been presented as threats, especially to young people. This idea was also echoed by sexologists like Paolo Mantegazza and Giuseppe Senizza. Plüschow's case was the most serious example of the corruption of young people, the main threat posed by pornography. For this reason, new and specific categories such as "pedopornography" were never considered or used in public debates during that time.

A significant step forward in the anti-pornography campaign was the Conference of Paris in May 1910. The conference aimed to establish international rules for shared laws among countries to stop the pornographic

materials market. This event led to the signing of the *Yellow Book*, an international agreement consisting of eight articles, which prompted the Italian government to compare its anti-pornography measures with those of other countries in Europe and around the world. Luigi Luzzatti, the head of the Italian government at that time and Minister of the Interior, did not immediately propose a new anti-pornography law. Instead, on June 16, 1910, he issued a ministerial circular to prefects and police departments throughout Italy, requesting more rigorous surveillance and quarterly reports on all anti-pornography operations to be sent to the Minister of the Interior. To celebrate his actions against pornography and respond to criticism about the lack of specific anti-pornography laws, Luzzatti sent several bulletins to newspapers to publicize the results of seizures and police surveillance. The first bulletin, published on July 7, 1910, reported the confiscation of 2,500 postcards and 50 booklets in Rome and 12,000 postcards in Turin (*Corriere della Sera* 1910b, 2). On September 18 of that same year, a new bulletin announced the seizure of 32,000 postcards, 6,500 photographs, and 2,200 books and brochures since June 16, thanks to police operations primarily in major Italian cities such as Turin, Genoa, Venice, Florence, and Palermo (*Corriere della Sera* 1910a, 4). Postcards and photographs were the most prevalent type of pornographic material seized in all of these bulletins. In December 1910, Luzzatti presented a draft of an actual anti-pornography law that specifically mentioned photography:

> Whoever manufactures, prints, reproduces, possesses, imports or causes to be imported, transports or causes to be transported obscene writings, drawings, photographs, images or other objects for the purpose of exhibiting, displaying, selling or distributing them in any form whatsoever, shall be punished by imprisonment of up to six months and a fine of fifty to one thousand lire.
> Whoever even in a non-public form distributes or sells the aforementioned writings, drawings, photographs, images or other objects, or trades in them in any way, and whoever exhibits or displays them to the public shall be punished by imprisonment for a

term of three months to one year and a fine of one hundred to two thousand lire.
The punishment shall be increased by half if the crime is committed to the detriment of a person under sixteen years of age (Luzzatti 1910).

However, this law was never approved due to bureaucratic timing and the fall of the government at the end of March 1911. The last bulletin published during Luzzatti's government, dated March 28, 1911, declared the seizure of "40,000 picture postcards, 20,000 photographs, 3,500 photographic negatives, 10,000 brochures, 300 drawings, and other items, including puppets, watches, cigarette cases, transparent papers, mirrors, and films" (*Corriere della Sera* 1911, 7).

Even after the Luzzatti government ended, police surveillance did not stop, and quarterly reports continued to be sent regularly from the prefectures to the Minister of the Interior until 1919. At the same time, anti-pornography campaigns continued to advocate for harsher measures. In particular, when Italy joined the First World War in 1915, anti-pornography movements presented their cause as a war against pornography.

It is the war against *pornography*, which disfigures social life in various forms, now brazen, now hypocritical, but always provocative, with *productions and stage performances* in theaters, cinematographs, café chantants, with *trivia novels*, with the fourth pages of newspapers, even of some of those that are in vogue, of humorous newspapers with continuous double entendres, in some of which it has even become a common feature to have alcove dithyrambs with engravings of the most daring poses; with the pamphlets or booklets with provocative titles or wrapped in mysterious covers or otherwise cleverly concealing internal filth; with the *picture postcards*, from which we now have a real storm; even with the matchboxes; with the toilets that sometimes station on our squares as appendages to the acrobats' shacks with the mysterious title "reserved for adults;" with the newspaper advertisements, with the

small mail, with the reclame notices, etc. (Comino 1916, 5).

