

# **The socializing dimension of the virtual sphere in founding a Lesbian community**

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Socialization makes us “real women”: feminine, passive, subject to male desire, wives, great moms, always secondary to men. As Simon de Beauvoir put it: you are not born a woman, you become one.

No one is brought up to be a lesbian.

This paper is based on an on-going research, emerging from participant observation of Nana’s Lesbian Forum<sup>i</sup>. It explores the socializing dimension of the virtual sphere in founding a Lesbian community. It focuses on the influence of lesbian women’s virtual forums upon the creation of a narrative of ‘lesbian community,’ and on creating an alternative sphere in which Co-culture women<sup>ii</sup> can participate, and be part of a collective.

In an attempt to understand the unique performance of ‘community’ in the virtual reality and its’ relevance to the lesbian community in particular, the research is concerned with questions about the sort of community that formed through and by interaction as well as the possibility that virtual relationships form a substitute for the real live community.

Other questions include the levels of influence virtual discussion group have on the individual real world, and the way virtual relationships challenge self-identity and self-image as well as normative perceptions about sexual identity, society and community.

The paper offers preliminary insights into the subject. Since it is a work in process, comments will be welcomed.

Since the early days of the CMC= Computer Mediated Communication, researchers have used the metaphor of 'community' almost intuitively in order to conceptualize the new social realm emerging through on-line interaction.

Thus they contributed to the production of narratives and discursive patterns.

One of the fundamental issues discussed in socio-anthropological research, concerning the human community, emphasizes the essential connection between two dimensions: the concrete and the socio-cultural. In doing so they limit the human community affinity to a restricted and modified geographic territory.

But humanity's attachment to specific lands is no longer explicit, and in fact in the last decade, researchers are mourning the 'end of the geography'<sup>iii</sup>. Distance has no meaning, the public sphere has vanished and the community left out, detached from a defined place.

A fresh view is offered by Anderson in his book "Imagined Communities"<sup>iv</sup>, thus allowing us some kind of comfort. Anderson describes the 'community' as a creature/ product of imagination. This imaginary product is structured by cognitive contexts. It is not geography that formulates communities but conceptions, elements of community and shared culture. The 'virtual community' is made of the way people comprehend themselves as a group.

An imaginary sphere, as outlined above, is the virtual sphere that enables the establishment of a Lesbian community. However, this sphere is not detached from the concrete. On the contrary, the Lesbian community, which is not characterized by concrete domain in reality, is strict about modeling a well-defined and substantial sphere. Lofty virtual walls delimit the place; distinguish it from the outside and characterize it within. It provides the community with a sense of "togetherness" and a

safe place TO BE a Lesbian<sup>v</sup>. A protecting and protected home, a shelter from the hostile world.

As one of the participants wrote:

**“...I wish we lived in a world where there was no need to hide behind a nick just to say you are a lesbian..”**

Varied strategies are used to define the virtual territory; the borderlines are worded in the forum's regulations and on the virtual walls hang signs prohibiting men's active attendance. Their intrusive messages are stricken by the OPY and a notice is posted instead, clarifying the reason. The OPY's message is a reflection and reinforcement of the delicate but explicit borderlines symbolizing the place as a 'Lesbian sphere'. The participating women practice this essential principle as well. By severely responding to the writer's message or by informing the OPY and demanding a reaction.

These strict rules are applied towards other "Others" who do not respect the lesbian essence and are perceived as a threat to the domain. Among them are non-lesbian women and minorities within the Homo'-les'-bi'-trans' community. They will also encounter an exclusion response.

Why is the concrete dimension important in the discussion of a lesbian virtual community?

In a study conducted in the US, seeking the parallel of the geography dimension on the web, Correll writes: **“The LC's [=Lesbian community] primary function is to serve as a lesbian community for people lacking a community in their geographic areas”**<sup>vi</sup>. So are women who debate their lesbian identity and do not feel comfortable participating in real-life gatherings with other lesbians and the lesbian co-culture.

Lack of a real life community is certainly not the primary reason for the existence of a virtual lesbian community in Israel. Israel is a small country and there is no problem to reach a suitable gathering place. Therefore, the requirement for a “virtual place of their own” and participating in the forum, is not due to the lack of suitable gathering places. Furthermore, most of the women participating the forum are living openly “outside the closet” (at least amongst the lesbian community) and being a part of the virtual community is integrated with the “real” live activity.

What then is the incentive for lesbian women in Israel to be part of a virtual community? The participants’ messages express their perception of the virtual forum as a home, a tribe, and a secret place, a shelter and a public lesbian sphere facing an alienated world.

“G” writes: [the forum is a] **“place where a public lesbian discussion can take place. To voice a voice which is excluded in reality. A virtual sphere like that is a unique place, where this voice, hesitant and stuttered, can become articulate.”**

In her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" Adrienne Rich introduces us to the concept of the sexual tendency as a matter concealed from us (lesbian tendency as well as heterosexual tendency). Furthermore, she writes, from the heterosexual point of view, the lesbian experience stands on a scale between perversion to non-visible at all<sup>vii</sup>.

Therefore, the lesbian woman is not a ‘lesbian’ until she declares it.

“A” writes: **Yesterday I went by myself to the cinema. I sat at the back looking around at all those people filling the place. I wanted so much to observe a same-sex couple.... if 10% of the population are Homosexual, then there must have been some of them there! And I have seen none.”**

Lack of visibility causes difficulty in making an unmediated contact with other lesbian women. As a result, the lesbian woman must be assisted with the public discursive to mold her identity. But the image of the lesbian woman, as emerges from the varied images of “lesbianism” and particularly through socializing structures, is a negative one<sup>viii</sup>.

