Brazilian Crossdresser Club

ALEX FERNANDO TEIXEIRA PRIMO, VANESSA ANDRADE PEREIRA, and ANGÉLICA FREITAS

ABSTRACT

This article studies a virtual community, the Brazilian Crossdresser Club (BCC), that aggregates stigmatized people who met solely because of the Internet. These men, united around a shared and well kept secret—dressing as women—participate actively in the club looking for friendship, support, and a place for open communication. The BCC demonstrates a high degree of organization and its members a lucid consciousness of the roles they play in society and among other virtual peers. This qualitative case study demonstrates that the Internet is a good environment for meeting people with the same desires and frustrations, and that certain communities, such as the BCC, would never be formed if it weren’t for the net’s capability of gathering people through communication. Cyberspace is a space where users can sustain an identity that does not correspond to their identity “in real life.”

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

The concept of community has evolved through the years. It now demands new approaches due to recent studies on post-modernism and because of the Internet and its capability of gathering people through communication in computer-mediated environments. The concept is usually used to describe a gathering of people in one specific geographical area. It also includes the idea that this assemblage has a social structure. In other words, there is some type of relationship between those people. Also, a shared spirit may exist among the members of the community as well as feeling of belonging to the group. In 1887, the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies created a dichotomy to describe two types of social organization: gemeinschaft (or community) and gesellschaft (or association). The first describes a traditional society of homogeneous culture where individuals have interpersonal relationships and value social interaction. The second type, characterized by urban and industrialized society, describes a society in which people have impersonal and distant relationships. Individualism is more valued than group solidarity and social relations are viewed as means to an end.

This article explores a new form of community that emerges from the new information society. Virtual communities have gemeinschaft traces (close and intimate relations and community sense) even without geographic coincidence or physical contact. According to Ávila, a community has the following characteristics: (1) A certain spacial contiguity, that permits direct contact between its members; (2) A consciousness of common interests that allow members to meet their objectives, which
they wouldn’t reach alone; and (3) Participation in a common production, which is the realization of objectives and the internal bonding force of the community. The group of people that gathers and interacts through online conferences experiences circumstances similar to those outlined by Ávila with one difference: the place of contact is cyberspace.

Fernback and Thompson\(^3\) define virtual communities as “social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contact within a specified boundary or place (e.g., a conference or chat line) that is symbolically delineated by a topic of interest” (p. 8). That is, different individuals gather because of a common sense, not because of mere geographical aggregation.

Reinghold\(^4\) understands virtual communities as social aggregations that emerge on the Internet when enough people undertake public discussion for a certain time, with sufficient emotion, and form webs of relationships in cyberspace. He states that fewer possibilities of real encounters in the cities and the disintegration of traditional communities around the world have motivated the appearance and growth of virtual encounters. As the reader will find in this article, the BCC’s virtual community was formed and grew stronger not only because of a lack of urban spaces, but also because of prejudice and social stigma.

Wark\(^5\) states that cyberspace is an alternative to the boredom of suburbia, without having to deal with the city’s danger. He also understands that cyberspace recreates the idea of community. The virtual communities do not have a real place to meet, as other communities do. The members do not meet in one specific nightclub or street. They integrate the community by means of a modem in electronic conferences. (Another interesting circumstance is the formation of virtual suburbs in cyberspace, since the chat users are normally present in theme channels.)

Virtual communities, built largely around shared interests and not physical proximity, suggest a movement away from the tense vitality of city life. When every “lifestyle” group has its own chat room, why bother venturing outside this narrow frame of reference? From this angle, the rise of the virtual community seems to follow the logic of suburbanization, as each social group retreats behind the new gated communities of cyberspace.\(^6\)

However, virtual communities are not only about shared interests and civic, humane interactions. They are also about conflict and contradiction. Actually, in many situations the interest in online conferences grows when there is a conflict. Some people would not be connected if there was no tension.

