Living the VirtuReal: Negotiating Transgender Identity in Cyberspace*

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This paper examines the ways transgender users manoeuver between online and offline worlds in order to negotiate their complicated gender identity and to overcome offline impediments. The study is based on virtual ethnography and discourse analysis within two online arenas, a newsgroup and a website, which are central to the Israeli transgender community. The analysis suggests that transgender users employ cyberspace as preliminary, complementary, and/or alternative spheres. Delving deeper into the meaning of the alternative sphere, the paper revisits 2 central issues in Internet research, namely the relationships between the online and the offline worlds, and identity management within online settings. The paper concludes by proposing a new term – VirtuReal – to address these issues.

Introduction

A transgender woman who maintains a virtual romantic relationship for more than a decade – a relationship she believes she cannot experience in the offline world; a senior bank manager who secretly wears his wife's underwear and after many years discovers, through online newsgroups, that his dishonorable hobby has a name – transvestitism – and an embracing community; a transgender teenage boy whose online transgender friends became "real" offline friends, putting an end to years of isolation. These stories, which I encountered during my research, exemplify how transgenders use cyberspace to accomplish things they would not achieve otherwise.

While the discourse of online empowerment has been well established in Internet research, little attention has been heretofore given to the *negotiation* between marginalized users – and transgenders in particular – and the Internet. This paper, therefore, examines the ways transgender users manoeuver between the online and the offline world in order to overcome offline impediments related to their gender.

Based on virtual ethnography and discourse analysis of online arenas that are central to the Israeli transgender community, the study indicates that transgender users employ cyberspace in three main ways: as preliminary, complementary, and/or alternative spheres. By paying close attention to cyberspace as an alternative sphere, which is especially pertinent to transgender users, the paper revisits two central issues in Internet research, namely the relationships between the online and the offline worlds, and

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identity issues (authenticity versus falseness) within online settings. I begin with outlining two general trends in Internet research – utopian and dystopian – before turning to discuss the social nature of the Internet and the role it plays in the lives of socially marginalized users, especially around issues of empowerment and identity. I then provide a brief review of the transgender life experience, with an emphasis upon the role of cyberspace.

The place of the Internet in our lives: Two trends in communication research

The term *virtual reality* (Rheingold, 1991) reveals an alleged contradiction pertaining to the ontological essence of the virtual experience. As such, it prompts a discussion about the differences between online and offline experiences. Almost 2 decades ago, Sherry Turkle (1995) depicted the online and the offline worlds as parallel spaces that provide users with different kinds of experiences. Manuel Castells (2000), in comparison, preferred the term *real virtuality*, emphasizing the realistic nature of the virtual experience, which is after all rooted in the offline setting.

The difference between these two descriptions reflects a shift in the field of Internet research. Early investigations glorified the Internet as a revolutionary medium that may foster changes in the social and political orders. Scholars portrayed it as a medium that facilitates democratization (Rheingold, 1993), redefines the concept of identity (Turkle, 1995), replaces offline communities (Lajoie, 1996; Wilson, 1997), and even changes the way we perceive reality (Poster, 1990). Later academics rejected these utopian visions and highlighted the role of demographic variables in limiting equality in Internet usage (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). They also pointed to the power relations that accompany online interactions. In other words, they claimed that the evils of the offline world are still here (Nguyen, Torlina, Peszynski, & Corbitt, 2006). By and large, these researchers promoted the perception that online practices are deeply rooted in the offline world (Nip, 2004; Wilson & Peterson, 2002).

Cyberspace as a social milieu

The sociability of the Internet derives primarily from the technology it is based on. Unlike face-to-face interactions, online communication transcends traditional boundaries of time and space. Namely, it is not bounded by geographical barriers and it is available 24 hours a day (White & Dorman, 2001). This feature has a wide impact on our social world, as evidenced in one of the most researched phenomenon related to cyberspace – virtual communities.

According to some researchers, the sociability of the Internet can be explained by the central role that communities play in our lives. Social communities are major sources of security and stability for their members (Brownell, 1950; Nisbet, 1960). The erosion of traditional offline communities as a result of industrialism, individualization, and globalization – a consensual assumption in the field of urban sociology (Hopper, 2003; Mellor, 1977; Stein, 1972) – may explain why scholars and early enthusiasts of the Internet embraced systems of computer-mediated communication. These systems, according to these researchers, give rise to real communities with rich human relationships (Rheingold, 2000; Wellman, 1999). These virtual communities are defined as "social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on […] public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 2000, p. xx). Other scholars preferred the broader term *virtual togetherness* to describe the various forms of collective online involvement, hoping to avoid the normative load that accompanies the constructed meanings of the concept *community* (Bakardjieva, 2003).

