

The Gender Identity Effect in Hypothetical Transgressions: a Mixed Approach Exploring Undergraduates' Attitudes toward Transgender Individuals

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Abstract: The present study explored the relationship between attitudes toward transgender individuals and the judgments people make in transgression scenarios involving transgender and cisgender individuals of different ages in a sample of 184 Romanian students. We used a mixed-method approach (quantitative and qualitative) and tested the effect of gender identity (cisgender or transgender) on participants' punishments in a hypothetical transgression (i.e., theft). In hypothetical transgressions involving preadolescent transgender and cisgender agents, results suggested no differences in participants' theft punishments. However, adult cisgender transgressors received significantly harsher punishments compared to transgender transgressors. Our qualitative analyses (N=736) suggested that the most frequent categories of responses justifying the punishments confirmed the importance of the agent's age. Our findings suggested no significant associations between participants' gender and reported the previous contact with an LGBTQ member and the punishments they chose for child and adult transgressors. Results are discussed in light of their implication in the contemporary, highly LGBTQ intolerant Romanian context.

Keywords: *transgender, moral judgement, age, gender, transgression.*

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1. Introduction

Prejudice and discrimination against sexual minorities is a well-established reality of our time. Although attitudes towards sexual minorities and their political rights have improved in recent years in some states such as America (Barnett et al., 2020; Baunach, 2012), there are still many countries where sexual minorities are not socially, morally, or politically accepted (e.g., Barnett et al., 2020; Lelutiu-Weinberger & Pachankis, 2017; Maftai & Holman, 2020). The key questions underlying our study are related to how much does an agent's gender identity and age matter in people's judgments of transgressions and how much this judgment is associated with people's attitudes toward transgender individuals.

In today's Romania, deviations from traditional gender roles and heterosexual orientations are harshly judged. Our country is among the most intolerant European states regarding prejudicial attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals (Adela, 2010; ILGA, 2021; Marsinun et al., 2020). The 2018 Referendum for redefining marriage clearly expressed the general, negative attitude of Romanians towards sexual minorities, even though the law (which implied that the legal definition of marriage should refer specifically to a commitment between a man and a woman) never passes due to low turnout (Dima, 2020; Maftai & Holman, 2020). The gender identity issue is even a more sensitive topic in today's Romania due to the recently proposed amendment to the National Education Law, which would now prohibit any reference to gender identity in public education and any academic research on the matter. According to this new law, Romanian schools would no longer address any issues involving individuals' gender identity.

Over time, we shape our behavior according to the attitudes and behaviors observed in others around us. We are taught how to behave in society considering our gender, what kind of toys we should play with, and what clothes we should wear (e.g., Sweet, 2014). Moreover, the deviations from traditional gender roles can be perceived as a moral transgression (Sirin et al., 2004). Previous studies suggested that the simple computerized representation of a silhouette can form an impression of an individual's sexuality (Johnson et al., 2007). Unlike sex (i.e., the biological aspect of the fact that we are female or male), gender refers to the psychological element by which we consider ourselves to be women or men (American Psychiatric Association, 5th ed. [DSM -5]; 2013). Some authors considered gender and sex as two intercorrelated concepts, with a fairly close relationship between them (Rahmnan & Wilson, 2003), while others argue that gender and sex are, in fact, two totally distinct concepts, with no link between them (Cava,

2016). While we resonate with this second theory, we will consider, within the present research, that sex and gender are two different concepts that deserve to be studied separately and not together.

In the present research, we aimed to explore one minority within the LGBTQ community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer). More specifically, we were interested in Romanian youth's attitude toward transgender individuals and the effect of gender identity and transgressors' age on undergraduates' punishment judgments. According to The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), the term "transgender" refers to the broad spectrum of individuals who identify with a gender different from their gender at birth (5th ed. [DSM-5]; American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 451). More specifically, "transgender people are those whose gender identity (sense of oneself as a man or a woman) or gender expression (expression of oneself as a man or a woman in behavior, manner, and/or dress) differ from conventional expectations for their physical sex" (Walch et al., 2012, p. 1283). Our decision to explore one minority within the LGBTQ community was based on the lack of research related to the attitudes towards transgender individuals within the Romanian socio-cultural context, our study aiming to fill in some of the related gaps concerning this research topic.

