DISCOVERING TRANS-IDENTITY ONLINE: HOW NEW AND EMERGING MEDIA CAN BE USED TO AID IN THE TRANSITIONING STAGE.

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Caudill College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences
Morehead State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Brandon P. Wengert
June 23, 2017
Accepted by the faculty of the Caudill College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree.

____________________________
Dr. Bernadette Barton
Director of Thesis

Master’s Committee:
____________________________, Chair
Dr. Bernadette Barton

____________________________
Dr. Suzanne Tallichet

____________________________
Dr. Constance Hardesty

____________________________
Date
DISCOVERING TRANS-IDENTITY ONLINE: HOW NEW AND EMERGING MEDIA CAN BE USED TO AID IN THE TRANSITIONING STAGE.

Brandon P. Wengert
Morehead State University, 2017

Director of Thesis: __________________________________________________
Dr. Bernadette Barton

The outside world is often dangerous for transgender individuals who are just beginning to transition into their gender identity. They are sometimes met with physical and emotional abuse of varying forms. A safer alternative to transitioning in the physical world, may be to instead transition using new and emerging forms of online media.

The data used in this research was discovered by using the popular internet search engine, Google. This search engine and method was used because of the simplicity of it. If a person is just beginning to explore online resources available for transgender individuals online, they would more than likely begin with a quick search of the internet with their cell phone or personal computer. The method of content analysis was utilized to pull existing data from online blogs, online journals, open forums, and websites. One text book was utilized in the analysis of popular forms of avatar usage and how online relationships are formed. Two magazines were utilized, one was an issue of Time Magazine, the other was an issue of National Geographic. A
documentary released by National Geographic was also utilized. The findings from this research presented evidence that the internet is being used already in some ways by transgender communities. It is used as a knowledgebase resource and as a support group. It is also used as a way for individuals to connect with each other safely from within the confines of their own homes.

The data also suggests that the internet is also being used as a means of trial and error for those in the transition stage to develop a sense of identity. While it was not the most common method of its use by transgender individuals, the fact that it is beginning to be used in a way for some to come out or develop their identity proves that this is a viable alternative to in-person communities and support groups, should they not be available regionally. It also shows that online support groups are used by transgender individuals to meet up and avoid the other members of the online community, and to develop a resource and a safe space. While the internet is being used in various forms by the transgender community, there is still a great deal of possibility to be found online. The internet may be easier for some to access than a community based transgender support group, and because of this it could in the future be suggested by guidance counselors and other types of advisors.

Accepted by: ________________________________, Chair
Dr. Bernadette Barton

________________________________________
Dr. Suzanne Tallichet

________________________________________
Dr. Constance Hardesty
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

In the year 2016, the transgender community struggles to exist in a society that doesn’t accept them for who they are. Many walk on eggshells and try to, “pass” as their preferred gender identity. While many changes have occurred to increase gender equality over the past couple of years, including a universal bathroom bill to allow transgender students to be allowed to use the restroom that corresponds to their perceived gender, there is still quite a bit left to accomplish. The recent change to the political atmosphere in the country has made for times of distrust and a questioning of what rights will transgender citizens be allowed. With so many unknowns, the question that this thesis explores is the role online media plays in transgender individuals transitioning?

There are many individuals in our country who wake up every day and feel like they are not the gender that corresponds with the sex that is listed on their identification. For those that are beginning to question who they are, they ask, “Do I want to identify as a different gender and if so how do I go about doing that?” It goes beyond waking up, finding a dress, putting on makeup and going into the world. “20% of Millennials identify as something other than strictly straight and cisgender…compared to 7% of Boomers.” (Pg. 50, Time Magazine. Infinite Identities. March 2017). Cisgender is when an individual identifies as the gender that matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

Cisgender people do not have to petition the court so that the state government will be able to change the sex on a driver’s license. Many of us will never have to be turned down for a job or evicted from our home because we are no longer viewed as the individual that we said we were. And regardless of the differences in opinion or beliefs with the rest of our families, many
of us will never know the fear of figuring out how to tell your family that you identify as a different gender than what you grew up as.

This work, draws on Symbolic Interactionism and within it, Dramaturgy to understand the importance of online environments for transgender individuals. I also do a content analysis of online transgender safe blogs, websites, and forums and various internet articles. I also consider how the transgender community online comes together and offer support systems and communities that are utilized as a type of resource or knowledge base for those who are now going through situations that other users have encountered themselves first hand during their own transition.

Though some in our society may have more than one front stage persona, I believe that this happens more often than not with transgender individuals who are in the process of transitioning. Because of the pressure of society to conform, many transgender individuals are forced to adhere to their biological sex’s preconceived gender when in public out of fear. “Trina, (her street name) hides during the day and does sex work at night – the only time she feels safe wearing feminine clothing. Still, she’s been attacked with acid, knives, a machete and a gun.” (Pg. 66, National Geographic Magazine; Rethinking Gender. January 2017). This excerpt from a recent issue of National Geographic Magazine is about a male to female (MtF) transgender individual who lives on the streets of Kingston, Jamaica with other transgender individuals. This research shows that transgender individuals utilize a minimum of two different front stage personas when possible so that they can begin to make the transition from one gender to the other comfortably. Stories like Trina’s are not widely reported but show that this is the case for some transgender individuals. The fact that two different front stage personalities would have to
exist for these individuals suggests that there needs to be an easier way to transition for them. While the world is not perfect, it could be more accepting.

The online world acts as a 24/7 community and support system for a transgender individual looking to begin the transition process. “I think that the internet has a lot to do with this. Websites like Tumblr bring a lot of kids together from across the country where they can all voice their questions about themselves.” (Gender Revolution: A Journey with Katie Couric; National Geographic Documentary. January 2017). As we now can access the internet at basically every moment within our day to day life, it can act as an invaluable resource to those who need help, or just want to talk to someone. This study finds that transgender people use online resources and support systems in the form of: transgender run blogs, forums, sub-reddits and websites to aid in the transition stage lessen the harassment and process through issues that occur to those that are just starting to go through or trying to go through this stage in their life.

This research is important because transgender individuals who encounter acts of harassment and violence are more prone to suicide, and harmful behaviors than that of other minority groups. “Almost 50% of trans identifying people have attempted or died by suicide.” (Gender Revolution: A Journey with Katie Couric; National Geographic Documentary. January 2017). To this end it can be said that for being themselves, transgender identifying individuals are being pushed to the point that they die by suicide or take harmful substances and many times it does not stop there. “In 2016 more trans individuals were murdered than any other year. The unemployment rate for transgender individuals was twice the national average. The unemployment rate for trans individuals of color was four times the national average. (Gender Revolution: A Journey with Katie Couric; National Geographic Documentary. January 2017). Some face barriers to employment. With many employers not hiring transitioning transgender
employees, they end up turning to the sex industry and find themselves homeless, not unlike Trina, living on the street and prone to even greater acts of violence and disease. In the study that follows I present information that finds that online communities help the transitioning period of a transgender individual be a smoother and less dangerous process.

For the purpose of this study, the definition of transgender that will be used is the exact one listed on transequality.org, “Transgender people are people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were thought to be at birth. “Trans” is often used as shorthand for transgender.” (transequality.org)

When the word transgender is used in this piece it will not be referring to: gender non-conforming, genderqueer, individuals who practice cross dressing without identifying as transgender, or gay or bisexual individuals. If any of the above listed are being described the term that fits best with that form of identifier will be used to differentiate from the transgender topic that is being discussed.

NPR or National Public Radio reported in June of 2016 that over 1.4 million adults identify as transgender in the United States. The survey data did report that of all the areas within the country that do have trans-citizens, that the District of Columbia seems to have the highest population of transgender citizens with over fourteen thousand respondents identifying as transgender, a number which when compared to the population of the District is roughly 2.77 percent. (npr.org, 2016).

**Theory - Dramaturgy**

Dramaturgy is a subsection of the Symbolic Interactionism theory within the Sociological perspective created by Erving Goffman. Dramaturgy is the belief that there is a minimum of two personas that exist within the lives of every individual that controls what is seen by the rest of the
world, the, “front stage” and, “back stage” personae. (Boundless. “Dramaturgy.” Boundless Sociology Boundless, 26 May. 2016. https://www.boundless.com). The front stage persona is what we allow the world to see of ourselves. To many this will be the appearances that they expose at work, their moods, attitudes, etc. that exist outside of their homes. It is the accepted, the adherence to norms and the refusal to appear as anything out of the ordinary. The backstage persona is the personality that we have when we are at home or in our “safe place.” It is when we let crack the mask that hides us from the world and we show the person with whom we truly identify. It is the lounge pants wearing individual that is sitting on their couch lint rolling a cat and binge watching the X-Files. The backstage personality is our private time. It’s when we can be ourselves without having to fear how the rest of the world will judge us. It is our safe place, our sanctuary to exist just as we are. Though being created roughly 35 years or so before users were anonymously signing on and chatting with each other via MMORPGS or even online chat rooms on the internet, Goffman’s Dramaturgy theory can be used to look at how new media has helped to facilitate transgender identity. Dramaturgy, uses the metaphor of the actor and the audience, usually through theater imagery to explain human behavior, and the true self.