Although cyberspace is often discussed in terms of networked individualism (Castells, 2001) and personalized networking (Wellman, 2001), it is now widely accepted that "being online may be fully social" (van Dijk, 2006, p. 168). In other words, the online individualism often involves intensive social

interaction. This understanding is evidenced in what Bakardjieva termed (2003) *immobile socialization*, a cultural trend in which individuals use the Internet to socialize from their private realm. Therefore, in one way or another, we are actually facing a new and unique social setting that make cyberspace a social sphere. Its sociability, as I now turn to show, is highly valuable when it comes to users who are subject to social marginalization.

The role of cyberspace in the lives of socially marginalized users

Research reports have demonstrated the empowering nature of the Internet (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008), emphasizing the sense of belonging and social support it provides to the users (Finn, 1996; Finn, 1999; Shaw & Gant, 2002; Wellman, 2001). These features are especially salient in newsgroups, which lie at the center of this study and are defined as one kind of a networked discussion group, a multiparticipants forum that is asynchronous, usually public and mostly focused on a specific topic of interest (Marciano, 2011). Participation in newsgroups allows users to establish and maintain social ties relatively easily (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006). For example, research has shown that more than 60% of respondents have felt a sense of belonging to the group (Roberts, 1998) and formed a relationship with people they "met" in the newsgroup (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Some scholars have even credited newsgroups as propitious agents of a social and civil revival (Connolly, 2001).

Online support groups, which operate within newsgroups and other online platforms, are central arenas to implement web empowerment, in part due to the anonymity they are based on. As such, they provide stigmatized participants with a welcoming venue to discuss sensitive and embarrassing issues (Idriss, Kvedar, & Waston, 2009; White & Dorman, 2001). As Hegland and Nelson put it, "any and all marginalized groups have turned to the Internet to express their unconventional behaviors" because it allows "individuals who live at the fringes of society to reflect upon their own paths, meet others, and offer or receive advice and support without risking public condemnation or persecution" (Hegland & Nelson, 2002, p. 141).

Various researches have demonstrated the positive influence of the Internet on different minority groups, such as cancer patients (Radin, 2006), low-income families (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004), hearing-impaired people (Barak & Sadovsky, 2008), physically handicapped (Bowker & Tuffin, 2007), sexual minorities (Marciano, 2011; Mehra et al., 2004) and so on. In order to understand how and why these groups use the Internet, Idriss and her colleagues (2009) mapped usage patterns, attitudes, demographics, and experiences of online support site users and found that key factors associated with using these sites were availability of resources (95.3%), convenience (94.0%), access to good advice (91.0%), and lack of embarrassment when dealing with personal issues (90.8%).

Along with social support and other kinds of web-based empowerment, the question of how online participation influences users' identity is of paramount importance, especially in the case of marginalized users. The answer to that question, at least in the context of gender identity, lies in the term *cyberfeminism*, which reflects, among others, transgender politics that refer to the unique possibility that new technologies offer: the ability to transcend bodily gender limitations and construct gender(less) identities (van Zoonen, 2002). More generally, Sherry Turkle (1995) reflected on how living in a virtual world influences the human identity. According to her, the Internet, as a technology that offers its users varied anonymous arenas of interactions, can be seen as a social laboratory in which the individual can experience different personalities in order to express different selves.

In fact, the idea of multiple selves was already presented in the middle of the last century. Both Goffman (1959) and Jung (1953) distinguished between two kinds of selves: public and private. Social interactions, Goffman suggested, should be examined in terms of front stage and backstage. Whereas the front stage is where we perform and present out public identity to others, the backstage is the safe

place where we rehears before the real show. The meanings of Goffman's theory – that every identity is, in one way or another, a performance – were discussed years later by Judith Butler (1990) in the context of gender in general, and transgenderism in particular. The combination of these notions – Turkle's laboratory and Goffman's and Jung's different selves – emphasizes the unique potential of the Internet to enable individuals to express their unfulfilled selves. These notions, it should be noted, reflect performative aspects of self-presentation as part of functional identity management, rather than an essential assumption of an authentic inner self.