1.1. Attitudes toward transgender: associated factors

Several studies have shown that heterosexual individuals tend to have a negative attitude towards transgender individuals generally (e.g., Fisher et al., 2017; Herek, 2004; Walch et al., 2012). Apparently, any deviation from current social norms may be harshly judged. For example, Horn (2007) observed that adolescents tended to judge their classmates according to their sexual orientation. Individuals who deviated from their traditional gender role (woman, man, intersex) would be less accepted and more harshly judged by their heterosexual colleagues. However, this negative attitude seems to be diminished by the previous contact with members of the LGTB community (Flores, 2015). Women seem to have a more favorable attitude towards transsexuality than men (Leitenberg & Slavin, 1983), while the attitude of heterosexual men towards transgender individuals is often unfavorable (Fisher et al., 2017; Walch et al., 2012).

Romanian's social identity is often centered around religious tradition (Orthodox religion), pro-natalism, and heterosexism (Dima, 2020). Along with gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals living in Romania, the transgender minority faces daily stigma (Dima, 2020; Marin, 2018), even though there are several NGOs actively involved in fighting against it (Dima,

2020). Several studies suggest that the Romanian transgender person often faces harsh judgment from heterosexual individuals, which automatically causes the internalization of transphobia by transgender individuals (Lelutiu-Weinberger, & Pachankis, 2017; Marin, 2018). Moreover, this sexual minority often experiences contradictory feelings about their gender, broadly related to intense cognitive dissonance (Marin, 2018).

1.2. Age, gender, moral judgment, and sexual orientation

Several researchers suggested the important role of morality in shaping people's attitudes towards sexual minorities (Herek, 2000; Leitenberg & Slavin, 1983). For example, in terms of moral judgment and attitudes toward transgender individuals, some authors argued that people tend to judge transgender individuals as more moral than homosexual individuals (Leitenberg & Slavin, 1983). Some authors (e.g., Barnett & King, 1985) showed that when we manipulate both the gender of the victim and the gender of the offender, in the eyes of the participants, the personal characteristics of the victim, not the aggressor, will be more significant. Thus, when participants were presented scenarios containing transgressor-victim dyads, in which the gender of the transgressor and the victim was manipulated, they choose to rescue more female victims (Barnett & King, 1985). However, other researchers suggested that in such transgressive scenarios, the transgression characteristics have a higher impact on one's judgment than the transgressor's gender (Maher & Bailey, 1999).

Previous research emphasized the importance of a series of personal characteristics of a transgressor (e.g., gender and age, sexual orientation, perceived fluency) in people's moral judgment regarding that specific transgression (Barnett & King, 1985; D'Estere et al., 2019; Fragale et al. al., 2009; Kawai et al., 2014). For example, White and Schaller (2018) manipulated the age of the transgressor (i.e., children and adults), and the judgment inferred by the participants was assessed according to the intention of the offender and the severity of the act (Study 3). Results suggested that adults tend to be more harshly judged for a transgression compared to children. Intentional violations and violent ones are also more severely deemed, regardless of the agent's age or intent (White & Schaller, 2018). Additionally, Sirin et al. (2004) manipulated the transgressor's gender in different scenarios involving moral transgressions. The authors offered participants two scenarios containing the descriptions of two transgressors (i.e., a man with feminine features and a woman with masculine features), and then explored the extent to which the gender of the character influenced the participant's moral judgment and perceived social status and sexual

orientation of the characters. It appears that the male transgressor was perceived as having a lower social status, more likely to be homosexual, and more immoral, as he deviated from his traditional gender role (Sirin et al., 2004). Moreover, men and women who generally deviate from traditional gender roles tend to be seen as transgressors and will implicitly be more harshly judged by society in general (Sirin et al., 2004).