“According to this perspective, individuals perform actions in everyday life as if they were performers on a stage. Identity is performed through roles.”(Boundless. “Dramaturgy.” Boundless Sociology Boundless, 26 May. 2016. https://www.boundless.com).

Every day people in society adhere to roles. The clerk at your local grocery store, the businessman, politician, police officer, etc. everyone in one way or another adheres to a role and lives their public life the way that society expects them to. In our society, popular culture has built up male role models and actors who are now growing massive beards, they drink alcohol, they work with their hands and they don’t break down into a “feelings” mode like children or
women might. Popular culture shows us that women are smaller than men, less physically intimidating and strong, they may play sports but they aren’t as athletic as say great male athletes such as National Basketball Association star Lebron James, for example. But are these people just playing these roles when in the eye of the public, or is this who they are 100% of their time?

“We believe that one’s identity is fundamentally intertwined with society outside of oneself. The performer is always aware that the audience is doing evaluative work on its own and might doubt the authenticity of the performance.” (Boundless. “Dramaturgy.” Boundless Sociology Boundless, 26 May. 2016. https://www.boundless.com).

We adhere to the roles that we believe society expects of us because we do not want to be thought to be different from anyone else. Those that are different in our society are often ostracized, they have a more difficult time getting health benefits or finding employment, they may suffer from physical or emotional harassment, they have a tougher life overall than those that are viewed as being part of the norm. The front stage persona that individuals play is the person that everyone else thinks that we are. The backstage persona is possibly the true self.

When not utilizing online environments for the transition period of their lives, a transgender person may start experimenting with identifying with a new gender in the public eye. Identifying as a new gender goes beyond just what clothes you’re going to wear that day or what your hair is going to look like. Public gender identification includes going to work and having to deal with how coworkers interact with you. It might involve awkward stares and anxiety that people are laughing at you. It’s going to a clothing store and asking to try on clothes that men or women may or may not be allowed to wear due to societal pressures, and having to deal with mislabeling, and misgendering.

It’s my belief that transgender individuals perform one or two front stage personalities, minimum. There is the front stage persona that they adhere to at work, or with family and there is the front stage persona that they may adhere to when they are in their true identified self or when
they are in social situations i.e.: going to the mall, out to eat, events, social clubs, etc. Therefore, it is my belief that transgender individuals, transitioning in the physical world seem to have a minimum of one or two front stage personalities, and perhaps these personalities may even be different genders. The amount of stress and anxiety that goes into the balancing of this must be astounding.

Online media and online environments give the transgender individual the ability to navigate the front stage environment and develop their front stage self within the safety of their back-stage environment. What does this mean? It’s shopping for clothes online, it’s talking to other online users as your preferred gender and learning firsthand how interactions go when performed by a different gender, it can even be talking to or finding other transgender individuals online or possibly forming a support community without having to go outside, or if a physical support group does not exist in your location.

Chapter 2:
LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically transgender individuals, like that of the gay or bisexual community did not find being open and public about their gender-identity to be as easy as it is now, which is saying something about the times that we live in and the progress that we have made as a society. In a passage of, “Just One of the Guys?: Transgender Men and the Persistence of Gender Inequality” Kristen Schilt, discusses the inequalities suffered by transmen in society. In one interview a transman discusses what it was like to transition in the 1950’s and 1960’s when at the time transgender was not a widely-known topic. During his time, he found himself in a lesbian enclave as his attraction to women and the individuals who lived within the enclave communities
seemed to more closely identify with his beliefs and feelings than the rest of the general population. The individual that speaks about living in a lesbian community in the 50’s and 60’s states that the entire time it just didn’t feel right, “‘I didn't feel I fitted in there, but that was the closest I could identify with.... There was something missing there, too. I always felt like I was living in disguise.’” (Schilt, 2010).

Schilt goes on to explain that it was actually popular for lesbian communities at the time to not feel very open to transmen because they felt that they were individuals trying to be men, and trying to gain, “male privilege.” Many transmen in these communities who at the time identified as lesbians kept their internal views and feelings hidden so as not to be ostracized from the community that kept them safe and took them in when they felt that the outside world was against them. To them it wasn’t dressing up as a more masculine lesbian but it was trying to let their outer appearance mirror their, “internal sense of maleness.” (Schilt, 2010).

Before the internet and before the world that we live in now, when it was more conservative and dangerous to be labeled as a, “gender deviant” many transgender individuals found themselves not living in the lesbian enclaves that were described in the experiences above, but instead found themselves hiding in plain sight. They maintained the front stage persona of the heterosexual, biological gender that they were identified as at birth and they did everything they could to maintain this identity. In the article, “I Did It All Online:” Transgender identity and the management of everyday life,” one individual speaks about the experiences and strategies performed by transgender individuals living within the suburbs of 1950’s and 1960’s, America. (Cavalcante, 2016).

The article explores underground magazines and pamphlets, resembling modern day zines, that spoke to the transgender individual, and helped them to have some sense of self, some
form of identity. The magazine that is referenced in the article is titled, “Transvestia: the journal of the American society for equality in dress.” (Cavalcante, 2016). The author states that many of the individuals within these areas saw this type of magazine as a form of connection with others that felt the same way about gender identity as they did. They finally had a way of connecting with others, even if it was only one-sided. This article states that historically these types of magazines were subscription based or sold in adult book stores, that they were typically wrapped in brown paper and were to be kept hidden from the public eye. (Cavalcante, 2016). I believe that this type of distribution, though at the time may have been necessary to spare the readers of harassment and punishment for what would be seen as sexual deviance, perpetuated the closet in a den of sin. Before there were individually run websites, blogs, etc. there was a community of individuals getting together and printing out literature for the rest of the community. I imagine that at that time, coming across something like magazines, discovering that there were indeed others out there that felt the same way mentally was life changing. It had to feel something like landing on an alien planet only to discover that amidst the sea of potentially dangerous faces are other individuals like yourself, hiding yet wanting to connect. “But once someone realizes they’re not alone, It’s really hard to take away that sense of empowerment.” (Pg. 52, Time Magazine. “Infinite Identities.” March 2017).

The United States of America, historically has not been the most accepting place for individuals who differ from the societal norm. We have a history of segregation, a history of prejudice and punishment for those that are different. Trans issues are confusing and threatening to many. Some argue against the equality that the transgender community and community advocates are fighting for because they see the transgender individual as a deceiver, as someone who is trying to, “pass” as something other than themselves. Ironically, the history of our society
that has deemed this deception as necessary for survival. Those that are different are made to hide from those that are the societal norm. Their front stage personas always must be maintained so as not to show a crack that would threaten the majority group. The 2016 presidential election added pressure to the already fragile relationship between the transgender community and that of the larger American society. “A bill introduced in California in January (2017) would add a third gender option on identification documents.” (Pg. 50, Time Magazine. “Infinite Identities.” March 2017). Societal stigma encourages trans people to transition phase online. The anonymity that gives so many on the internet an unnecessary amount of power over others may also be able to grant the transgender individual and the community the ability to safely communicate with each other and perhaps online media can assist transgender individuals with their transition.

An article titled, “Transgender youth homelessness: Understanding programmatic barriers through the lens of cisgenderism” by Jama Shelton references and highlights one overlooked and perhaps not widely known issues which is, homelessness among transgender youth. Shelton does suggest that there may be multiple causes for the increased amount of homelessness in transgender youth, with it being reported that possibly 20 – 40% of the homeless youth in the country identify as LGBT, though the specific numbers on how many of these youths are transgender is not represented. (Shelton, 2015). Shelton presents multiple possibilities for the large number of transgender and LGB youth and states that something that could be one of the leading causes of homelessness might be the fact that LGBT youth are thrown out of their house on a greater number due to their parents lacking the understanding of their gender identity or sexual orientation. (Shelton, 2015). Shelton later goes on to suggest that another cause for the increased levels of homelessness for transgender youth may be the fact that transgender individuals often do not have updated government identification that supports who they say they
are. (Shelton, 2015). Shelton goes on to explain some of the more in depth ways in which an individual must jump through hoops to obtain a new government form of identification. For the person that is already suffering from homelessness or who is having difficulty finding a place to stay since they are beginning the transition process, this may be an increased amount of stress that is unnecessary. The fact that it is so difficult to have a form of identification updated, that many of the homeless shelters do not support transgender individuals, and in fact are sex segregated making it unsafe and many times making it to where a transgender identifying individual is not able to access services simply because the way they look or how they identify. (Shelton, 2015).