Whether we perceive the Internet as revolutionary or we support the reluctant notion of real virtuality, the social nature of cyberspace – and newsgroups in particular – is highly consensual. The Internet's ability to empower users in various ways – from online support to testing and expressing different selves – makes it almost an ideal medium for transgender individuals, who are the focus of the next section. Before that, two points should be made: First, while many contemporary researchers acknowledge the empowering potential of the Internet, others also emphasize aspects of inequality in online participation, especially in the context of unprivileged users (see Gray, 2009). Second, and as a consequence of the previous point, this paper goes beyond the discourse of empowerment. Rather than asking *whether* cyberspace empowers transgender users or not, I focus on the negotiation between the two, in order to understand how transgenders use the Internet and what part the online discourse takes in shaping their experiences.

The role of cyberspace in the lives of transgender users

Before turning to elaborate on the potential contribution of cyberspace to transgender individuals, I want to briefly review some of the difficulties and obstacles that many of them face on a daily basis. This is not to say that the transgender life experience is characterized primarily by wretchedness and misery, but to shed light on some aspects of discrimination and marginalization they suffer from. These evils, as I will show later on, are the very features that make cyberspace so attractive to transgender users.

In most societies the gender binary serves as a fundamental system by which individuals define themselves (Hubbard, 1998). Therefore, congruence between one's sex, gender and sexuality is highly appreciated (Butler, 1990). Since gender is a social element, individuals are expected to enact their gender role according to social conventions in order to become legitimate actors (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). This expectation, violated by many transgenders, is the basic source for the difficulties and obstacles many of them experience.

Challenging the binary system through transgender practices usually results in stigmatization, ostracizing and mockery, especially when the gender appearance is not convincing; namely, when it does not coincide with the biological sex, speaking hetero-normatively (Gagne, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997). Research reveals that 60% of the American transgenders have experienced some kind of violence or harassment (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2002) and many of them have been subjected to housing and employment discrimination (Clements-Nolle, Marx, Guzman, & Katz, 2001). These findings are even more problematic considering the fact that transgender individuals are less likely to receive adequate medical and criminal justice interventions (Witten & Eyler, 1999).

In addition to the above difficulties, transgender people are at high risk for HIV (Clements-Nolle et al., 2001; Nemoto, Operario, Keatley, Nguyen, & Sugano, 2005). Not only do many of them lack important information about HIV risks and prevention techniques (Bockting, Robinson, & Rosser, 1998) and therefore suffer from high rates of infections (Sykes, 1999), they are also discriminated within HIV prevention programs, which tend to be insensitive to their needs (Bockting, Robinson, & Rosser, 1998a).

Clements-Nolle and her colleagues (2001) showed that 60% of their 515 transgender interviewees were depressed and 32% of them had attempted suicide. Nevertheless, many of them were treated insensitively by service providers who are inappropriately trained (Nemoto et al., 2005), unfamiliar with the

transgender culture (Lombardi, 2001) and biased with views that are not based on objective empirical research (Fox, 2000).

This problematic situation led the American Public Health Association to pass a resolution on transgender health issues during its 1999 annual meeting: "the need for acknowledging transgendered individuals within research and clinical practice"[1] (Lombardi, 2001). Over a decade has passed since this call and the National Transgender Discrimination Survey Report on Health and Health Care reveals that not much has changed: Nineteen percent of the sample reported being refused care due to their gender nonconforming status, 28% were subjected to harassment in medical settings, and 50% reported having to teach their medical providers about transgender care (Grant et al., 2010).

Rubin (2007) discussed the social attitudes toward transgender people in a broader sociological context, suggesting that different sex acts are appraised according to hierarchical system of sexual value. While marital, reproductive heterosexuals enjoy being at the top of the pyramid, the very bottom of it inhabits the most despised: transsexuals and transvestites along with sadomasochists, prostitutes, and more. Whereas those at the top of the list are "rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits," the lowliest inhabitants are "subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions" (p. 151). The lower part of Rubin's pyramid is exactly where the empowering ability of the Internet becomes relevant.

While scholars have explored the role of the Internet in the lives of socially marginalized people, few of them dedicated their research to transgender users. A review of these works suggests three main insights regarding the topic. First, on the personal-materialistic level, the Internet is an unprecedented source of information, support and consultation; it allows transgender users to maintain social interactions, take part in the local and global transgender communities and share their experiences with peers – activities that alleviate feelings of isolation (Hegland & Nelson, 2002). For example, prior to the Internet, transgender individuals relied on the medical institution, which encouraged them to deny their past, disengage with the LGBT community, and assimilate in the heteronormative society as heterosexuals. The Internet, on the other hand, empowered them as independent critical subjects, by making similar individuals and rich information available (Shapiro, 2004).