Reid\(^7\) understands that computer-mediated communication (CMC) affects the way people perceive reality as it works with a particular system of signs and meaning. According to Reid, reality as composed by CMC consists of a post-modernist phenomenon: users deconstruct conventional social limits and construct their own communities and cultures.

In fact, it is possible to find in the work of French sociologist Michel Maffesoli,\(^8\) one of the most important theorists of post-modernity, evidence that virtual communities are a strong trait of this new era. According to Maffesoli, there is today a return to a communitarian ideal, which is a different move from modernity’s individualism. He finds this communitarian urge in what he calls post-modern tribalism. The effects of post-modern tribalism can be felt in juvenile effervescence, as in the multiplication of aggregations built upon different sexual, cultural, religious, and even political practices. Those tribes move toward a being-together (as the author calls it) that does not aim at a certain objective, but only to seize the world’s pleasures and to meet others in the reduced tribe frame and share emotions and common feelings. Because tribalism is of strong relativism, it presents a pluralist composition where negotiation takes place and real and symbolic territories are delimited. In this context, relativism establishes the relation: sometimes aggressive and violent relations, sometimes alliances and affective interactions.

In fact, these characteristics are to be found in online communities, which show a will to relate, interact, and discuss. What matters is communication and being together. These characteristics will be found in the virtual club here studied.
METHODOLOGY

This article analyses a specific virtual community that was formed on the web and congregates people who have met through the Internet. The community subject of this study is the Brazilian Crossdress Club (BCC). Its history, existence, and services provided are discussed; its site was fully studied as well as the personal member’s home page’s that were linked to it. The site (http://wwwbccclub.com.br) is a place where newcomers get to know the club and where members get updated information and relate to each other. The page also carries statistics and members’ biographies. The BCC virtual magazine is also described to show its services, its level of organization, and its continuous updating.

The club aggregates people who otherwise would not be able to meet each other. The BCC wouldn’t demonstrate its keen sense of community if it weren’t for the Internet. It constitutes a marginal group that is victim of difficult social prejudice and carries a strong stigma. This prejudice and stigma has always kept the crossdressing practice a hidden personal secret. Because of this, Goffman’s stigma theory will be used to study this community’s life. His perspective will also be contrasted with some biographies available in the site.

Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with five active BCC members: four crossdressers (Liane Ferraz, Elizabeth Bardotti, Giyna Gershwin, and Debbi) and one transvestite (Maitê Schneider). The results of those talks conducted online are described and discussed in order to give a faithful picture of the motivations that guide these BCC members in working toward constructing and maintaining a virtual community. However, to familiarize the reader with the hidden universe of crossdressing, this analysis will begin with the description of the diverse identities that members assume in the club.

SEXUAL IDENTITIES

The BCC site provides its members with explanations about different “sexual identities.” The text warns the readers that those explanations should not be taken as scientific, but rather as a “photograph” of what happens in “the backstage of this universe.” According to the text, these identities can be divided into TG (transgendered), S/O (supportive other), TV (transvestites), TS (transexuals), and CD (crossdressers). People who fall into any of these categories, except S/O, are considered to be transgendered (which can be male or female).

The supportive other is the partner of a transgendered person. This person “knows about the TG’s peculiarity and supports him” or her. The transvestite is someone who has all the secondary characteristics of a woman, except for the genitals. This person dresses and acts socially as a woman. There is a cultural impression that the transvestite is someone who goes into prostitution, which in many cases is not true. The transsexual and the transvestite seem alike, but the first has undergone surgery in order to change gender. Women are also included in this category.

The crossdresser is someone who, as people in the other categories, dresses up as someone of the opposite sex. However, the crossdresser won’t assume a feminine social position. He will not undergo surgery because he leads a masculine social life. He will not take hormones either. The male crossdresser does not wish to have his social identity affected.

BCC’S HISTORY

The BCC was founded in May 1997 by Deborah Lee, “a girl who lived in the closet, as all of us,” according to the text in the History pages. Deborah Lee thought this kind of club would be the ideal solution for crossdressers. It would take them out of the small and closed world in which they had no one with whom to share their fantasies.