Discrimination of transgender individuals goes far beyond homelessness, support systems in place designed to help the public do not have means of assisting those who are transitioning. For example, the prison system is not trans friendly, making them unsafe for many incarcerated trans people forced into prisons for people another gender, leading to an increased risk of rape and acts of violence by other inmates. Transwomen placed in a correctional facility for men resulted in a high probability of transwomen being raped. (Johnson. "Recognition Of the Nonhuman: The Psychological Minefield of Transgender Inequality in the Law." 2010). It increases the possibility that inmates will not receive their hormone medication, it increases the chance for verbal and physical harassment by other inmates and by the correctional facility workers, and also increases the mental strain on the individual. “In homeless shelters and prisons, transgender persons are often forced to go to genitalia-matching facilities, increasing the risk that they will be harassed, beaten, or raped.” (Johnson, 2010). This article also addresses the issue of homelessness and how the laws that are supposed to protect the greater American public, fail in a spectacular fashion when representing the transgender individual. Johnson goes into
great detail about the ways in which custody battles are lost, marriages are voided and widows or spouses will find themselves no longer having access to estates. The law is literally against them. It is against them to such an extent that until recently there was a defense called, “trans panic” which was used in legal cases in which perpetrators were given shortened sentences or were acquitted of their crimes simply because they accidentally slept with a man or a woman and supposedly committed the violent act in a confused rage. (Wodda & Panfil, 2015).

One of the most damaging parts about the transition process for transgender individuals is the fact that currently it can be extremely difficult to find support groups or resources to help with the process. “Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth are often at a greater risk for negative health outcomes compared with heterosexual youth. They are twice as likely to experience anxiety and depression compared with heterosexual youth.” (Johnson & Amella, 2013). There are many negative repercussions of suffering from social isolation and transgender individuals suffer in a greater number than other portions of the population. (Johnson & Amella, 2013). Transgender individuals report feeling a variety of forms of isolation, they can feel physically or emotionally isolated, and not just from the general population but from those they considered to be friends or even close family members. This type of isolation can lead to thoughts of suicide, or self-harming actions. It can lead to an increase in weight and or a possibility of eating disorders. It can lead to healthcare issues, and or a lack of employability due to homelessness or financial support in the job hunt stage, it can even lead to working as a sex worker which increases the chance of violent crime, sexually transmitted diseases and etc. (Johnson & Amella, 2013). Feeling isolated from those that are supposed to be close to us is damaging and I believe that it speaks to the importance of socialization in our lives when so many individuals within a minority group self-harm or have attempted suicide, not just once but
multiple times. In a study performed by the Community Health Research Initiative (CHRI) of Virginia Commonwealth University, 350 trans participants were surveyed in which 290 responded. Of those that responded, “28.5% reported a history of suicide attempts… 32.5% reported having made one attempt, 28.6% reported a history of two attempts, and 39% reported having made three or more attempts.” (Testa, Bradford, Hendricks & Bongar. 2012). Those numbers are a direct correlation to isolation and suicide attempts by individuals who feel that they honestly have nobody in their life that they can be close to. It is important to note that this social isolation does not just include close members but also medical professionals, teachers and educators, government officials, employees and politicians as well.

Societal changes to the belief that one should have to, “pass” as their desired or biological gender in order to successfully navigate the world may not be drastic or quick in their arrival but that is not to say that we have not made progress already. “With the assistance of student service professionals who can help them navigate campus resources and sex-segregated facilities, transgender students can full realize their potential.” (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, Tubbs, 2005). This quote is describing ways in which college campuses can reach out and offer support to those who have identified as a gender or a sexual orientation that is different from the preconceived norm. The article was released in 2005, before the rise in transgender rights and suggests that we should stop sex segregating our public colleges. The author suggests that we can make the experience easier for those trying to transition isn’t to continue segregation but to offer transgender individuals dorms that are more suited for the transition period relatively private bathroom stalls and showers, and a different option than the historically institutionalized same-sex living arrangements. (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, Tubbs, 2005). Same-sex living arrangements and sex segregated bathrooms seem to be becoming a thing of the past. It would more than likely
cut down on verbal and physical assault possibilities and also make the experience more comfortable for those who worry that they may be using the restroom with someone of the opposite sex, (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, Tubbs, 2005) because regardless of the amount of information which has been supplied stating that transgender individuals are not simply dressing in drag to prey upon unsuspecting bathroom goers this idea is supplied to the public by propaganda machines disguised as news outlets that argue otherwise. This argument for the removal of sex segregated restrooms and campus housing is also a means in which we can combat the institutionalized sexism that exists within our public education system.

Institutionalized sexism and its impact on the transgender community goes far beyond the borders of just the public education system. It can be found in the daily procedures and mentality in American employers, and it can also be found in our extracurricular sporting events. Transgender employees that are trying to, “pass” in their workplace are more likely to experience a form of harassment such as verbal, if not physical harassment. This can be simply a refusal by coworkers to call someone by their preferred descriptor, or even mocked with verbal insults such as, “faggot.” (Bailey, 2015). Employers often claim that the transition process when performed in a work environment is distracting and disrupting to coworkers (Bailey, 2015) this actually resembles the argument that girls in public school systems should cover their entire body so as not to distract the male students; because women in our society are over sexualized and are seen at fault if they try to wear clothing that they are comfortable in, let alone if they wear something that may be considered, “distracting” to someone else.

This institutionalized sexism is very apparent when working with the blurring of gender lines in our traditional educational, work, and competitive sports environments. The belief that bathrooms must be segregated to protect women from men is a very popular argument, but yet
there is little discussion about defending men from women. (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). This continues the belief that women as a gender are weaker and thus men will always be the dominant sex, regardless of the basis. The belief that women have such a disadvantage and that all men are just these sexed up beings that are trying to get into a female restroom is unsubstantiated. The proof in this is that there is practically no policing of men’s restrooms from transmen. Established institutions do not find themselves worried that men are going to be raped by transmen. “Because unwanted sexual attention is seen as a danger to women and children, but rarely, if ever, as a danger to adult men, men’s spaces are not policed. This differential policing of gender-segregated spaces illustrates the cultural logics that uphold gender inequality and heteronormativity…” ((Westbrook & Schilt, 2014).

There is a growing argument that the real cause of the concern for women is because society is scared of people with a penis. The penis fear is in a way blurring the lines between what we as a society are considering to be male or female. For example, you can compete in men’s sports if you have a penis or do not have a penis, but you cannot compete in female sports if you have a penis. (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Transwomen are forced to provide an extreme amount of evidence which proves that they are in fact as weak as every other woman that exists in the sport they are trying to play. One particular example of a transfemale athlete receiving far more than her share of harassment for participating in her sport as a woman is the case of Fallon Fox, a competitive mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter who since news of her being a trans athlete has come out has experienced a huge amount of criticism and harassment. (McLearen, 2015).

Fox was cleared by multiple fighting boards to be able to compete in her sport. She supplied all evidence of being a woman, she underwent surgery to have her penis removed as part of her transition without it offering any sort of advantage at all. (McLearen, 2015).
(Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Many of the commentators and various popular voices within the sport had quite a bit to say about the fact that this, “lying, sick, sociopathic, disgusting, freak” simply joined the sport to, “beat the fuck out of chicks.” (McLearen, 2015). These arguments, this belief that Fox is really just a man that is trying to beat up women are unjust and almost entirely made up of this notion that women are always the weaker sex in comparison to men. These commentators and spokespeople do not take into count that Fox also is on medication to lower if not remove her production of testosterone completely which actually gives her a disadvantage against all of her other opponents biologically. (McLearen, 2015).

Female athletes in the sport, such as former bantamweight champion Meisha Tate has suggested that while she supports transgender individuals she is concerned with the safety of her and other female athletes who should have to be protected from MtF athletes. It’s about physical safety. (McLearen, 2015). This belief that individuals can and are often seen as having more than once outside personality and identity goes hand in hand with the theory of dramaturgy that will be used when discussing this topic. Cis-gender individuals will often think of transgender identifying individuals as having at least two different outward personalities, especially when concerning sports or other types of activities which may blur the lines between gender segregated spaces. One will be that of, “the social gender, the sexual gender and the sports (or other gender-segregated space) gender.” (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). For Fox to be seen as just another woman athlete, she can’t win enough to be a success, but she also can’t lose so much so as to appear to be terrible at her sport. She has to be just as inadequate as the rest of female athletes are supposed to be when compared to their male counterparts. (McLearen, 2015).