In his description of the war against pornography, Antonio Comino mentioned the large number of postcards in circulation at that time. This scenario is confirmed by the quantitative analysis of police reports between 1910 and 1919. The most frequently seized materials were postcards, representing 63.2% of cases. Next were photos, representing 11.3% of cases. Lastly were pamphlets, books, and newspapers, often illustrated, representing 10.4% of cases.[5] Additionally, most advertisements in newspapers that were reported to the police offered photographs described as "artistic," "for lovers of beauty," "with artistic nudes," or "exotic," as well as improbable photographic objects that revealed obscene images only through liquid contact.[6]

Reframing Imaginaries: Photography and the Representation of Sexuality

Pornographic photography and obscene literature represented sexuality quite differently. The latter was strictly linked to politics and satire (Darnton 1995), while the former rarely included elements or references from the surrounding context. However, in terms of sexual practices, photography seemed to be in closer dialogue with sexological books and pamphlets. Some intellectuals even mentioned pornographic photography in their works. Paolo Mantegazza, for example, owned a collection of pornographic photos (Campani 2023, 531–534).

One important sexual practice and subject of exploration in both photography and sexology is lesbianism, probably popularized by the widespread circulation of postcards and photos at the end of the 19th century (Gilardi 1976, 169). In 1862, Ferdinando Tonini defined the "lesbian

5 These percentages are derived from the author's quantitative analysis of documents located in Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Central State Archive – ACS), Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1913-1915, fascicolo 12985.2, buste 151–152, and Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1916-1918, fascicolo 12985.2, busta 205.

6 ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1913-1915, fascicolo 12985.2, busta 152, Pubblicazioni oscene.

game" as a phenomenon prevalent in urban areas, particularly in convents, schools, and prisons. This phenomenon was said to lead to physical changes such as breast reduction, cessation of menstruation, enlargement of the clitoris, and increased sexual desire. A few years later, in 1878, Arrigo Tamassia defined lesbianism as an "inversion of the sexual instinct," considering it a disease (Beccalossi 2009, 106–109). In 1919, Giuseppe Senizza described tribadism as follows: "By an ugly freak of nature there are women who feel the same excitement, the same emotions, the same desires in front of their fellow women as a man would feel" (1919, 477).

Photography reversed the perspective of illness, turning it into an image of desire. This worked perfectly for male observers, who became voyeurs and spectators of "what women do when they are alone" (Solomon-Godeau 1990, 235). In the Italian context, photographs of naked or semi-naked women suggesting lesbian behavior emerged in the late 1840s, although they likely became more prevalent a few decades later. However, this sexual imagery did not become widespread in Italian literature until the last decades of the 19th century. A relevant example is the 1877 novel *Al di là* by Alfredo Oriani, which tells the story of the love between Elisa and Mimy. In 1908 an anonymous collection of short stories entitled *Fede: L'eredità di Saffo* was published, in which Fede, the main narrator, declares a scientific interest in the intercourse between women. Although the details are not explicit, oral sex is mentioned and intended as the climax of the sexual experience. Maria Nannipieri Volpi, known as Mura, was the first female author to describe lesbian intercourse in her 1919 novel *Perfidie*.

The effectiveness of the lesbian imaginary on male spectators lay in the challenge it posed to masculinity, both in terms of treatment and desire, by depicting practices inaccessible to men. This was effective because female sexuality was generally imagined as passive, weak, or even nonexistent. According to Guglielmo Ferrero and Cesare Lombroso, the idea of passivity was the reason

why adultery affected women more than men (Ferrero and Lombroso 1893, 57–58). Senizza described passive female sexuality with these words: “The woman enjoys the exaltation she has provoked in the man, just as the female nightingale enjoys the melodies sung for her by the singer of the night” (Senizza 1919, 72).