In fact, adults are generally considered more responsible for their actions, while children are not considered capable enough to be accounted for their transgression (Bastian et al., 2011; Malle et al., 2014; White & Schaller, 2018). Moreover, compared to children, adults and the elderly are often more "sacrificed" (or generally preferred) in moral dilemmas, compared to younger characters (e.g., Cikara et al., 2010; Kawaii et al., 2014; Li et al., 2010).

2. The present study

Though a few studies explored the stigma around sexual minorities in Romania and homophobia in general (e.g., Dima, 2020; Leluti-Weinberger & Pachankis, 2017; Marin, 2018; Maftei & Holman, 2020), to our knowledge, at the current moment, no published studies are focusing on the attitude of Romanians heterosexuals towards transgender individuals. We aimed to address this gap by exploring the link between the attitude towards transgender individuals and the effect of gender identity on punishment judgments. More specifically, we explored how gender identity (i.e., transgender, cisgender) and age (i.e., child or adult) would impact participants' moral judgment of a transgression. Additionally, we explored the potential associations between participants' attitudes towards transgender individuals, their gender, previous contact with an LGBTQ community, and their answers to hypothetical scenarios involving transgressions.

Previous studies highlighted the importance of previous contact with a sexual minority and how it may lead to a more positive attitude toward transgender individuals (Flores, 2015). Thus, we assumed that participants who have had previous contact with a member of the LGBTQ community would have a more tolerant attitude toward transgender individuals. We also hypothesized that men would show a more intolerant attitude towards transgender individuals compared to women. These differences are often encountered in studies investigating gender differences in attitudes toward transgender individuals (Herek, 2004; Leitenberg & Slavin, 1983; & Walch et al., 2012).

In line with previous studies related to the importance of the personal characteristics of the transgressor such as age and sexual

orientation, and gender identity (Barnett & King, 1985; D'Estere et al., 2019; Fragale, 2006; Fragale et al., 2009; Kawai et al., 2014), and the general attitude toward transgender individuals, we assumed that the transgender transgressor would be more severely judged (would receive a severer punishment) compared to the cisgender transgressor. Finally, we assumed that participants who have a less tolerant attitude toward transgender individuals would also express a harsher judgment of the transgender transgressor than the cisgender one, regardless of age.

2.1. Participants and Research procedure

Our sample consisted of 184 undergraduate psychology students ($M=21.45$, $SD=3.94$). Fifty-six were males (30.43%), and 128 were women (69.57%), all cisgender, heterosexual, in their second and third (and last) year in college. Out of the 184 participants, 117 (63.6%) confirmed the previous contact with an LGBTQ member (i.e., a gay or lesbian member).

An Ethical board approved the research from the university where the authors are affiliated. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study (a research exploring the general knowledge and attitudes toward the existing laws in the Romanian Penal Code, regarding theft, for both children and adults; we told all participants that a group of Law students conducted our study), its duration (about 30 minutes), the confidentiality of the data, and the fact that they can leave the study anytime they wanted. Participation was voluntary for all students. All instruments were administered online at the beginning of 2020. First, participants completed a demographic scale, assessing their age, gender, living area (urban or rural), gender identity, sexual orientation, and previous contact with an LGBTQ member. They were administered the four scenarios (along with five filler tasks, before and after each scenario), followed by the ATTI scale.

2.2. Research design and materials

Participants were told the following: "You are part of a jury that will have to decide different punishments in case of criminal offenses. First, please read the Glossary above, explaining different terms that we used along with the research, and we considered important to be acknowledged (e.g., transgender, cisgender)". After, they read two scenarios [adapted from Krettenauer & Eichler (2006)] describing a transgression (i.e., theft) where the agent of the action was either cisgender or transgender preadolescent (aged 12), followed by another set describing a similar transgression, where

the agent was either a cisgender or a transgender adult (aged 32). We used a filler task following each of the four scenarios.