In an early portion of this thesis I briefly spoke about social isolation as it is something that exists within the day to day lives of many transgender individuals. “Over one third of
LGBTQ students report being harassed at school.” (Pg. 54. Time Magazine. “Infinite Identities.” March 2017). Individuals who are feeling socially isolated may not have an outlet or means to communicate with those that are like them. Some parts of the country are historically more open to transgender and LGBT communities than others yet this should not always be a determination as to what is and is not allowed to exist. If resources are made available and or support communities are maintained online, then it may be possible to help combat social isolation with an available support system. One resource that is utilized by many homeless trans individuals is the prepaid cell phone. Prepaid cellphones do not require identification to obtain, and because of this, transgender individuals would be able to obtain a cell phone with data and or wireless internet capabilities so as to access these resources and or support systems.

This study explores online spaces as areas that trans people can use to combat social isolation. Thanks to Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social networking, it’s easier for people to make connections and people are coming out at earlier ages. (Waldrop, 2014). Waldrop explains that perceptions in these scenarios are worse than reality, “When I’m contacted by young people… I always tell them that the fears are so much greater than the reality. And I always encourage them to be open, because they will be so much happier. If you’re doing good science, if you’re a good teacher – that’s what matters.” (Waldrop, 2014). Perhaps it’s not that perception is greater than the reality of coming out, but because trans and LGBTQ individuals have reasons to be afraid at times, our body has flight or fight responses for a reason, and “passing” in today’s society for trans individuals may very well be considered a form of flight response. It may be considered easier and less stressful to, “pass” than to risk being assaulted and harassed for trying to be yourself in public.
Being Trans in an Online World:

While there is little that can be done to help with the stress of living in a sex-segregated world, aside from slowly making the transition in all facilities to equal gender spaces, one thing that may help in the alleviation of stress is that of online communities. We are, without a doubt a people of the internet. We carry it in our pocket, we wear it on our wrists and it is everywhere in our homes. We are always connected, always seeking to be updated on the outside world, we rarely are expected to go more than a few short minutes without accessing it, “At each point in our lives we seek to project ourselves into the world…yet the computer offers us new opportunities as a medium that embodies our ideas and expresses our diversity.” (Turkel, 2006). The internet is being used as a resource among various industries to connect employees, countless jobs are now able to be performed at home, and citizens are able to relax and stream endless amounts of content from their televisions or mobile phones without a second thought. People around the world sit in front of their own television and play video games or watch live events with others through various internet enabled party applications. The internet has broken down language barriers, physical boundaries and has enabled us as a species to sprint past where we would have been without it.

Yet while the internet can be used for work and play, I believe that there are ways in which it can be used to build community between individuals who may otherwise have a difficult time finding others to communicate with in person. “People who join and become involved in online groups often assume a common identity with one another which implies similarity and affinity. In the exchange of online messages, a shared identity often is reinforced. (Turner, Grube and Meyers 2001: 233; see also Walther, Slovacek, and Tidwell 2001: 112)” (Chayko, 2002). People have been doing this for years, connecting with their favorite movie stars, music artists,
columnists, radio hosts, etc. (Chayko, 2002). The only new part about it is that instead of simply 
reading the words or hearing a person and thinking that they are probably like you in some way, 
we are now able to sit at the computer, or pick up our phones and message people anywhere in 
the world who are like us, people we would most likely have never met online.

These types of experiences, this “meeting of the minds,” the interconnectedness of us as a 
society allows the possibility for so many things. For one, we are now able to let our voices be 
heard in very public forums. We no longer have to just sit by and read what others are saying 
about a topic, we can add our voice to it also. In this way, the online world can be used as a 
knowledgebase or ever growing resource for the transgender individual looking to transition 
safely. People who may not have any transgender friends can simply go to a search engine, type 
in, “transgender gamers” or, “transgender individuals in my area” and almost assuredly find a 
way to connect with people fairly close to themselves or worst case scenario message someone 
that they met online and start the beginning of a online friendship. By adding their voice to the 
transgender community that exists online, they are able to establish a support group. They learn 
there is a large number of people who have experienced the same harassment and hardships that 
they have experienced that they have a difficult time belonging in the local community.

Online communities can offer support for the person that needs to come home and rant 
about what they’ve been through in a day. They can be used as a resource of past experiences, a 
place where someone can say, “Has anyone else ever dealt with this?” and then receive an 
answer that is not only helpful but perhaps positive and one that is easily relatable. The internet 
can also offer a place to test out this new identity for the first time. Many individuals use the 
internet to transition in ways such as creating fake Facebook and social media profiles to learn 
how to be the gender that they identify as. (Cavalcante, 2016). While social media does indeed
allow people to be themselves, they do it at a risk of being seen as deceptive.

**Avatars:**

Historically it is not transgender players who have been using avatars of a gender different than their biological one in online games, but heterosexual cis-gendered individuals. Many female gamers report doing this to avoid harassment from male gamers. Many male gamers report doing this to avoid, “having to look at a guy’s ass all day.” Charlize Veritas, huffingtonpost.com, February 2016).

The creation of avatars in massively multiplayer online role player gaming allows individuals to create an avatar that mirrors the gender that they identify as. Because of this some individuals have stated that it allows them to have conversations with individuals of the same gender that they would not get to have in the outside world. (theguardian.com. Laura Kate Dale. 2014). And also that it may open them up to experiencing various forms of sexism that they may not encounter during the transitioning process in the outside world. With online worlds having a history of being a fairly gender fluid environment, I believe that avatars in this new media allow trans people to try on a range of selves, test the water with little personal costs, and play with gender identity without any repercussions or safety risks.

In this communication with other individuals of the same sex, and being perceived as being the sex that they identify as, a confidence is fostered and transgender individuals are also learning how to interact and what the world will look like socially, when they do eventually finish their transition period. A lot of people will see these images, and there is a possibility that they are taken from somewhere else, and they feel deceived. While it can be said that this is not important, the feelings of deception by people who are going to this webpage, it still should be
said that it could in a way be seen as a reinforcement of stereotypes in which Transgender individuals are seen as deceivers. Another possible avenue, and one that has been explored is that of online gaming.

I hypothesize that transitioning online, at least in the beginning stages, is not only easier but safer in many aspects. I hope to find that by removing the stress that comes with trying to find resources and a community, removing the social isolation that occurs when transgender individuals feel that they have nobody to talk to, that we can also help to lower some of the statistics that show the amount of self-harm, suicide, and drug and alcohol abuse that exists in the isolated lives of transgender individuals. I believe that utilizing the internet to remove the difficulty of developing a new front stage persona from what may be a safely guarded back stage persona, will be a benefit in the transitioning stage by not only and lowering the possibility of physical harm, but helping to develop social skills as well. I hope to reach out to various online communities, to offer some of the resources here within this paper so that perhaps readers can add this to the resource database that they currently have, and I would also like to encourage others to broaden their way of thinking. I believe that if we shape the internet to our needs, that we can create this safe space for others to communicate and grow effectively and safely.

Chapter 3: Methodology

My research of new media and its impact on the transition stage in a transgender individual’s life was conducted between April 2016 to March 2017, after receiving the approval of Morehead State’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Due to my research being centered around internet usage within the transgender community, I was not able to easily find a community of
individuals within my immediate location to interview in person nor was I able to gather a sample for interviewing through online resources. I encountered a reluctance of hesitation from respondents when I reached out to them for interviews. Another thing that I found, is that it is difficult to get people to respond through internet communications solely.