With the help of Monique Michele, another crossdresser, Deborah took part in online chats and invited other people to join them. Monique started building the home site for the club. Two other people helped to create the club: Priscila and Debbi, who were friends with Deborah and Monique. When Monique left them, in July
1997, Debbi (who already had her own home page) was in charge of building and maintaining a new site.

On November 30, 1998, the BCC had 292 members from Brazil, not counting other members from abroad. It is the first South American organization of this kind. Tables 1–3 provide BCC statistics from October and November of 1998.

### THE CLUB’S SITE

After a recent redesign, the BCC site resembles an online magazine. As such, it has an index of the different available sections.

1. **Cover stories** includes recent issues concerning the practice of crossdressing and about the club life.
2. **U say so** is a section where members and visitors can post messages in a forum-like page. There are many crossdressers inviting others to write them E-mail, searching for information, etc.
3. **It was in the news** includes stories that were published in magazines and newspapers about the life of crossdressers and transvestites. In this section there are also reference links such as a bibliography on transgender issues, and a service link with psychological and medical support (even concerning surgery). This section also asks for interactivity, motivating the visitors and club members to send news story copies or reference links.
4. **Regional branches** opens pages for branches of three other Brazilian states (Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and Paraná) even though the majority of members is from the state of São Paulo, where the site is produced.
5. **Online chat** leads the user to three chat rooms where crossdressers and other visitors can talk freely. The club members are always very kind and open to answering questions about the club and the crossdressing practice. The chat rooms become very busy after 10 pm. Chatters can talk with all participants or maintain private one-to-one communication.
6. **Members** provides links to members’ E-mail addresses (which are normally provided by free services such as Hotmail and Yahoo and guarantee anonymity), and, if available, links to personal home-page and biographies. All members are listed by alphabetical order or by state. There is also a listing of all members’ homepages.

### COPING WITH STIGMA

The crossdressers in the BCC site are a stigmatized group. For this discussion, we will use the perspective of “stigma” developed by Ervin Goffmann, which proposes good explanations about those individuals who would find themselves “unable for total social acceptance.” Our

### TABLE 1. Marital Status of BCC Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>October</th>
<th>November</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Quantity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>49.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>42.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widower</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 2. Age of BCC Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>October</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>November</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not inform</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to 20 years old</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7.39%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–30 years old</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>44.01%</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>41.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–40 years old</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>33.80%</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>35.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41–50 years old</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12.68%</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>13.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 50 years old</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.11%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.05%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
intention is to demonstrate that the Internet has made it possible for these people to build a community where they can sustain their desired identity.

According to Ervin Goffman, the means of categorizing people and the attributes that are considered to be common and natural were established by society. Based in preconceptions about social expectancies (social categories delimited according to consensus), people tend to create demands toward other people’s behavior, which is hoped to be effective when one starts to live with a certain person. Because this article deals with crossdressers, it is relevant to consider the question of gender in the BCC because “masculinity,” with its culturally built meaning and all the rights and duties that this meaning implies, places these crossdressers in a marginal sphere. The consensual conception of masculinity defines the attitudes taken by beings of the masculine gender.

One delimitation of masculinity could be mentioned to serve the purposes of this study: men should run away from all that may suggest femininity. Even though authors define several other characteristics of the masculine identity, this one was chosen because it takes into account the main characteristic of the BCC, that is, a group of men who enjoy taking on a female personality and wearing items of women’s clothing. For a long time, these men felt alone in the world, but now they have found a place where they can share their experiences and doubts and find support.