We used the following Glossary, translated into Romanian, from Green and Maurer (2015, p.53-56): *Cisgender*: "An adjective to describe a person whose gender identity is congruent with (or "matches") the biological sex they were assigned at birth "(Green & Maurer, p. 53); *Transgender*: "An adjective used to describe a person whose gender identity is incongruent with (or does not "match") the biological sex they were assigned at birth. "Transgender" serves an umbrella term to refer to the full range and diversity of identities within transgender communities because it is currently the most widely used and recognized term." (Green & Maurer, p. 56).

The scenarios involving preadolescents were the following:

1. Transgender agent: *Case 1 / Data of the accused: Name: Nicoleta; Age: 12 years; Transgender (Nicoleta was assigned a male at birth and identifies as a female); Type of transgression: theft.*

Nicoleta really wanted to go on a year-end trip with all her colleagues, but her parents couldn't afford it. One day, she spent her time at the home of her best friend on her birthday. Coincidentally, Nicoleta heard her friend's parents talking about where they usually hide their savings. Therefore, when no one was looking, Nicoleta just took the money and disappeared. She managed to steal around 60 euros. According to the Romanian Penal Code, Art. 124 (2), the admission in an educational center of minors who committed a transgression, and are under the age of 14, is ordered for a period between 1 and 3 years."

2. Cisgender agent: *Case 2 / Data of the accused: Name: Mihai; Age: 13 years; Cisgender; Type of transgression: theft.*

Mihai is a boy who really likes to spend his free time playing video games. The new video game released two months ago is a new trend among children his age, but the high price (around 60 euros) does not allow his parents to purchase it. One Monday, after school, Mihai stopped at the video game store, and when he noticed that no one was watching him, he just took the CD and hid it in his backpack and then quietly left the store. According to the Romanian Penal Code, Art. 124 (2), the admission in an educational center of minors who committed a transgression, and are under the age of 14, is ordered for a period between 1 and 3 years."

The scenarios involving adults were the following:

3. Transgender agent: *Case 1 / Data of the accused: Name: Ana; Age: 32 years; Transgender (Ana was assigned a male at birth, but identifies as a female); Type of transgression: theft.*

Ana has a very interesting hobby. She collects old records with original bits from the 1950s. She already has a considerable collection, but she is missing a few pieces to complete her collection. One Sunday morning, when she was walking through a bargain

market, she found an album that she had been looking for a long time. The seller wanted 60 euros for that, but Ana couldn't afford it. When the seller wasn't paying attention, Ana just took the album and disappeared into the crowd. According to the Romanian Penal Code, Art. 124 (2), theft is punishable by imprisonment from 6 months to 3 years or a fine.

4. Cisgender agent: *Case 2 / Data of the accused: Name: Gabriel; Age: 33 years; Cisgender: Type of transgression: theft.*

Gabriel is passionate about old stamps and is one of the most famous collectors in his city. He was recently offered to participate in a fair where he could improve his collection, but he has no money to travel to that city. So, one evening, he managed to steal around 60 euros from a store near his house, to go to that fair. According to the Romanian Penal Code, Art. 124 (2), theft is punishable by imprisonment from 6 months to 3 years or a fine.

After reading each scenario, participants answered two questions, the first one being similar to the one used by Darley (2009), and Laurent et al. (2014): a) *Which of the above do you think it would an appropriate punishment for (i.e., the agent), considering that the current Romanian laws for children (<18) who break the law (i.e., steal)?* and b) *Why did you choose that punishment?.* For scenarios implying preadolescents, participants had to choose from the following options: a) 1 year in a detention center for minors (the minimum sentence, according to the Romanian law); b) 2 years in a detention center for minors; c) 1 year in a detention center for minors (the maximum punishment, according to the Romanian law). For scenarios implying adults, participants had to choose from the following options: a) a fine (the minimum punishment for theft, according to the Romanian law); b) 6 months in prison; c) 1 year in prison; d) 2 years in prison; e) 3 years in prison (the maximum punishment for theft, according to the Romanian law).

We then used the Attitudes Toward Transgender Individuals (ATTI) Scale (Walch et al., 2012) to analyze the attitude towards transgender individuals. The scale consisted of twenty items, and participants' answers were rated on a Likert scale, from 1 ("strongly agree") to 5 ("strongly disagree"). Example items for the scale include: "It would be beneficial for our society if it recognized being transgender as normal" and "Transgender individuals should not be allowed to work with children". Cronbach's alpha indicated a high internal consistency for the present scale (.94).