One of the methods that I attempted to use was posting on the online forum, Reddit; which I will briefly describe. Reddit is an open forum style website that allows users to view and comment on posts. Because of the open forum nature of Reddit, it is a common occurrence for sarcastic and rude comments to derail the topic of the original post. For this study, I started a thread in a sub-Reddit called /r/transgamers by posting a question. This was my initial post:

“Hi all!
My name is Brandon, here on Reddit I go by BrandalfTheGrey and I found this community forum about a week or two ago while doing some research. I am a Sociology Graduate Student and am looking to begin research on my thesis. Last semester I was in a gender inequality course and throughout the course transgender inequality was a very common theme. Though even while I am not transgender I would love to be able to help the community in any way, so on to the reason for the post.
I am a gamer and have been for about 27 years. In that time, I rarely communicated with the online community (well there really wasn’t much of one to communicate with until about oh 8 years ago or so) but since then the online community that I have witnessed is that of World of Warcraft and other MMO’s. While playing WoW I, like many others have witnessed very offensive and very sexist comments and posts made within chat be it trade, guild, raid, or etc. Sexism and gender inequality exists very heavily in World of Warcraft and it makes me extremely disappointed in the community to see how they treat individuals who they view as different from themselves, regardless of the difference. To me, video games have always been a place for me to escape, and I wish that everyone could have that, that we as gamers, geeks, etc. could all feel welcome among peers and not attacked.
As a graduate student I want to write my thesis on transgender inequality in the online gaming community. I want to tackle this subject because it’s important to me, because I wish that the online community was a place where everyone could feel comfortable and not have to worry about being harassed. With this post I am hoping that maybe one or two individuals, more would always be welcome, would comment below or private message if you prefer not to make everything public, to share some of the instances or experiences you’ve had that brought you here to this forum, or experiences you’ve had in general with online gaming.
I am sorry if my posting here is a problem, if it is then please disregard this as I was not trying to be malicious or harmful but just was looking to have a few conversations with individuals who may be able to help the community broaden its views by sharing their experiences. Let’s remember that this isn’t going unnoticed, if it was then none of us would be here, posting, reading and wanting to make things different.
Thanks for everything,
BrandalfTheGrey.”
Within moments I had a variety of responses, some were a little defensive, which is understood as I am an outsider and was looking for some first-hand accounts, while others were incredibly helpful and told me where I should go to find more information on my topic. My post was also taken down in under 30 minutes and I had to have a discussion with two different moderators because by asking people to comment with personal stories, I was breaking a couple of rules. When I explained that I was performing this work for a Master’s Thesis, gave the moderator the name of the institution and the approval number given to me by the IRB, then my post could be posted once again would be permitted.

I found that even with individuals who had agreed to speak with me and who I had created a rapport with, communication ceased abruptly before answering any type of questionnaire. I believe this is due to the current state of events and the preconceived attitude toward transgender individuals by the media and by large portions of the population within certain areas. Being a heterosexual, Caucasian, cis-male I found that gaining the trust of a vulnerable population is challenging. Because of this, the bulk of my research is content analysis of online blogs, online journal entries, textbooks on avatar usage and the creation of online relationships, open forums, websites, online support groups and online resources.

Used in the content analysis were 21 online resources varying between blogs, websites, and forums written by either transgender individuals or by websites offering online support and resources for transgender individuals. I also analyzed 2 magazines, one being March 2017’s Time Magazine and the other magazine was January of 2017’s National Geographic Magazine’s Gender Revolution issue; Nation Geographic’s Gender Revolution: A Journey with Katie Couric was also utilized. The content analysis articles were thematically analyzed and placed into five
categories: avatars, personal coming out, open forums, online resources, and support groups. Names of individuals in open forums were changed for anonymity though the names of individuals who had written online articles were used as they are published works.

I located the websites by using Google, by searching for various phrases like, “what are the best online transgender communities?” or, “looking for an online transgender support group.” and etc. The goal of my searches was to find, in the easiest and most natural fashion, comprehensive online resources for transgender individuals. I tried to imagine myself as a member of the population seeking resources. It is also important to note that many of the blogs, essays and websites I found were written by transgender individuals or if it was in an open forum setting came directly from individuals who have experienced some sort of harassment or who had experience in transitioning from one gender to another. What I was hoping to find is that there are already several resources online which can be utilized, though perhaps these communities are unknown by the offline public. My results confirmed that this was indeed the case.

The textbook, “Avatars at Work and Play: Collaboration and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments (Computer Supported Cooperative Work)” was not written by transgender individuals, but by several professionals who specialize in online communication. Within it are sections dedicated to how online avatar usage and online relationships form. I used this textbook though to learn about online interactions and see how in modern and newly emerging online media avatars and online relationship building happens between users. Moving forward I will present the results of research.
Chapter 4:

Results

Opening this results chapter up, is a section about websites and online areas that are utilized by transgender individuals as resources.

**Online Resources**

“I would not be talking to you right now if I had not spent like 50 percent of the last four years on the internet. It’s what’s allowing the younger generation to survive.” Hari Nef, an actress on Amazon’s show “Transparent” speaks a bit about using the internet to come out. (good.is. Caroline Pham. September 2015). For many it is a resource, a knowledge base full of information from medical professionals and first-hand accounts of transitioning. To others it can be a support group. “I get my support from online communities. Livejournal groups, Tumblr pages… [those] have been really helpful for me. There really isn’t anything in my community.” This quote comes from a Marc, a transman who lives in central Pennsylvania and doesn’t have access to an in person support group. To people like Marc, the internet is a solace, a sanctuary and a knowledgebase. (pennlive.com. Kari Larsen. November 2015).

Statements like these, in which people can access a support system and find information that is of use to them from within the safety of their own home, shows just how crucial these internet communities are to the survival of transmen and transwomen. A survey performed by PennLive which asked transgender and non-binary readers to share information about their experiences, shows that over 81% of respondents admit that they are out on the internet. Of these respondents, some say that it is because there are not visible trans communities where they are living. (pennlive.com. Kari Larsen. November 2015). The internet is worldwide and 24/7 whereas
local support groups are constricted to region and local time zones. The internet allows the interconnectivity of a substantial amount of the world population seamlessly and from anywhere. Most people use the internet for quick Google searches, or to post a picture of the meal they had for breakfast on Instagram. Others will use the interconnectivity to speak with friends or family members in other countries; and for some transgender individuals, they will discover who they are.

In this section I will discuss and describe online resources that trans people access.

One online resource the transgender community uses is social media. There are quite a few social media websites on the web these days, each offering something that makes them stand out from the rest. Most people stick with the more widely known social media websites: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, and even YouTube. “Social media websites make it possible to connect with others in meaningful ways regardless of geographic location, giving today’s trans-questioning and transitioning folks a distinct advantage over those who came before.” (Riverdale, 2009, transguys.com). This quote comes from an article titled, “Finding Community Online” on a website called, transguys.com in which the author provides a variety of online resources that are available but perhaps not widely known. The article starts with social media outlet, Twitter and then from there lists a few LGBTQ users that can be followed or communities that are active and helpful. One that I was surprised to see on the list was LiveJournal.

LiveJournal.com gained popularity in the early 2000’s with middle school and high schooler students. Its name explains exactly what it is, it is a journal that one would write in whenever they felt the need, but it could be accessed online by anyone. Many people would start it just as one would a diary or journal entry, “Dear Diary” or, “Dear Journal.” Joshua Riverdale, the author of the, “Finding Community Online” article says that Live Journal hosts a variety of LGBTQ communities and he lists a couple that are more active in Canada.
Beyond Livejournal, Riverdale lists a few other forms of social media. Many are perhaps less recognized and for these he provides a brief explanation as to why they are helpful, or what it is that they offer the user. Riverdale continues by listing dating websites for FtM transitioning and for transmen, and discusses forums. (Riverdale, 2009, transguys.com). Continuing from here, the author begins to discuss a larger number of social media websites, ranging far past just Facebook and YouTube.

“But, the age of the Internet has provided people around the world with the ability to connect with other like-minded individuals.” This quote comes from a study performed by André Cavalcante, in which one individual used the internet to come out online. It was referenced in an earlier chapter and is titled, “I did it all online.” The article is about a MtF trans individual named Jen and how without the internet and without the support groups that are found online, she might not have been able to come out or transition. (natcom.org. André Cavalcante. June 2016).

Support groups for transgender individuals are growing in number by the day. While pages like EmptyClosets.com and Susan’s Place offer safe spaces, websites like Facebook allow quicker access, messenger applications and services, and the ability to quickly reach more individuals. In the coming years I imagine that the internet will become an even more crucial tool for those looking to transition or for those who need a support group to help get through these difficult and often confusing times.

In 2017, National Geographic released a documentary titled, “Gender Revolution: A Journey with Katie Couric” in which news anchor Katie Couric interviewed teenagers and professionals from across the country and spoke to them about the changes that are occurring with gender identity. One common topic, at least with students was the impact that social media had on
their experience. One student stated that, “For me Facebook is a source of support.” And they also spoke about how that was where they came out for the first time. Many of the students spoke excitedly about how social media allowed them to be themselves, and that they could receive quite a bit of support from their friends and family through it. “I think that the internet has a lot to do with this. Websites like Tumblr bring a lot of kids together from across the counter where they can all voice their questions about themselves.” (Gender Revolution: A Journey with Katie Couric. National Geographic. 2017).