One of the BCC members described this situation: “You know, there was a time in which I felt I was sick, but then I found the BCC and realized there were a lot of people like me . . . it was a relief!!! If society were not so prejudiced, I would live as a woman all the time” (Kelly Diniz’s online biography). To Goffman, the stigma stems from a specific discrepancy between what is socially expected from someone (the expectations) and the answer that this person gives to this demand, that is, if he/she really behaves as it is defined. In Kelly’s case, she answers to all social expectations of masculinity by leading the role of a man in her daily life, but she has found a place where it is possible to demonstrate her true way of being. Before finding the BCC, Kelly says that she even thought herself to be the carrier of some pathology.

There are many cases of crossdressers who point to the BCC as a very important space to sustain their identity. According to Goffman, members of a particular category of stigma tend to gather in a social groups. These groups are composed of members from the same category, equal people, and people who support the cause; all of whom can show others in the same situation that they are not alone, that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>October</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>November</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>São Paulo</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>51.41%</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>55.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio de Janeiro</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>14.44%</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>14.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraná</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7.04%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minas Gerais</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.93%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio Grande do Sul</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.28%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.70%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brasília-DF</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.46%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceará</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.35%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Espírito Santo</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.70%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maranhão</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.35%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goiás</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.06%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mato Grosso</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.76%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sta Catarina</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.06%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.35%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piauí</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.35%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exterior</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7.75%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7.53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
there are people who are willing to accept their point of view and to share the feeling that everyone is human and normal. This social group forms a net of mutual help that makes the stigmatized member feel at home.

This statement can be illustrated by Gyina Gershwin. She was asked during this research about the benefits the BCC offered its members: “I think that for many girls it is an open door which leads to a cozy place where they can feel normal, no matter what desires they have, I think this is the biggest contribution of the club.”

This article should also consider the place where the BCC is located, namely, “cyberspace.” The BCC is a virtual community instituted by members who built a homepage, making it the headquarters of the club. The constitution of a group in virtual space becomes important if the potential of the Internet and the cyberspace is taken into account. Cyberspace is a space where members can sustain an identity that does not correspond to their identity “in real life.”

According to Goffman,9 when a discrepancy in relation to society’s expectations is manifested (an occasion in which the people deemed to be “normal” become aware of something that is considered a stigma), a severe social relationship problems occurs. The social identity of the “rule-breaker” is ruined. The stigmatized person is away from the society in such a way that they end up feeling discredited. This is why anonymity is so important to many of the users, and most of their E-mails addresses are from servers that offer them as a free service. According to Liane Ferraz, the club’s president, “the group which gets together is very small, most of the members prefer to remain anonymous.”

According to the biographical statements published in the club’s homepage, a great number of the BCC crossdressers have never been out in public wearing women’s clothes: “I never missed an opportunity of transforming myself . . . but unfortunately, I have never been out of the closet either” (Gisele Monteiro’s biography); “Today I live alone, nourishing my fantasies at home and dressing up very sexily at night” (Georgina Perez’s biography); “I dream to go out in public, but I still haven’t found safe opportunities for that” (Barbara Sheena’s biography).

People who have a non-visible stigma can generally make use of techniques to hide their secret, so that they can manipulate the crucial information about themselves. The main strategy is to hide or eliminate signs that have become symbols of stigma, this being the typical case of crossdressers who in their daily lives dress up and act like men, trying to hide any symbols that may leave doubts about their personality.

According to Goffman,9 a person can sustain many selves, taking into account the place where their roles can be externalized. They do this by reflecting upon those consequences that they will suffer in a certain social circumstance. A division of the world can be defined in the following way: public places (where stigmatized people are treated carefully and sometimes harshly) and retired places (where they can expose themselves and realize that they don’t need to hide). Most crossdressers use their homes as retired places where they can feel at ease. This is where they start to dress up and sustain their “feminine self”; and now they can also rely on the BCC, where they are not alone.

The Internet, seen many times as a public place, can grant a freedom of action in group for the crossdressers because of its ability to provide users with the incursion to several particularized environments. This action has its importance made stronger by all its participants as a point of sustainability of this identity, which was maintained out of social life and public spaces before.