2.3. Results

Pretesting procedure

All instruments used in the present study went through an initial pretesting stage to test the ATII translation accuracy and identify any

potential difficulties that participants might face throughout the instruments' completion. The pretesting sample included 36 undergraduate psychology students (55.5% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.2$, $SD = 2.90$). Participants reported no difficulties in understanding the items and the scenarios we used, and the internal consistency of the ATTI scale was .91.

A. Statistical analysis.

We used the 24.0 version of the SPSS program to analyze our data. We first explored the way transgressors were punished for their moral wrongness (i.e., theft). We compared the answers two by two (separately for preadolescent and adult transgressors), depending on the transgressors' gender identity (i.e., cisgender or transgender). For the scenarios implying preadolescents, Wilcoxon test results suggested no differences in participants' punishments ($Z = -.034$, $p = .732$). Therefore, our assumption related to severer punishments participants would give to transgender preadolescents, compared to cisgender preadolescents, was not confirmed. However, we did find significant differences in adult transgressor scenarios. Contrary to our expectations, the Wilcoxon test results ($Z = -6.920$, $p < .001$) indicated, on average, that participants' punishments for the cisgender transgressor ($M_{\text{rank}} = 53.43$ / $M_{\text{dn}} = .50$) were significantly higher, compared to the ones given for the transgender adult transgressor ($M_{\text{rank}} = 49.92$ / $M_{\text{dn}} = .50$).

We also explored potential associations between ATTI scores and the punishments given in all four scenarios, and correlation analyses did not confirm any significant associations between the variables (all p -s were $> .05$). Chi-square tests suggested no significant associations between participants' gender and child transgressors' punishments (transgender agent: $\chi^2 = 3.29$, $p = .77$; cisgender agent: $\chi^2 = .89$, $p = .98$), nor the adult transgressors' punishments (transgender agent: $\chi^2 = 5.69$, $p = .93$; cisgender agent: $\chi^2 = 11.86$, $p = .45$). Additionally, results suggested the same pattern of results concerning participants' reported previous contact with an LGBTQ member.

B. Justifying punishment: a qualitative analysis

We used participants' answers to the second question (*Why did you choose that punishment?*) to understand better and clarify the reasons behind their judgment. We used in-vivo coding and multiple perspectives (i.e., three different researchers analyzed the data) in categorizing 736 answers (four answers for each of the 184 students). Consistency among the ratings (i.e., categories and subcategories) provided by the three coders was high, with a Cohen's kappa of .82. Table 1 offers a detailed perspective on participants' punishment justifications.

Table 1. Participants' punishments justification (N=736)

Category	Type of scenario							
	Transgender preadolescent		Cisgender preadolescent		Transgender adult		Cisgender adult	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Immorality of the transgression (i.e., stealing is immoral)	30	16.30	29	15.76	55	29.89	77	41.84
Power of the law (theft is prohibited by authority, i.e., breaks the law)	20	10.86	19	10.32	16	8.69	22	11.95
Sensitivity due to the transgressor's age	58	31.52	51	27.71	0	0	0	0
Other's welfare (the transgression affects the life of others)	34	18.47	38	20.65	49	26.65	35	19.02
Gender identity equality (the wrongness or immorality of the act should be judged regardless of one's gender identity)	41	22.28	45	24.48	60	32.60	46	25.02
I don't know (the participant could not provide an explanation for his/her choice)	1	0.57	2	1.08	4	2.17	4	2.17

Note: Number of answers coded for each scenario: N= 184; Total answers coded: N=736

The most common answers used to justify the punishment for preadolescent transgressors were related to the sensitivity implied by the agent's young age (e.g., transgender: "*Maybe Nicoleta did not realize the seriousness of her actions, that is why I do not consider maximum punishment*"; cisgender: "*Mihai deserves a minimum punishment because a long institutionalization would affect his childhood*"), and remarks related to gender identity equality: transgender: "*First of all, I have to be fair: gender doesn't make you inferior to society*"; cisgender: "*I think he deserves it because gender identity doesn't matter when it comes to theft*"). For adult

transgender transgressors, the most common justifications were related to the same gender identity equality ("*Ana does not deserve to be punished more severely for the simple fact that her gender identity does not meet society's expectations*"). However, for the cisgender agent, the most common category of answers was related to the immorality of his act ("*It is not moral for Gabriel to steal a good that is not his*").