Open Forums

Open forums are areas in which users can post a specific comment or statement and have others comment or discuss the topic with them through a series of replies. To those that are unfamiliar with online open forums, think about a long Facebook comment thread. On Facebook, someone may post a status and from there another user replies, a different user replies to that person’s comment and so on. Online open forums work in much the same way, while conforming to a specific website’s rules.

“Everyone wonders who they are, but not everyone is brave enough to seek the answer.” This is the opening line on the front page of Emptyclosets.com. “Empty Closets is a place where you can figure out who you are, surrounded by other people like you.” Empty Closets offers its users a way to talk with other individuals like them regardless of whether they are: gay, lesbian, transgender, gender nonconforming or etc. While the entire website is not an open forum, it does have one that can be used by members. Forums and chat rooms are available for immediate communication; resources are supplied under easy to find tabs at the top of the page and news that may be important to the community is updated regularly. There are rules and regulations that
are put into place to make sure that the community maintains its identification as a safe space. New individuals must be approved for membership and once they are approved, they will be able to comment on posts, utilize chat rooms, create their own blogs and galleries and truly get into the communities. Nonmembers are not entirely without access to the website though. Nonmembers can use it to view resources; they can also view forums but are not able to comment on them. (2015. Welcome. Emptyclosets.com). The strict guidelines that are put in place by websites like emptyclosets.com are usually monitored by moderators. Moderators are there to make sure that the rules of the community are followed so that the integrity of a website is not lost. While this may seem a bit strict to some, you must remember that yes while this is the internet and everything on the internet for the most part can be read by everyone, if the internet is to be used as a resource or as a support group for a community that is widely discriminated against, it should have rules and safeguards in place to protect that community.

Moderators and admins allow websites to be safe spaces by monitoring activity to the website and making sure that social rules are being followed. One open forum maintained by moderators is Reddit.com.

Reddit is an open forum and not always the most welcoming of places. It is not immediately user friendly, as the user interface looks a little daunting. Imagine Craigslist.com but with various news stories and pictures. Reddit offers the same blank white canvas as craigslist.com but each post that you see on reddit.com was created by a user and they typically will have tens to hundreds, perhaps even thousands (for the more popular users or topics) of comments on their initial posts. Reddit is how I first became aware of transgender individuals utilizing the internet to come together. Within reddit.com there are subsections called, “sub-Reddits.” A sub-Reddit is an offshoot of the main page that allows members to build a community or to find a more specific area within the website. Some popular sub-Reddits may be about horror stories, politics, video games, cat pictures, and the list goes on. The sub-Reddit that I first stumbled into though is called, “/r/transgamers.”

/r/Transgamers is a sub-Reddit that allows transgender identifying video gamers a place to avoid the rest of online gamers. These users can post what game they are currently playing and ask if anyone wants to join them. If someone would like to join, they comment on the initial thread and from there are sent a private message sharing user names that are used on a video game console and then the two members will be able to play games together. This is particularly helpful when trying to avoid the harassment and awkwardness that can come from playing video games online with individuals who are not familiar with trans individuals or a place to make friends and play video games with other trans individuals. /R/transgamer acts as a support system in a couple of
ways, one of those being that it offers trans-gamers the ability to escape the real world while also allowing them to socialize with other trans identifying individuals online.

Though not all of the threads within this particular sub-Reddit are about trying to meet each other. Some threads will be a newly identifying individual trying to find a safe space in specific online virtual world, perhaps World of Warcraft or Second Life to play. They are often looking for a trans-friendly community that they know will be welcoming and give them the ability to make friends easier.

While gaming does give some a place to escape and a place to encounter other like-minded individuals, many people in the world do not play video games. Because of this, you cannot have the only support group type communities based around video gaming. /R/transgamer is without a doubt an important place on the internet. In relation to Goffman and Dramaturgy this would be an
example of a, “backstage.” area because it can be accessed within the safety of their own home and whenever they choose to use it. It’s a place where people can go, leave their worries about voice communication behind and find a variety of people that have dealt with many of the same things. Other sub-Redds such as: /r/asktransgender and /r/transeducate are good places to go to ask a community of transgender folk questions and have a conversation that may not be possible to some in their offline lives. The immediate individual interaction and the amount of archived data, such as first-person experiences that is present within the open forum when shared may help someone else who is at the same starting point in their transition stage discover where to go next.

The below screen shot taken from /r/transgamers gives a glimpse into the user interface of Reddit. While this particular sub-Reddit has been customized by the moderators to have a pinkish hue header, which is not the typical header of a Reddit page. This screen shot also offers a glimpse into the typical Reddit layout. Original posts, or threads will be in bold letters, which when clicked on will give the user the ability to leave a comment or rate a thread. When rated, the thread then moves up closer to the top of the page. Open forum websites like Reddit and Empty Closet’s own forum may not seem like the most safe and logical place for transgender individuals to look for advice, there are a lot of benefits that can come from the open forum design. I for one, am an example of an individual who learned quite a bit within a short amount of time due to the number of people who post threads on /r/transgamers and who commented on my own post. While open forums and the resources listed before are helpful, others seek the availability of an online support group.
Personal Coming Out

While video games, and online gaming can be used as an escape for all manners of people, not just those that identify as transgender or gender non-conforming, I observed that gaming is utilized as a resource in the transitioning period of a transgender individual’s life. It is a way for the front stage persona to be developed within the safety of their own home. The internet in this way presents an interesting new take on transitioning. Of the coming stories that were analyzed in this thesis, most discuss how they began to explore their new gender identity first, through the online world.

Of the twenty-two blogs, essays and websites that were used in the content analysis for this paper, ten of them dealt almost solely with personal accounts of, “coming out.” To be listed as a, “coming out” topic, the piece had to have at least one sentence or section within it from the first person perspective to describe a time when the author used the internet as a way to come
out. This was done in a number of ways, though typically it involved avatar usage, video games, or various online communities.

Six of the ten articles that were classified as, “personal coming out” involved video games in which the individual would interact in some way with players who are not in the same room with them, and who may be anonymous. “Gaming and the virtual world were really my only outlets to be myself before I came out as a transgender woman.” Jessica Mar, a developer, gamer and trans woman, discusses that she would often play video games that had stronger female characters, or ones that gave her the option of choosing to play as a female rather than a male character. To Jessica, gaming was and is her safe space. It is to her, like many others, a place where she can escape the pressures of real life and delve into an interactive story and, “…cast spells, shoot cool weapons, and be an overall badass all while being in the safety of my own home…” (polygon.com)

**Avatars**

Online representation comes in many forms. It can be the Facebook selfie that people see when they access your personal page, or whenever you use a Facebook account linked news page to comment on election news. It can be an animated picture that someone uses when posting on an internet message board or forum, it can even be a user controlled virtual avatar. User controlled avatars have been around since the late 90’s and while they can be utilized outside of videogames, it is definitely in video game worlds in which they are growing in popularity.

“You see, it’s the chance for us to play as our preferred gender.” Online videogames are often utilized by many as a form of escape and one of the major reasons is because they can develop a version of themselves that they are happy and comfortable with. “We can finally be
that badass chick who saves the day from hordes of aliens or that righteous dude who fights the undead masses to avenge his mortal soul, but whatever your quest is...you finally get to do it as you.” (Charlize Veritas, huffingtonpost.com, February 2016). While avatars can be used to slay dragons, not everything about them is pretend. “Most people are being themselves rather than experimenting with new identities or personalities.” (Schroeder, Axelsson; Pg. 195-197). While the video games that people play are indeed fictional, the people that sit behind the keyboards and controllers are not.

Video games don’t have to be as fictional as a fantasy-based adventure setting. Games like, “Second Life” present just that, the opportunity for their users to have a second life different from the one that they experience outside of their home. “When I logged on I didn’t have to worry about ‘passing’ as female. I could be myself. It encouraged me to realize that it’s something I wanted to live in my real life and not just in my second life.” Veronica, a second life player and transgender woman gives her experiences with Second Life. Video games like Second Life allow players to craft their avatars, it allows the users to create or alter their front stage persona, live through their avatar, and move those experiences from the virtual world into the real one.