Second, on the communal level, the Internet reduced organizational and administrative challenges, and thus facilitated transgender political and social activism (Shapiro, 2004). This was a crucial stage in the process of establishing an organized networked transgender community.

Third, on the identity level, cyberspace seems to be an ideal platform for transgender individuals. According to Whittle (1998), many transgender people hide their identity in the offline world, in order to avoid social sanctions. This ongoing impersonation actually involves maintaining a virtual identity in the offline world. This is why "living" in the online world is not new to them. On the contrary, they can be seen as experts within the online world, even though they acquired their expertise offline. Ironically, the virtual world – where others make efforts to learn how to manage their identities – gives expression to the usually hidden transgender identity. In other words, the transgender self is experienced through the virtual one, partially because living in cyberspace may "infuse a sense of 'realness' into the experience of something that is, at least according to strict social dictates, based on artifice and deception" (Hegland & Nelson, 2002, p. 155).

Method

The current study focuses on two online arenas which are central to the Israeli transgender community: the newsgroup *Transgenders & Friends* and the website *GoTrans*. In order to grasp the profound meanings of what I call *living in cyberspace*, I integrated two complementary methodologies: discourse analysis and virtual ethnography.

Discourse analysis is a methodology that includes different approaches to the study of texts and discursive practices (Tracy, 1995). More specifically, it is used to interpretively analyze social phenomena and to explore how socially produced ideas are created and maintained (Hardy, Harley, & Phillips, 2004). In this research I apply Potter and Wetherell's (1987) suggested procedures. They focus on the ways in which the text is organized and functions. They list three major components – function, variation, and construction – to argue that the activity of using a text inevitably involves a selection of one variation, according to the purpose of the talk and in order to construct a social world. The text, according to them, is not a pathway to a hidden reality lying beyond it, nor a channel that necessarily leads the researcher to one's attitudes or dispositions. Alternatively, the focus is on the text itself and on the ways the individual uses it to explain, rationalize, and construct ideas and actions. Therefore, the researcher is interested not only in what reality means for individuals, but also – and primarily – in the ways it is produced by them (Hardy et al., 2004).

The second methodology is virtual ethnography. Like traditional ethnography, it highlights the importance of in-depth engagement in the field (Hine, 2000, 2008). However, being a web-based method, it is an "ethnography in, of and through the virtual" (Hine, 2000, p. 65) and therefore it makes use of the rich social interactions and the open context that characterize cyberspace, where practices, meanings, and identities merge (Dominguez et al., 2007). My working definition for virtual ethnography, then, will be an online research that applies ethnographic methods to the study of mediated interactions and cultures.

According to Hine (2000), virtual ethnography raises some essential questions: How do users understand the Internet's capabilities as a medium of communication? How does it affect the organization of social relationships? What are the implications of the Internet for authenticity? Is the virtual experienced as different and separate from the "real"? And so on. The current study is ethnographic in nature not only because it follows the required methodological procedures but primarily because its main purpose is "to make the […] behavior of a different way of life humanly comprehensible" (Clifford, 1986, p. 101).

Before addressing issues of sampling, I want to make two important points. First, every ethnographer should place himself/herself anywhere on the spectrum between full participant and full observer – a decision with important implications regarding the working assumptions (Hine, 2008). Second, online lurking, I believe, is not enough to produce an appropriate ethnography (see Beaulieu, 2004). However, during the research I felt that any intervention in the inner dynamics of the field would be an "external manipulation" that may harm its natural atmosphere. Looking for an alternative way to get involved, I decided to take part in various community events (from the Transgender Day of Remembrance ceremony to antidiscrimination demonstrations), which I felt got me deeply engaged in the transgender culture.

The first arena that was examined was the newsgroup *Transgenders & Friends*, which operates under *Tapuz* – the most active and popular UGC (user-generated content) site in Israel. The newsgroup was founded in 2002 in order to "provide support, an open ear and a friendly environment to the transgender community in Israel" (as stated in the About page). At the beginning of the research period (October 2011), the newsgroup's archive included 300 pages with 4,500 posts (15 posts per page), from which I systematically sampled 900 posts (three from each page, in equal increments). The second field was *GoTrans* – the largest website of the Israeli transgender community. It was founded in 2008 as a "medium that offers quality information about science, medicine and society for transgender individuals". The website offers five sections, including general articles from which I sampled the texts for this research. I sampled 100 items out of 346 (approximately every third item).