The absence of role models and the negative public images reflecting on the lesbian self-identity increases the importance of non-mediated encounter with other lesbian women<sup>ix</sup>. This kind of contact, possible in the virtual sphere imbues significance to their personal experience and provides tools for coping in the world surrounding them.

“B” writes: **“This forum is very interesting ... After realizing that it’s O.K not to be like anybody else and that it’s not so bad not to be like anybody else, and after reaching the point of not carrying whether I’m like anybody else or not I found you and I feel exactly like anybody else.”**

The participants’ messages weave the story of their inner world as well as the community narrative. Thus, it creates a common formation of understanding the lesbian individual identity and the co-culture’s construction. The participants’ personal stories become a public estate. The stories form a “folklore” that contributes to the reinforcement of the common narrative. The tribe’s flame is fed by these stories.

However, the tribe’s component does not contradict individualism. Certain participants obtain a unique status and become a **“Dyke-con”**<sup>x</sup>. They fulfill the social role of a mentor and of a popular psychologist who mediate between her former personal and collective lesbian experience and the inexperienced lesbian. In short, they are socialization agents. Agents of the lesbian co-culture.

These women are usually mid 30<sup>th</sup>, Self-confident, comfortable with their lesbian identity and sexuality. Out of the 'closet' for a long time and with strong feelings of belonging/ devotion/ loyalty to the lesbian community.

The Dyke-cons messages are challenging. In an open manner they raise and enable discussions on "forbidden" subjects, thus easing the mental and cognitive burden that is associated with establishing lesbian identity in heterosexual society. In July 2001 **Hurricane** began to publish "**The guide for the beginning lesbian**". Its chapters bear titles as: "prejudice or - why me?"; "All alone in the world or - where do all the rest hide?"; A chapter with the title: "how do I say..." deals with terminology, symbols and tag lines.

The guide is very informative and contains historical descriptions and links. (Recently I was told that the Gay-Lesbian-Bi and Tran's Israel Association would hold lectures based on its chapters).

Another example is: "**The weekly sex column of sister D**". Her detailed messages are written in amusing language, informative and accurate, combined with personal anecdotes and frequently cause the reader to blush ... (I for sure).

[And I quote:]

**"Today I would like to talk about masturbation (or- to those of you who are modest- being 'nice' to oneself). To my humble opinion, it is a genius concept, satisfactory and most important- you can rely on no one but yourself. I highly recommend to every woman to masturbate at least once a day. Yes, even if you are in a relationship... it doesn't contradict. This week, I will survey different ways for multi-orgasm and delightful masturbation. Naturally, most of the knowledge is based on my personal experience and little from amazed observation of partners who stayed the night."**[End of quote]

The other participants respond with stories of their own and with proposals of subjects for future's columns they wish to read.

On March 2002 the following graphite appeared on walls all over the country:

**Lesbian – the keyboard is liberating!**

**Signed – NANA's lesbian forum**

**March 2002**

These words are the best summary of this paper. It articulates the experience of women living in the 'Borderlands'<sup>xi</sup>, continuously trying to bridge the common heterosexual norms and the lesbian community ones. It expresses the understanding that being a part of the Virtual Lesbian Community offers a common ground for comprehending the individual self-conception as a lesbian, as well as their need to be a part of Co-culture community.

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<sup>i</sup> “Nana” is a commercial, mainstream site. The lesbian forum conduct within it is the most active and popular forum amongst other Israeli’s lesbian forums.

<sup>ii</sup> Co-culture- the word is used to avoid the negative or inferior connotations of past descriptions (subculture, minority etc.)

<sup>iii</sup> Zygmunt Bauman. 2002. Globalization; The human consequences. Hakibbutz Hameuchad. Israel.

<sup>iv</sup> Anderson, B.1991. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of Nationalism. Verso Books, Revised edition.

<sup>v</sup> Krieger 1982. Lesbian Identity and community: Recent social science literature. Sings: Journal of women in culture and society 8:91-108.1982.

Correll 1995. The ethnography of an electronic bar, the lesbian café. Journal of contemporary ethnography, vol. 24, no. 3, 1995. pp. 270-298.

Warren 1974. Identity and community in the gay world. John Wiley & Sons. Inc. NY, 1974

<sup>vi</sup> Correll 95. *ibid* , p. 282

<sup>vii</sup> Rich, Adrienne. 1980. Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. *Signs* 5.

<sup>viii</sup> Ciasullo, M. Ann. 2001. Making her (in)visible: Culture representations of lesbianism and the lesbian body in the 1990s. *Feminist Studies*; College Park; Fall. Vol. 27. Issue 3. Pp: 577-608  
In her article, Ciasullo describe the way the popular media of the 90’ made the “Lesbianism” visible; the representation of the lesbian woman made possible by straightening through Heterosexual’s norms before she could step out of the closet and be seen in the public sphere of mainstream culture.

<sup>ix</sup> Ponse 1978. Identities in the lesbian world, the social construction of self. (contributions in sociology; no. 28), Greenwood Press, Inc. USA. 1978.

<sup>x</sup> Dyke-con= dyke+ icon. One of the participant linguistic renewal

<sup>xi</sup> Anzaldua, Gloria, 1987. Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. San Francisco: Spinsrers/Aunt Lute