**RESULTS**

What follows is a description of the results collected from the five in-depth interviews conducted via E-mail with some important club members. BCC members have not been interacting virtually for a long time. Most of them have been members for 1 year, however, all the interviewees have shown their profound enthusiasm with the club services. They have also demonstrated their happiness when finding out about the club. This first contact happens to many after finding a link in AltaVista “which
happened in a magical form, as everything in Internet does,” says Maitê Schneider. However, Elisabeth Bardotti (who is known by her nickname “Betinha”) met Deborah in a gay chat (who told her she was founding an online CD club) and confessed to be so thrilled to discover that there were “people like me in this world” that she didn’t sleep for 3 nights after.

After getting in touch with the club they kept coming back frequently. The motivations for returning are finding people with similar dreams, desires, and frustrations. Betinha enjoyed meeting people with the same sexual fantasy and getting to know “really serious people, full of dignity and who shared the same way of thinking.” Liane Ferraz says that she found out that she was not the only straight person that liked to dress as a woman in the BCC. (It is to be noted that the president of the club is married to a “real” woman, Sussu.) Today, as one of the most active participants of this community, Liane enjoys giving support to others and share common secrets. Besides, despite all prejudice, she also tries to define and separate the crossdressing universe of pure fetishism, which is confusing even for many participants. Giyna Gershwin says that she tries to help people who are new in the club, “helping them realize that they are not lonely islands.” Maitê, at her turn, concludes that she has found partnership and a new family. Finally, Debbi, one of the founders of the club, understands that she wouldn’t be half of what she is today if it weren’t for the club.

When asked about what BCC offers to its members and about what people search in it, Liane acknowledges that she has found more than she could expect. As part of the management, she states that the club does not have any economical interest and does not charge anything for its services. (In fact, the site is hosted in a free server, Geocities, and the maintenance of the site is conducted by member’s enthusiasm, earning nothing other than personal satisfaction.) She devotes several hours of her free time to answer E-mails and to update the site (which, indeed, always brings new material and pictures). Betinha points out that there is no practical advantage in becoming a member of BCC. There is no social, monetary, or sexual interests involved, apart from creating new and true friendships: “We are happy to be with someone, look at him and see your own self . . . it is truly exciting.” Maitê adds that the club “provides support in various forms, leisure, and constructive proposals in searching for a balanced identity.” Concerning her expectations, she wants “to help and to be helped, to understand and to be understood, to play and talk about serious issues.”

As for actual face-to-face meetings, Liane shows that the club majority prefers to remain totally anonymous, without meeting others personally. The group that goes to physical encounters is small. The meetings are not regularly scheduled today even though in the beginning of the club they would happen monthly and some wives and supporters would be present. Betinha informs that those events (even though they haven’t been held for a while) are organized through the chat rooms and E-mails. However, if a new CD wishes to attend the party, she has to provide personal data such as her real name and telephone number. She also has to introduce herself, in her manly identity, in a previous encounter at lunch time or during a happy hour, “anything that brings her from virtuality to reality,” says Betinha. This happens in order to protect the meeting from malicious people, and to show newcomers that the parties are “of high level, that vulgarity is not allowed, that any sexual activity is forbidden, and that she [the newcomer CD] has to be dressed with all feminine clothes and accessories.” Debbi, who has promoted parties celebrating the anniversary of her site, reassures that there are no sexual activities, and that the meetings “have always a friendly atmosphere with good talk, drinks, snacks, happily chat and everything else of a girly reunion.”

The parties are held in São Paulo, which holds the greatest number of CDs. Also, the CDs that manage BCC live there. Debbi justifies this greater concentration in São Paulo because 40% of Brazilian Internet is located there. However, the interviewees state that the relationship with CDs from other states is also very strong, and many have already gone to São Paulo and met the CDs of that enormous city. Maitê says that, because she can’t go to those parties, as she lives in the southern city Cu-
ritiba, she always calls “to get a taste of it.” She has already been visited by Liane and his wife, Sussu, who came from São Paulo especially to meet her. There are also meetings of even smaller groups between CDs with closer relationships and affinity. Betinha and Giyna add that closer friends are always in touch (even daily), and that frequently they go out for lunch or dinner where they treat each other by their real names.