The analysis process was twofold: first, I classified these texts into thematic categories (the posts from the first arena were classified into 11 categories and the articles from the second arena were classified into eight categories). This procedure compensated for the limited sampling: The recurrence of the

topics – and accordingly the ability to categorize them – enabled me to grasp the general mindset of the analyzed arenas. Second, I applied discourse analysis on the sampled texts in order to understand how socially marginalized people use and perceive cyberspace.

Analysis

An analysis of these texts revealed recurring motifs and patterns that indicate that transgender users employ cyberspace as preliminary, complementary, and/or alternative spheres. The *preliminary sphere* provides the users an opportunity to virtually go through various experiences before "entering the real world." One prevalent example is users who begin and maintain virtual romantic relationships, often with the hope of transferring them to the offline world at a designated point of time. Transgender users may also employ cyberspace as a *complementary sphere* that completes the offline world and constitutes a supplemental part of it. In other words, it serves as *another* social arena in the user's life, just like school or work. Thus, the separation between the user's online and offline worlds is minimal. Users who use cyberspace as complementary tend to reveal real details from their offline lives (e.g. full name). Alongside the preliminary and the complementary spheres, some transgender users employ cyberspace as an *alternative sphere* that constitutes a parallel world that provides its inhabitants with different and sometimes contradictory experiences from those available in the offline world. This option usually involves an adoption of a virtual identity that contributes to the users' well-being. For example, many transgender women who participate in the newsgroup maintain virtual relationships while hiding their biological sex. These practices, they witness, allow them to feel like "real biological women" in a way that cannot be achieved in the offline world, not even by sex reassignment surgery (SRS). [Comment added after online publication May 26, 2014: Throughout the paper, I refer quite frequently to sex reassignment surgery (SRS). This is not to imply that SRS and gender transition are synonymous. Transitioning, of course, is a complex multi-faceted process that may or may not involve SRS. However, SRS is widely discussed in the paper because it is a major concern within the researched newsgroup.]

These proposed spheres are in fact analytic tools that pack complex experiences and turn it into a set of schematic descriptions. The simplified schema, therefore, reflects a somewhat chaotic reality. Thus, the messages that will be presented in this section will not follow a linear order. Namely, a single message will not match exclusively to a single sphere. The following two messages introduce us to the practical way in which transgender individuals use cyberspace as an alternative sphere.

(1) I virtually live as a woman: I'm already 27 […], I'm considered gay, but **I maintain many virtual relationships […] as a normal biological woman**. When they work well (**a few years**, for example) and I badly want to meet the other side, I just can't 'cause I have a regular male body. Does it mean I need to change my body?[2]

(2) There's no need to go through unnecessary procedures: Apart from being unable to present yourself as a woman, **do you feel that your need is relevant to other situations in the real world? Maybe the virtual life is satisfying for you** […].

These messages exemplify how transgender individuals use cyberspace as an alternative sphere. In the first message the user distinguishes between her offline world, where she lives with a "regular male body," and her virtual online world, where she lives as a "normal biological woman." The response (msg. #2) to this message reinforces the separation between these worlds: the user who wrote it tries to refine the interrelations between them by suggesting the possibility that each one of them may fulfill different needs. He also provides us a first clue of cyberspace as an alternative sphere by implying that it may be a satisfying alternative to the offline world. In fact, the messages above refer to four different issues that will be addressed during this paper: (a) the distinction between cyberspace's three different functions; (b) the nature of cyberspace as an alternative sphere and its ability to provide its users a unique experience

by turning impossible desires into a possible reality; (c) questions of authenticity and falseness within online settings; and finally (d) the traditional ongoing discussion regarding the interrelations between the online and the offline worlds, and the power-relations that characterize both world.

The next message demonstrates and sharpens cyberspace's different functions, while focusing on its role as an alternative sphere.

(3) I'm really pissed: I live as a **virtual woman** […] and I maintain virtual relationships with several people. We both know that **we're never gonna meet** and we're fine with it […]. **Living as a virtual woman keeps me alive**. I live like this since I was 14 (I'm almost 28). On the one hand, I live as a woman most of my time (**and it's just like the dream, being a normal-biological woman and not a trans**). On the other hand, it probably hinders my physical change because living as a biological woman without making the change is pretty nice, **it's satisfying enough**.