“As our digital incarnations, avatars are more than an arrangement of pixels on our laptops. We can dress them in our clothes. We can feed them our favorite foods and put our words into their mouths. But instead of acting as perfect mirrors of our IRL (in real-life) selves, avatars can leap out of the glass to be and do things we can’t in our everyday lives. For some people, it’s thrusting a double-edged ax into the belly of a dragon. For others, it’s possessing an opposite-gendered body.” (motherboard.vice.com. Cecilia D’anastasio. April 2015).
Many studies have been performed on avatars but few individuals have done as much for the field of study as digital worlds psychiatrist, Nick Yee. “Over five years, Yee surveyed 35,000 MMORPG players on their in-world experiences. It turns out that over a quarter of MMORPG players view their avatars as idealized versions of themselves. Likewise, over half of these gamers believe their avatars are extensions of themselves.” Yee also developed the term, “Proteus Effect.” The Proteus Effect is the belief that while users alter and even pour themselves into their digital avatars, the avatars also impact and effect their daily lives in the real world. (motherboard.vice.com. Cecila D’anastasio. April 2015). I believe a prime example of this is Veronica and her Second Life character and can be related back to Goffman. Veronica’s experience with Second Life helped her to develop her true self in the offline world though without Veronica the avatar would have never existed.

Another study by Professor Jesse Fox of Ohio State University, found that avatars can affect how people behave in the real world. She discovered that people with customized avatars, ones that look like their creators, receive more positive and more realistic responses. People that can craft an avatar that resembles themselves, and use that to interact with an environment, seem to do so in a more realistic way. “This tells us that avatars can change our behaviors; they allow us to practice and test out certain behaviors in a virtual world.” (nytimes.com. Laura Parker. August 2016).

Online experiences and interactions may transfer hermetically from the avatar to the real world. Those that are starting to transition from one gender to another and are beginning to identify as transgender can use avatars to safely experience social situations in the shoes of the another gender. “Experimenting with her gender in a virtual safe space, she said, helped her realize that transitioning was something she wanted.” This quote is about a person named Dale
who began to transition to female after experimenting online through World of Warcraft. Dale states that she began to speak more confidently, that she began to feel more comfortable in her virtual skin and wanted to bring that to the real world. “If I experimented presenting as female and it didn’t feel right I could stop using that account and nothing would come of it.” This is one other potential positive benefit of utilizing online environments to assist in transitioning. Accounts can be deleted if the user is no longer comfortable with the experience that they are having. (motherboard.vice.com. Cecila D’anastasio. April 2015). “It’s only temporary, but it helps us and I like to believe that it gets us through our offline struggles a little easier.” Said one player who will be referred to as Ashley. “Maybe it doesn’t make the misgendering any less harsh or having to decide if it’s safe to use the restroom any less scary, but at the end of the day it allows us some peace from these thoughts and a place to safely express ourselves.” (Charlize Veritas, huffingtonpost.com, February 2016).

Avatar creation can vary drastically depending on what platform the creation tool is located. For many it can be an avatar that is close to how they see themselves; probably humanoid, around the same weight and physical build, facial hair or hair style that matches closely. Some choose to create characters that are different but that they think will be fun to play: orcs, trolls, elves, robots, the opposite gender. For many though online avatars can only go so far towards allowing an individual to be a representation of themselves online. For a trans identifying individual, many would like for their characters to be representations of themselves and not what is perceived to be the norm for men or women. They may not want to play as a woman or a man online, but play as a representation of themselves, perhaps even a gender non-conforming one.

In an article titled, “I did it all online” an individual by the name of Jen, discussed how
she utilized the internet to almost fully transition with only the internet as a resource. Jen, who began her transition when she was 16, found few support groups or individuals helpful. Her story is not unlike other individuals who are transitioning. Her father refused to believe that his son was really a girl, and did everything he could to change what was happening. After her parents divorced and Jen went on to live with her mother, Jen found that things were slightly easier. Jen began researching things related to changing sex via the internet. “I started researching it on the internet ... I went through a variety of terms because I mean I saw people change sex when I was younger but I really didn’t know the terminology or any- thing. So I went to Wikipedia to learn about it. At first I was like well maybe I am a cross dresser, and I played around with that idea and researched it, but then I didn’t really feel I was a cross dresser. So then I tried transgender on Wikipedia.” Jen explained that while she found a lot of information on things like Wikipedia, she also had more questions and so she would start to gravitate toward blogs and forums.

Jen didn’t stop at researching though, soon she found herself creating social media pages on Facebook and Myspace that she felt were representations of her true self. “I made fake MySpace and Facebook pages to project myself the way I felt ... the inner me I guess. I used the female name my parents would have given me if I was born a girl. I would put up pictures of myself all dressed. At the very beginning, I started with fake pictures of people I thought I should look like.”

The internet facilitated Jen’s early transition in ways previous generations lacked, Millennials like Jen have had cellular phones with internet capabilities since their early teens if not younger. Today’s youth do not have to live in a world without the internet, and because of this I believe that the internet could be better utilized and have support groups created so as to be more readily available and helpful for those in their transitioning stage. Jen’s story is a special
case, but I write this with hopes that there are more cases like hers out there, they just haven’t had the same opportunity to be as documented as hers.

**Gaming:**

In May of 2016 publisher Electronic Arts released an update to their game, The Sims, with an update that allows any physical attribute to be applied to any character. At first glance this may be overlooked as an irrelevant feature but to many, it is anything but. “A lot of people assume that all trans men have feminine features and trans women have masculine features, but that’s not the case.” This quote, from a gamer named Blair is speaking a bit about the character that she created. Blair, who transitioned when she was 24 created her Sims character with broad shoulders, a deep voice and made her infertile. The Sims is a life simulator of sorts and so having a character that is infertile is to many a step towards true online representation. Giving players the ability to create transgender characters, to have representations of themselves is hopefully something that becomes more common. Deep voices, broad shoulders and Adam’s Apples are some things that many people would take for granted in character creation but at the same time, removing gender conforming physical features and allowing a full freedom to express gender in a virtual world seems like it should be an easy shift to the norm. (nytimes.com. Laura Parker. August 2016) For over sixteen years, a company by the name of Electronic Arts has been releasing a living simulator of sorts called, “The Sims.” The Sims allows its users to create a Sim, or a computer version of themselves, build a house, manage a family and a job, and live any sort of life that they can. Players are free to do any number of things, including killing other Sims or failing at all of the things that may make one successful in the real world. While the Sims has historically allowed players the freedom to create a man or a woman, something that has not been possible is the ability to create a transgender character; this changed in May of 2016.
Female characters can have Adam’s Apples and deeper voices, characters can be infertile and have broad shoulders, players can now be gender nonconforming or truly create a character that closely resembles where they are in their transition stage. An individual with a history of playing the Sims, Dr. Schloss, 41, states that, “The more I played the game and experienced the possibility for life in an alternative universe, the more I wanted to make that a reality for myself.” The Sims was one of the first games to ever exist which allowed players to have same sex relationships. Even as early as it’s first iteration in 2000, The Sims allowed its players to marry the same sex, and to adopt children within a same sex relationship. While other games would follow this later on, The Sims was a pioneer in accommodating sexual diversity. Now by allowing players to create transgender characters it further increases the freedom and ability for its players to be truly represented within the gaming worlds that they inhabit. (nytimes.com)

“In early 2006, almost five years before I came out to my family and friends as transgender, I started playing the online fantasy game, World of Warcraft...” says Laura, an individual who first began exploring her identity online rather than, offline. When speaking about why, Laura states, “They provide a place in which identity can be explored safely. And for me, someone who the world viewed as male, World of Warcraft provided me a space to discover that I felt more comfortable when treated as female.” While Laura does state numerous times within her personal account that she enjoyed the game for it’s various gameplay elements, she also states that it gave her the ability to see from a different gender perspective, one that she may not have been able to comfortably explore in the real world. “I found a place where I had friends that treated me as female, for better or for worse. I had found a world where I got complimented on my appearance in game, where people were not scared away by my gender presentation.” (the guardian.com)
While games like World of Warcraft can help players learn what it is like to interact with others as a particular gender, which of course would translate into an easier transition period later in life, in the real world, one gamer remarked on other ways in which they had utilized online gaming. “I have GTA (Grand Theft Auto) Online to thank for my style. Playing around with the wardrobe choices in the game gave me the freedom to experiment with different looks and find out what felt most like me with the added benefit of never spending any real money!” Charlize, a trans individual that used online gaming to help her with parts of her transition discusses other aspects that were assisted by online gaming. Clothing and fashion choices, which is something that could easily go overlooked, is an important part of the transitioning stage in a person’s life. Whereas there may be a huge amount of trepidation in going to a clothing store and trying on clothes for a gender that you may not physically be representative of, online, especially as described here with the experience received from GTA Online can be helpful. Allowing a person who is new to their gender identity the luxury of finding clothes they like online, without having to worry about stress, anxiety, and the nervousness that may come along with it.