The interviews conducted in this research aimed also to find out if there are CDs that just assume their feminine side in the Internet, and why. Maitê understands that society is very hostile in front of such a subject. Many members do not assume their preference because they have a highly structured life, whereas others are not sure about their orientation and what they want. Maitê herself dresses as a woman all day long, and shows pictures of herself in her site before crossdressing, of her childhood, and even pictures of her family (which looks like any other middle class family). Betinha is a bit more radical. She states that CDs just assume their crossdressing in the Internet. “In real life we are men above any suspicion, and those who are not like this, cannot be with us because they would put our secret in danger . . . During the events, logically, we assume our feminine personalities.” Liane thinks that the main reasons that so many men prefer to act as CDs solely on the net is the fantasy secret and the lack of opportunities. Giyna provides a very interesting point of view concerning this problem:

There is a great difference between being a CD and having a sexual fetish or being stressed and wanting to release one’s fantasies in some way . . . virtuality helps people to create a series of situations where they may fantasize freely and create parallel lives as in a big theater and this exists in many people that attend the club.

Debbi shows that many curious men get affiliated with the club just to fool around, and some never write or participate in the chats or parties. There are also others that are, as she calls them, “Internet impostors” who use real women’s pictures as their own.

This research was also interested to learn if any BCC member faced problems of losing her anonymity or suffered prejudice attacks by releasing sites on the web. Betinha once more states that anonymity is a necessity for crossdressers. If one does not hold the practice as a secret, this person would not be a CD anymore. According to her, there were very few problems, except for one crossdresser that revealed his home page to some “friends” who later spread its existence to other people and to some hackers that invaded some sites and added some dirty phrases. Giyna remembers that one crossdresser got involved with a married man, who later showed the CDs site to his wife. Then, in the process of separation she wanted to use the site as a proof. But nothing else happened, the CD closed the site and moved its location.

The persons that are not CDs or TVs that come to the club or its chats are, according to Betinha, nice and cordial. Many mistakenly think that it is a place for looking for transvestites, and just a few demonstrate bad manners or prejudicial actions. Debbi agrees that most of the visitors act politely, others are attracted by them, “some are so sexually attracted that it is annoying.” She says she tries to ignore curious visitors who ask too much about their condition. On the other hand, in Giyna’s opinion, non-CD people are “unfortunately” the majority in the club’s public space. Where many present themselves nicely and are willing to know the members. Others pretend to be CDs and take advantage of the member’s friendliness. She adds that once even a woman pretended to be a crossdresser in order to find someone to have sexual relationship with her husband and herself. Giyna knows that the encounter really happened.

Even though the members are always reinforcing that the club is not a place for finding sexual partners, Giyna’s story shows that it also happens; but, it happens in practically all public chats. BCC chat would certainly be an exception if it didn’t happen there. Besides, no one can control, in any chat whatsoever, what happens in private talk.

The BCC has also been the stage for serious offenses from “straight” men. Liane says that she has been sometimes offended, “what hap-
pens is that there are really many impolite people, and this is not only in our virtual community, but in all.” Giyna says that there is no recommendation from the club’s management on how to react to demonstrations of prejudice, as the club is just a gathering place. That is, each person acts according to their discretion.

Because the Club administration wishes to show that the BCC site is not a site for pornography, when one enters the BCC site, a Javascript alert warns that the information in the page is about transgendered people, crossdressers, transsexuals, and transvestites, and is meant for the public in general. However, people should not enter the homepage if they feel offended by its content. The alert also informs that the site is not advisable for people under the age of 18 years. Liane justifies this warning by saying that it is intended to put curious people off, “We want the visit of people that have something to do with us.” Giyna adds that it avoids legal problems, as the people that enter the site know what it is about.