The woman who wrote this message maintains two separate worlds that do not complete each other: While she lives as a man in the offline world, she has been living as a woman in the online world for already 14 years. For her, cyberspace is not a preliminary sphere as well, since she has no intention to transfer her online experiences to the offline world ("we're never gonna meet"). As she observes, the ability to live as a "normal biological woman" is not only a dream but it actually keeps her alive; it is so satisfying that she claims that it obviates the need for SRS. As an alternative sphere, cyberspace provides her with a unique experience that she feels she cannot achieve in the offline world. Unlike most users, who engage in identity experiments out of self-exploration (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005), the message suggests that for this user, managing a virtual identity is a true need rather than an entertaining whim. The next message takes this insight even further and shows that as an alternative sphere, cyberspace compensates for deficiencies that characterize the transgender life experience in the offline world and turns impossible desires into possible reality. By doing so, it provides its members with an all-encompassing ongoing alternative experience.

(4) Hi everybody: I knew that I wanted be a girl since I was four […]. My biggest fear is that I won't pass as a woman […]. I live as a virtual woman because **all I want is to be accepted as a real biological woman, not as a transsexual.**

This message presents one of the most prevalent concerns in the transgender life experience: the desire to "pass" (Gagne et al., 1997). Many transgender women, as the analysis reveals, dream about getting rid of the transsexual tag, which they know will accompany them for the rest of their lives, despite any physical changes (i.e. surgery). Unwillingly, they renounce the unattainable identity of "real biological women" and come to terms with the transgender identity. This account coincides with what Gangne and her colleagues depicted as "the aspiration to be seen and identified by others as real women" (1997, p. 501).

Using cyberspace as an alternative sphere plays an interesting role in this context. The members of *Transgenders & Friends* are aware that SRS won't make any of them "biological women" (females) or "biological men" (males). However, as the message above indicates, using cyberspace as a virtual alternative sphere brings them as close as possible to that position, by allowing them to fully live as the opposite sex. For them, the virtual world practically makes the impossible possible. This point of view, I argue, is possible only when cyberspace is perceived as a total alternative world that is able to provide an all-encompassing ongoing alternative experience. In fact, the woman who wrote the message prefers to live virtually as a biological woman than to live offline as a transgender woman.

The real nature of the alternative sphere is also reflected in the next message, which arouses two main issues: questions of authenticity and falseness within online settings, and differences between transgender and cisgender[3] users. One of the newsgroup's members – a biological female who considers herself a man that is sexually attracted to men (namely, a transgender gay man) – shared her frustration from

having to hide her biological sex (female) from her virtual partners. [Comment added after online publication May 26, 2014: Although this person is a transgender man, I use the pronouns "her" and "she" only because this is how she refers to herself. Throughout the paper, I refer to the members using their own identified gender.] In response, she was asked whether it feels like a lie. This is what she replied, followed by two responses of other members.

(5) When I'm with him: it feels like **my true self**! This is what I want to be … the point is that I've never lied … except the identity thing […].

(6) Few suggestions: You have every right to express your true self in romantic relationships. […] **you didn't cheat anyone** (!) even if society alludes to impersonation. I believe that **a true virtual relationship outside the real world is way better than a fake relationship within it**. Although this kind of relationship is complicated and usually won't break into the real world, **it can happen** if your partner really loves you […].

(7) The men I talk to always ask for a photo really fast […] and it's just blows it all […]. We need to talk about ways to maintain virtual friendships 'cause for most of us, the alternative is painful loneliness.

In the theoretical part of the paper I combined Jung's (1953), Goffman's (1959), and Turkle's (1995) ideas to argue that the Internet has the potential to allow individuals to express their unfulfilled selves. Messages 5 and 6 convincingly demonstrate this potential. The users who wrote them explicitly assert that hiding the biological sex as part of a virtual relationship is by no means a fraud, but a manifestation of the individual's self. This view supports Whittle's (1998) argument that for many transgender people, the actual identity is experienced and expressed through the virtual self. The possibility of transgender individuals to experience and present their "real identity" through cyberspace (as an alternative sphere) emphasizes the central role it plays in the lives of users who are compelled to hide their identities in the offline world. In this context, it should be noted that when users write about "revealing the real identity," they usually relate to coming out as transgenders, as oppose to maintaining what they call "a fake cisgender identity." Even when allegedly essentialist terms such as "inner," "authentic," or "core" sneak into their discourse, they usually reflect a reliance on familiar psychological notions rather than an ideological standpoint that involves gender politics.