3. Discussion

Research showed the influence of the transgressor's personal characteristics on participants' moral judgment (Barnett & King, 1985; D'Esterre et al., 2019; Kawai, Kubo, Kubo-Kawai, 2014; Fragale, 2006; Fragale et al., 2009). However, there are studies that showed that transgender individuals are perceived as being more moral compared to homosexual individuals (Leitenberg & Slavin, 1983), the research related to the relation between attitudes toward transgender people and the judgments people make in transgression scenarios involving transgender and cisgender individuals of different ages.

Previous studies suggested that gender might be a significantly associated factor of attitudes towards transgender individuals (Herek, 2004; Leitenberg & Slavin, 1983; & Walch et al., 2012). Therefore, we considered that gender would also be significantly associated with participants' punishments in hypothetical scenarios. However, our findings did not suggest similar patterns. Though men generally judge that any deviation from the traditional gender role as a threat (Costa & Davies, 2012), and, by internalizing traditional gender roles, they consider any change in "normativity" as threatening and wrong (Costa & Davies, 2012; Nayak & Kehily, 1996), we did not find such patterns in our sample. One explanation may be related to the small number of participants and the lack of balance between participants' reported genders. Moreover, our findings cannot be generalized because our sample was small and exclusively formed by students (and they were generally found to have more tolerant and have more positive attitudes towards sexual minorities, such as transgender individuals; Walch et al., 2012).

We also assumed that participants who reported previous contact with an LGBTQ member would be more tolerant of transgender individuals than those with no previous LGBTQ contact. In the 50's, Allport (1954) suggested that the damage to a minority of any kind (color, race, sex, or gender) can be reduced by increasing the direct contact with that specific minority; and 2) once we learn more about a specific category of people (e.g., minority), we would implicitly have a more positive attitude toward it

(Allport, 1954, apud King, Winter & Webster, 2009). Our results suggested that the previous contact with an LGBTQ member was not, however, associated with participants' choice of punishments, regardless of the transgressor's characteristics.

We generally expected that the penalties given to transgender individuals, regardless of their age (preadolescent or adult), would be more severe than the penalties given to cisgender individuals. However, our findings suggested a different pattern of results; more specifically, we found no such differences for the preadolescent group and harsher penalties for the cisgender adult group, contrary to what we expected. We based our assumption on several studies that confirmed the high levels of intolerance Romanians generally express toward sexual minorities (Dima, 2020; Maftai & Holman, 2020; Marin, 2018). Our results regarding the lack of differences in the preadolescent group are interesting because both our participants' answers (quantitative and qualitative data) seemed not to have considered the gender identity and may have only relied more on the relevance of the transgressors' age. This specific result appears to support previous research in people's choices in sacrificial moral dilemmas, where children (and youth, in general, preadolescents included) are a vital element in choosing the sacrificial target (participants usually choosing to save children instead of adults; e.g., Kawahii et al., 2014). Though the scenarios we used were not sacrificial moral dilemmas, they implied a punishment, which, in preadolescents' case, only involved confinement than adults (who could also pay a fine and not do jail time). Additionally, our result seems to be in line with previous research that suggested that children and youth are generally considered to be pure and innocent (Bastian et al., 2011; Malle et al., 2014; White & Schaller, 2018), with low chances of getting involved in immoral acts. The answers included in the qualitative analysis also support this idea, e.g., "Maybe he did not realize the seriousness of his deeds, so I do not think he deserves the maximum punishment" / "I chose the minimum punishment because Mihai is still at an early age and does not pose a threat to society."