At the same time, many intellectuals and sexologists admitted that social restrictions caused this passivity. Regarding this issue, Mantegazza stated that, in reality,

> the woman is always physically ready for copulation, while the man is only sometimes. Many women have several impurities in the time that the man has only one. The woman, even if she conceals the throbbing of her breasts and her frequent desires, seeks these pleasures with greater fervor than the man, which are made all the more seductive for her by the mystery imposed on her by modesty and social manners (Mantegazza 1854, 65).

The scientific statements about female sexuality, as attested by the examples above, were formulated by male scientists. These descriptions were characterized by passivity, otherness, and irrationality: science, shaped by male perspectives, placed female sexuality between a field to be investigated and pathology, which imbued these behaviors with mystery. For this reason, science contributed to make the topic of female sexuality fascinating from a male perspective. These attractive elements were at the root of the representations of female sexuality, and lesbianism as its enhanced expressions, in pornographic photography. Similarly to how female nudes in painting and fine arts were created for male viewers throughout the 19th century (Hauser 1974, II: 48), these photographs satisfied male curiosity, which was echoed by sexology. Photographic representations of intercourses between women were mainly intended for men: these images were constructed to mirror male expectations, curiosities, and desires, in the same way literature and sexology saw male authors addressing the male audience.

As any other illegal production, pornograph-

ic materials were rarely signed by their creators, photographs in particular. For this reason, it is unknown if there were women photographers realizing pictures of lesbian intercourses, In the same way, sources attesting a female audience for these materials are ever rarer; however, this cannot be excluded. Consumption reorganizes production criteria, giving objects new paths, social lives, and cultural roles and values (de Certeau 1984, 30–38): in this perspective it is possible that these pictures were also consumed by women. Erotic and pornographic photographs also be shared visual materials within lesbian communities, in the same way they were so for homosexual ones. The photographs of Plüschow and Wilhelm von Gloeden, who was based in Sicily, are the main example of this phenomenon. In one postcard from the materials seized from Plüschow it was written: "I am homo-sezuell (*Urmingh*): are there many *Urmingh* in Rome?" (Falco 1919, 7). These photos visually represented the identity of men with a homosexual orientation and placed it in a fictitious, ancient Greek-style setting, inspired by archaeological findings in Pompeii and Herculaneum from the 18th and early 19th centuries. This imagery also found a place in literary expression, as evidenced by Luigi Settembrini's novel *I neoplatonici*, written between 1858 and 1859 and published only in 1977, and John Addington Symonds' *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, written in 1873 and circulated very narrowly. Unlike these literary works, Plüschow's and Gloeden's photographs spread transnationally and enabled communities to share this imagery and identity. Despite the absence of comparable traces and sources, the possibility of alike examples in lesbian communities should be considered.

As attested by the pictures of lesbian intercourses, pornographic photography broke the moral condemnation of intellectuals and sexologists regarding sexual practices and transformed what was described as an illness into imagery of desire. This process can be observed even with unusual sexual practices, such as zoophilia. Since the daguerreotype era in the mid-19th century, pictures of naked women with dogs have been found, and between the end

of the century and the early 20th century, pictures of women having oral sex with dogs were not uncommon. This imagery shared the engendered description of zoophilia found in sexological books. Sexual intercourse between men and animals was described as occurring in the distant past and in faraway places (Garnier 1907, 123; Senizza 1919, 347). These practices were related to psychopathology, as evidenced by the writings of Krafft-Ebing and Bloch, as well as satirical literature.[7] Conversely, women having intercourse with animals were described as a common phenomenon:

> Some women allow their vulva to be licked by small dogs and even cats trained for this purpose, and they feel no little excitement from it, as the tongues of these animals are rougher than those of men and women. In fact, this bestial onanism seems to be common in large cities, among prostitutes and gallant women. Hence the expression *cave canem*, applied to women who take these animals with them, caress them and have their mouths licked in public, which gives rise to the suspicion that they also have their mouths licked elsewhere (Garnier 1907, 124).