Message #6 represents a prominent desire within the newsgroup, a desire that can be better understood in terms of the suggested spheres: Many transgender individuals hope to be able to use cyberspace as preliminary rather than alternative sphere. This message points to the possibility – and apparently to the hope – that the virtual affair will become a real offline relationship; namely, that the virtual experience will constitute an initial stage before the "real thing." In other words, using cyberspace as an alternative sphere (as opposed to a preliminary sphere), albeit satisfying and fulfilling, is the best possible option, but not the ideal one. However, as message #7 indicates, this is true mainly to transgender users.

This message points to the unique way in which transgender use cyberspace. While the transgender woman who wrote the message *has to* use cyberspace as an alternative sphere in order to hide her biological sex and successfully maintain a relationship, the cisgender men who talk to her "ask for a photo really fast"; for them, using cyberspace as a preliminary sphere is *taken for granted*. In other words, using cyberspace as a preliminary sphere in the romantic context is a privilege that transgender users do not automatically have. Thus, the difference between the transgender woman and her cisgender male partners has a significant meaning: what most of us perceive as a daily practice of "surfing the net" involves hierarchies between the privileged and the unprivileged, the marginalized and the unmarginalized.

The hierarchies between marginalized and unmarginalized users within online settings returns us to a discussion on one of the most researched issues in the study of CMC: the interrelations between the online and the offline worlds. The analysis indicates that while the online and the offline worlds can

be seen as separated distinct spheres that provide the users with different experiences, the offline world sets the structural framework and dictates some strict limitations that affect both worlds. Within this confined space, the online world has the power to alleviate the marginalization of unprivileged users, although it does not break basic structural hierarchies. For example, a biological male can live online as a woman and enjoy both a relatively satisfying relationship and a desired sense of self that cannot be experienced in the offline world. In this sense, the online world empowers the unprivileged. However, the offline world's restrictions prevent her from using cyberspace as a preliminary sphere and thus negate the option to transfer this relationship to the offline world. Although the offline world indeed sets the structural framework and limits one's agency, the texts analyzed in this paper show that as an alternative sphere, cyberspace does not only fulfill a crucial need for transgender users, but also provides an empowering and satisfying experience.

Alleviating feelings of marginalization through media usage is not an insignificant matter to be taken for granted. In order to fully comprehend how using cyberspace as an alternative sphere makes it possible, we pause to delve deeper into the concept of *alternativeness*. The next message helps us sharpen the definition of the term and sets cyberspace as a whole comprehensive continuous world that is quite similar to the "real" offline one, with some important exceptions. One of the newsgroup's members posted a message claiming that out of confidentiality, the participation should be anonymous. In response, these messages were posted:

(8) Every nickname is anonymous: unless I choose to expose myself. […]. **Nicknames create continuity, an ability to identify and communicate** – but only with the virtual personality, which can be easily changed.

(9) Continuity is the problem: When you use a continuous nickname, people cling to you, **they relate to you, not to the content**.

(10) I have to say: Personal assaults by asterisked members […] are a bit like shooting from a tank on unprotected naked people. They are vulnerable but the asterisk isn't.

In the first two messages the users present an interesting argument: Using a constant nickname creates continuity that encourages references to the person rather than to the content. In other words, nicknames allow participants to identify the user who wrote the message and more importantly – to ascribe certain characteristics to him/her. This point suggests that the alternative sphere – which is usually perceived as a fertile ground for counterfeit identities – is actually a world whose "virtual inhabitants" have a personality, a character and virtual history. In this sense, cyberspace as an alternative sphere is a whole comprehensive world that is quite similar to the offline one. Its alternativeness, I want to suggest, should be defined not by its wrongly-perceived temporariness, but mainly by its being a parallel arena that is able to provide a meaningful experience, which is distinct from the one available in the offline world.