The cisgender transgressor was more harshly punished than the transgender one, contrary to our assumption. We already know that people who have a gay, lesbian, or bisexual acquaintance will implicitly express more positive attitudes towards transgender individuals (Allport, 1954, apud King et al., 2009; Basow & Johnson, 2000). Additionally, previous studies also showed that young people usually have more favorable attitudes toward sexual minorities (Landen & Innala, 2000). However, this was not the case for our sample. Another factor that might explain this result (which also

accounts as a limitation of the present study) is the fact that our sample was formed by students majoring in psychology. Their curricula imply much information about gender identity, sexual orientation, social attitudes and related factors, and many other similar topics. More specifically, the psychology students in our sample had previously learned why people reject people and ideas different from theirs, gender identity and gender roles, and different theories concerning sexual minorities' acceptance. Personal factors and their social background might have also accounted more for explaining students' answers. Therefore, future studies might benefit from extending the sample to other students majoring in other areas (e.g., technical) and exploring other personal and social factors.

The topic of discrimination against sexual minorities is already a well-known issue worldwide, and our participants may have formed opinions over time about the fact that cisgender (who might have also been considered as heterosexuals) are generally the majority who judge the minority; therefore, they might have punished the cisgender agents more severely, compared to the transgender transgressors, as a form of protest against the numerous discrimination acts that sexual minorities generally face in Romania (e.g., the 2018 Referendum, in which, however, heterosexuals and cisgender individuals rejected the law according to which marriage would be the link between a man and a woman).

We used different scales to measure punishments given for preadolescent vs. adult transgressors. The reason behind this choice was related to our desire to maintain the impression that a group of Law students conducted our study; therefore, according to the Penal Code, the options we gave them are the only possible ones. We could not use the same "legal"-choice scale for both adults and children because the Romanian Law provides different confinement measures, depending on the transgressor's age (e.g., younger than 14, 16, 18, or older than 18). Therefore, we tried to respect the "legal" reality of the punishments as much as possible so that the participants could focus on this aspect. Moreover, we used all five filler tasks to identify elements from specific criminal and civil law sections to keep the focus on this side. However, future studies may want to use a more robust approach, using Anova analyzes, and therefore a similar measurement for the dependent variables.

The four scenarios we used were analyzed two-by-two, depending on the agent's age (preadolescent vs. adult). However, the transgender transgressor was described as a boy who identified as a girl, and the cisgender agent was also described as a male. This may be a limitation of the present study because the attitude towards the two characters presented in

the scenarios could be different, depending on the gender of the participant (the one who evaluates the severity of the punishment), as well as on the gender the character identifies with (Worthen, 2013; Worthen, 2016). Another limit may be the type of transgression that the scenarios presented (Maher & Bailey, 1999). Although a moral and a criminal violation (it breaks the law), theft can be considered a more or a less severe violation, depending on participants' personal history and beliefs. In the pretesting procedure, we did not assess the way theft is considered from a moral point of view, so future studies could use different transgressions and analyze their different impact on the punishments given to transgressors. We also suggest that future researchers may use a counter-balance order of the scenarios better to observe its potential impact on participants' answers.

Finally, though our intentions were more concentrated on the quantitative data, we were surprised to learn that the most frequent categories of responses confirmed the quantitative results obtained (e.g., the importance of the transgressor's age and participants' focus on their innocence). However, future studies may want to extend such qualitative approaches for a more in-depth exploration of people's justifications when punishing transgressions.

Despite these limitations, the present study explores a controversial topic in today's Romania and provides essential insight into people's attitudes toward transgender individuals. As far as we know, the present study is the first to focus on Romanians' ATT and one of the few that linked age and gender identity with moral judgment.

However, in the light of the recent Romanian events (i.e., the amendment to the National Education Law, which prohibits any reference to gender identity in public education, as well as any academic research on the matter), intervention and educational programs aimed to increase tolerance and lower discrimination toward transgender individuals are need in contemporary, mostly LGBT-intolerant Romania.

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