"Bestial clitoral masturbation" is by no means as rare as one might be led to believe. Prostitutes and gallant women are the most likely to indulge in it (Senizza 1919, 384).

This imagery may have its roots in the bestial eroticism of the mythological imagination, which inspired many 19th- and early 20th-century painters, such as Bouguereau, Cézanne, Klee, Chaplin, von Stuck and, in Italy, Aristide Sartorio, with *The pleasure* of 1889. In 1880, Gabriele D'Annunzio wrote the poem *Sta Donna Clara*, which describes the oral intercourse between a dog and a woman. The same imaginary can be found in ex-libris and in a bronze sculpture by Egidio Casarotti, dated around 1915. All these representations, photographs included, recalled the aforementioned idea of female sexuality as a form of irrationality. Similarly to the pictures of lesbian intercourses, pictures from the imaginary of zoophilia were mainly addressed to a

7 See for example *Amori briganteschi *ossia narrazione storica di fatti galanti, grotteschi e bestiali dei briganti del 1861 e 1862*, n.d.

male audience, and in the same way they transformed what sexology defined as pathology into sexual desire.

Conclusions

Before attempting to determine whether photography transformed the way sexuality was imagined and defined, it is possible to conclude that the case studies presented here demonstrate the close link between the photographic medium and the formation of the meaning of pornography and the debates surrounding it, along with sexual imaginaries and ideas about sexual behaviors that sexology attempted to influence. While this relationship is evident in the analyzed sources, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that photography alone gave rise to pornography or completely transformed sexual imaginaries between the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Regarding the first case study, which focuses on the origins of pornography, historical research has revealed that the term emerged around 1880, while the first reports of the circulation of so-called obscene pictures date back a few decades earlier. Despite photography's central role in developing restrictions and measures against pornography, materials falling under the pornography label were not limited to photos and postcards. Moralist intellectuals, doctors, and sexologists complained about various types of materials, not just photographs. However, a quantitative analysis of police reports reveals that photographic images were the most common form of pornography. While there is no evidence suggesting that the circulation of postcards and photographs was the main cause of anti-pornographic campaigns, photography was undoubtedly the primary medium through which pornography manifested.

The photographs circulating in this context made sexual imageries visible and popular. The second case study analyzed mainly the representation of lesbian intercourses, briefly compared to descriptions and pictures about zoophilia. The analysis revealed that sexological writings and pornographic photography shared many

elements, particularly the male perspective. The difference between the two was their purpose: while the former aimed to define diseases and unacceptable sexual practices, the latter created sexual fantasies, even if fictional. The circulation and consumption of pornographic photographs also created communities with shared images and imaginaries that shaped their identities. Similar representations, as pointed out throughout the analysis, can also be found in other media, such as literature and painting. It is possible to assume that, due to its wider circulation, photography popularized the same themes and imaginations represented in literary and artistic productions. However, there are not enough elements to determine whether photographs and postcards influenced or were inspired by these other types of media. Despite the shared elements between sexological writings, literature, paintings, and pornographic photographs, it is impossible to conclude that the photographic medium completely reshaped sexual imaginations since there are no visible traces of this potential revolution.

Ultimately, the initial question remains unanswered: whether the photographic medium alone was capable of reshaping sexual imaginations. The sources analyzed here cannot attribute the emergence of the concept of pornography and the demand for this type of material to the widespread circulation of photographs and postcards. During the latter half of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, sexuality was conceived of in new ways in both Italy and Europe due to the emergence of national contexts (Mosse 1985). This shift became evident in debates and policies regarding hygiene, education and demography (Bonetta 1990; Togman 2019). The theme of sexuality reflected the complexity of the context of those decades, and pornographic photography became emblematic of this subject. However, at the same time, this analysis reveals how photographs are strictly tied to the history of sexuality of this period, presenting contextual elements which require thick descriptions (Geertz 1975), and represent unavoidable sources and objects of analysis.

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