Message #10 deepens our understanding of the alternative sphere as a comprehensive continuous place. First, the asterisk issue should be explained. An active participation in the newsgroup is possible by either signing up, getting an exclusive constant nickname and a membership, or by skipping this stage and choosing a temporary asterisked nickname. The asterisk, therefore, marks temporary unsigned users. Message #10 includes an interesting metaphor that clarifies the depth of the alternative sphere: The user who wrote it compares assaults upon newsgroup's members by temporary asterisked users, to attacks on naked people by armed forces in a tank. In fact, by claiming that the newsgroup's members are exposed and vulnerable he implicitly suggests that the newsgroup as an alternative sphere is by default a space that inhabits members who know each other's characters, personalities, and relations with other members. Ironically, the asterisked users are the exceptions who have chosen a counterfeit identity inside the alternative sphere.

For transgender individuals, the alternative world is parallel to the offline world. What distinguishes between these worlds is neither the temporariness nor the tentativeness of the activity, since even within the alternative world people identify themselves and tag those who do not. The fact that the alternative world serves as a parallel world, rather than a temporary or tentative one, means that within its boundaries, users maintain a fixed constant identity that they chose themselves, rather than an artificial enforced identity.

Concluding discussion

The paper examined how transgender users maneuver between the online and the offline worlds in order to negotiate their complicated gender identity and empower their life experience. Based on virtual ethnography and discourse analysis within an Israeli transgender newsgroup, the study indicated that transgender individuals might use cyberspace as preliminary, complementary and/or alternative spheres. The third mode of use is especially pertinent to transgender users who maintain, in many cases, online identities in order to overcome offline limitations.

More than a decade ago, Maria Bakardjieva (2003) offered a typology of various forms of online involvement, in which virtual communities constitute only one form of virtual togetherness. The typology includes a continuum of five modes of Internet use, ranging from a rationalist information-oriented mode to a sociocommunal one. The fifth mode, the communitarian, characterizes online communities with "interpersonal commitment and a sense of common identity" (p. 303). Under this mode, "representatives of disenfranchised groups" use the Internet "as a tool to carve spaces of sociability, solidarity [and] mutual support" (p. 304). This depiction accurately conveys the virtual togetherness, in Bakardjieva's terms, that characterizes the researched transgender newsgroup.

One of Bakardjieva's conclusions regarding the relationship between the online and the offline worlds is that in all modes of virtual togetherness, "actions and interactions in online forums were closely intertwined with participants' projects and pursuits in their offline lives." Hence, she emphasizes "the artificiality of the split between 'virtual' and 'real'" (p. 304). Later studies supported Bakardjieva's conclusion in various contexts, including gaming (Taylor, 2006), social network sites (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008) and elderly users (Xie, 2008). While my analysis also indicates that online experiences are inextricably connected to the offline world and vice versa, it aims to unravel this connection and points to three types of relationships. Moreover, the study demonstrates that when it comes to disadvantaged groups that experience a relatively severe social marginalization, like transgender individuals, the users *chose* to create the artificial separation that Bakardjieva mentioned – as evidenced in the alternative sphere – in order to overcome offline impediments. In this case, "the artificiality of the split" becomes a genuine part of the users' life experience."

Using cyberspace as an alternative sphere enables transgender users to undergo meaningful experiences that are hard to attain in the offline world. These experiences include maintaining a chosen identity and building a romantic relationship online. Although the analysis indicated that the offline world sets boundaries that potentially limit the latitude within the online world, these boundaries are wide enough to allow mediated agency that empowers transgender users. In fact, these users create an alternative world that problematizes the traditional discussion regarding the relationship between the online and the offline worlds. The online sphere created by transgender users can been seen as a VirtuReal world, a term that reflects both the fact that it provides an empowering virtual experience that compensates for offline social inferiority, and the fact that it is nevertheless subject to offline restrictions. This term intermediates between the concepts of *virtual reality* and *real virtuality* discussed at the beginning of the paper.

In a way, cyberspace as an alternative sphere is relatively similar to the offline world. Being alternative, in this sense, does not mean a chaotic space of fake identities, but a parallel sphere where users take off

previous identities in favor of chosen identities that reflect their claimed personalities. Based on these relatively fixed and constant identities, social interactions take place and an alternative world emerges.

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Notes

1 APHA policy statement 9933 is available here: http://www.apha.org/advocacy/policy/policysearch/default.htm?id=204
2 Every message was given a chronological number (in parentheses) followed by a title, as it was written by the user (unless no title was written), a colon and the main content. Bold texts signify my emphasis, square-parenthesized texts signify my addition, and three dots inside square parentheses signify omission.
3 Cisgender people, as opposed to transgender people, experience congruence between their sex and their gender.

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