(huffingtonpost.com)

Stories like Laura’s, in which individuals are uncomfortable or nervous with how the world is going to react to them during the beginning stages of their transition, speak volumes. There are many trans individuals out there seeking a way to comfortably discover who they are, without worrying about being publicly shamed or ridiculed. Many areas of the world do not have local trans communities and support groups. In small rural communities transgenderism is uncommon and new. “Playing games to be treated as our true gender is a good way to relieve the anxiety of not being accepted that often comes with being trans, but it can feel like a trap too…” One gamer discusses how she often struggled with using gaming as an escape and in doing so
would lose what the games were designed for in the first place. “…Sometimes I think I relied too much on these games to get the acceptance I wanted. I’m glad I was able to stop it and enjoy games in a more pure way.” (transgamersociologist.com). An often-reoccurring topic within most articles dealing with transgender gamers, the amount of escapism that one pursues eventually becomes too much and they are forced to back away or risk losing a connection to the outside world. It may be an experience in which someone ends up learning their personal clothing style or gaining the confidence to come out publicly, but it gives the user a little bit of time to experience life the way they would like to live it.

Online communities ranging from various extremes develop in online worlds. You can have a community that is closed, almost professional in their goals and aspirations. These types require the members to clock in and follow a strict schedule else, or they risk being let go from the community. Others, such as Proudmoore, a realm on the massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) World of Warcraft, become known as an unofficial safe space. “Proudmoore is known as the unofficial LGBT server, which boasts itself as having the 12th largest population of over 200 North American based servers.” (transgenderuniverse.com. Savannah Luke. April 2016).

Proudmoore is an intriguing thing because it shows in its own way that safe places and LGBT communities can be created and founded within a world even if the game did not intend on giving the option of creating one. While researching this topic, I found myself constantly searching Google with, “Looking for a transgender guild on World of Warcraft.” And while many archived pages exist, each with outdated information or no longer active guilds, many pages would suggest that a player try finding something on Proudmoore. I accept that Proudmoore is an oddity, but it should be said that gamers will find a way to create a community
and support group if one does not already exist, and that the internet in its vastness gives the opportunity for this to happen.

When referencing online experience versus offline experiences a Reddit user said, “I would be careful with IRL (in real life) groups as well – the first group I attended was horrible. The room was barely lit making it feel like everyone was ashamed – which most were. The regulars mostly met as a support group for all the absolutely terrible things that were going on in their lives (a lot of which were their own fault), told newbies how everything was going to turn to shit after they transitioned but that it would be “the best thing ever.” (reddit.com)

While online communities may not always be the answer, it does offer the following advantages: they’re readily available, they allow the user the opportunity to communicate with people who may not be local, as well as many other things and several trans individuals discussed it as important to their transitions. While games such as World of Warcraft may require a computer to access, there are phone applications that can be used to chat with friends who are online. This feature gives Warcraft an offline feel, allowing the user to chat with friends, who may still remain anonymous, hidden behind an avatar alias. Where an offline group may only meet once every so often, an online resource can be accessed anytime it is needed.

“During a period of my life that I had a huge number of questions about who I was, it taught me things about myself in an environment where, for a long time, I felt safe.” Laura again speaking about her World of Warcraft experiences discusses how being able to interact with others as the gender she identified as, enriched her transition experience. Not only did she learn how to interact with others as a woman, but she also experienced what it can be like when people find out that your gender may be different from what you are representing it to be.
While the online world may assist with transitioning for some, a number of gamers also feel that it isn’t so much that it makes transitioning easier but that it just makes it easier to deal with the day to day life that comes with it. “It’s only temporary, but it helps us and I like to believe that it gets us through our offline struggles a little easier.” Ashley, a gamer who talks briefly in an article about her experience playing online, doesn’t feel like gaming helps her offline other than making it easier to get through the day. “Maybe it doesn’t make the misgendering any less harsh or having to decide if it’s safe to use the restroom any less scary, but at the end of the day it allows us some peace from these thoughts and a place to safely express ourselves.” Perhaps that’s an overlooked perk to utilizing video games and online communities in the transitioning experience. Maybe it’s not that offline the individuals feel any different, maybe it’s just that it gives them an escape. It allows them to take their minds off the things that are happening in the real world and just for a second party up with a bunch of friends or cover up in a blanket, with a beloved pet and delve into the mysteries of a virtual world, reading lore and becoming the virtual hero that has been foretold. (huffingtonpost.com)

Chapter 5:

Conclusion

There already exists a limited number of websites whose focus is helping to bring a transgender community online. They offer advice, provide online safe spaces, encourage online meet ups, and shield their users from oppression. I believe that it is directly related to Dramaturgy and the works of Goffman. Online safe spaces are unique for giving user the ability to develop a front stage personality while they are learning from those that have already transitioned or from users who are the gender they are transitioning to. It allows users the
uniqueness of spending time in the back of the stage while also working on who they are in the front stage, without having to show others before the transitioning individual is comfortable.


I originally approached this study with the belief that there were likely a few websites available, but I imagined that they would be simple by design. By simple I mean things like Reddit forums in which people can see comments and comment themselves; basically, big questions and answer groups. What I found though is that some of the websites that exist, websites like, “Empty Closets” offer a great deal more support than I previously believed.

I found that through accessing through these online resources myself, that trans people already appear to be utilizing the internet as a resource. What I would like to see though, is for it to be more commonly used as a resource for transition stages, if it isn’t being used this way already. I believe this can be accomplished through an increased knowledge of the benefits that can be found within internet socialization. An increased focus on relationship building in new and emerging media, and by monitoring these channels with website administration to prevent bullying of any kind. With the amount of online socialization that already exists in the transgender community, this medium could afford its users the peace of mind to come out and discover themselves within the safety of their own home rather than having to suffer the emotional stress and anxiety that may come with physically transitioning, or searching for support structures and resources within the real world.

Many of the websites that were used in this study provided a variety of means to support transgender individuals. Websites offer resources: hotlines, info about support groups, reading material, and importantly for this project, stories in comparison to real life. Where a local support group may have tens of members, an online support group could have hundreds all of which are
available almost 24/7. In each of these, individuals can share their personal account, and with such a large number of personal accounts, there is a greater likelihood that one of these resonates closely with the troubles or worries that a newly transitioning individual may be experiencing.

I was also surprised to find that many transgender individuals are learning about their true self through online video games. The use of avatars in the transitioning period seems to be extremely beneficial in developing their true front stage persona, and in developing their true individual identity. Subjects explained that having the ability to design personal clothing and hair style, and experience social interactions through the eyes of the opposite sex was useful. This may work for these individuals in much the same way as many people claim to be, “hands on” learners. Through experiencing something first hand they gain knowledge of how to perform this action successfully. I believe that social interaction may work to the same degree. Though true that it is happening online, and in many cases, is probably completely anonymous, having the ability to interact with others as an avatar of the opposite gender is in many ways the safest way to experience socialization as their preferred gender.

This information, all of which can be found through a search with any popular search engine, the one I used was Google, is public and was useful. Contained within the material was a large amount of information. There were conversations through open forums, first hand personal coming out stories, etc. all of which was found to be a large, publicly accessed database of sorts. One thing that I discovered is that because there was a need for online resources and support groups for transgender individuals, these online resources were created and are maintained by members of the community.

It also appears to be a possibility that new and emerging forms of media, including social media are increasing the awareness of transgender issues. Facebook, while not utilized within
this study acts as a massive connection for most of the world. Between cat pictures and political posts there lies a possibility to connect through closed groups monitored by administrators. While this may in many ways erase the anonymity that is to be desired, the broad reach and increased understanding by the public may also be utilized to further the progress of transgender rights. I believe that a study could be formed exclusively on the effects that social media has on the evolving rights of the transgender community.

It is my belief that this study could lead to a greater understanding of the influence that new and emerging medias has on gender equality. Online environments are full of online trolls but also can be havens for minority group members seeking support, guidance and community. With the ever-growing connectivity of the world to each other through online means even those not within the transgender community, like myself, are able to learn about the struggles of transgender individuals and can offer help to increase awareness. “But once someone realizes they’re not alone, it’s really hard to take away that sense of empowerment.” (Jacob Tobia. Time Magazine. Pg. 52. 2017.).
Cited Sources


<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/nov/29/transgender-advice-best-resources-online>.


22. "Which online transgender community do you feel is the best for freshly-out transgender people, youth especially? Which are not so great? • r/asktransgender." Reddit. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Nov. 2016. <https://www.reddit.com/r/asktransgender/comments/37w5g0/which_online_transgender_community_do_you_feel_is/>.
Scholarly Resource


7. Goldblum, Peter, Rylan J. Testa, Samantha Pflum, Michael L. Hendricks, Judith Bradford, and Bruce Bongar. "The relationship between gender-based victimization and