The site does not deal only with crossdressing issues, but it also has information on missing children, culture, and education. Debbi explains that it has been there since the first site she produced for the club “because they are issues of global concern, and why shouldn’t we care about them?” Betinha sees it as a matter of broadening the club’s character. The BCC president justifies, “we live our daily life in a real world, not just virtual, the best thing to do is try to unify these two worlds.”

On the other hand, the club does not exercise any form of activism or any action toward legal issues. Betinha understands that they are not prepared for it yet. It would also be necessary to disclose themselves, which, according to her, is out of the question. Liane points out that the site posts articles about the laws that apply to people like them. They also request members to send stories on medicine and psychology. She also sees activism as something far from their interest: “We are a virtual society.”

Another interesting point concerns the social-economical situation of the members enrolled in BCC. Because Brazil is a developing country, a connection to the Internet is still something limited to that minority that can afford a computer and telephone and Internet provider bills. This being so, the members interviewed confirm that the greatest majority of members is from upper middle class and of a high social and cultural level. Again, this differentiates CDs from the image that transvestites have in this country: that they are poor and earn money from prostitution.

CONCLUSIONS

This is certainly not a psychological article, which is neither the authors’ aim nor field. However, the research has shown that seeing CDs as people of certain pathology brings a risk of making a grave generalization. We have found people in search of good friends who are willing to communicate and share their dreams. They have jobs, a social and “normal” life outdoors. They are also in good economical situations and many are married to supportive wives. BCC is about fantasy and interaction, not about violence, prostitution, dirty sexual misorientations, or child abuse. Thus, it can be concluded that the club is a small and virtual tribe aiming only to provide an environment for dialogue and support where fantasy is free and dreaming is allowed.

It may be asked why so many men get affiliated to a CD club, use free e-mail services with women’s names, put out websites for public visitation, and many times expose themselves wearing wigs and dresses on pictures published in their sites. It has to be understood that these men share the will of feeling feminine and sexy, being treated gently, and talking about issues that wouldn’t be accepted in “men’s talk.”

For many years they have suffered thinking that they were abnormal and had some serious psychological problem, even though most of them wouldn’t really want to be a woman or be submitted to surgery. However, these people learned that they are not alone, and many share with them the same dreams, desires, and difficulties. The Internet is for them a medium for mutual support and an environment of friendship where their hidden wishes may be revealed. This community is about sharing, about making friends, playing, giving, and receiving support.
This virtual community is a good example of a widespread and anonymous group, which would be normally considered marginal and deviant and be an easy target for social stigma and individual prejudices. Its members only want to be together and communicate for the sake of feeling cared about. They do not look for any economical benefit or use the club for finding sexual clients. What matters is knowing that one is not alone—the certainty of belonging.

If it weren’t for the Internet, the people enrolled in the construction of this lively community could never meet or even imagine other crossdressers apart from themselves. And if the Net did not exist, this highly organized community would never be formed. Many individuals could suffer from depression due to the lack of friendly support.

This is a community that was formed because and around a well kept secret. If it wasn’t so, it would not even be created. Even though the available personal sites are illustrated with pictures (many of them with covered faces), anonymity break has been an exception, as they are all very careful about their real social situation. In fact, the Internet has been many times accused of being just a stage for lies, fantasies, and false identities. But in the BCC’s case, what the participants really want is a place where they can freely fantasize and assume different identities and personalities.

It is a game, a serious game after all. In a society where dreams and fantasies are many times considered a coward’s escape from reality, the Internet and BCC are proving that one’s health also depends upon communication, mutual support, revealing desires and wishes and that virtuality does not destroy reality. In fact, the BCC members continue to cope with social and work expectations, and they are very aware of the differences between their life “outdoors” and on the Internet.

REFERENCES


Address requests for reprints to:
Alex Fernando Teixeira Primo Communications Professor (UFRGS) Rua Ramiro Barcelos 2129/73 Porto Alegre/RS 90035-007
E-mail: aprimo@iname.com