The importance of accessing online communities for queer, trans, disabled, racialized, and/or neurodivergent people or Winnicott's Transitional Phenomena in action through social media platforms

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When I was asked to write this opinion piece about identity formation for trans and gender non-conforming people, and the role of online platforms such as Instagram (IG), TikTok, and dating apps, I wanted to move the discussion past the common repetitive presence of a cisgender psychoanalyst/ mental health clinician taking up space constructing narratives surrounding trans and gender queer experiences. This request presented a fantastic opportunity to reflect on how this type of content comes up in psychoanalytic sessions not only with trans and gender queer patients, but also with other marginalized communities. Classic Freudian concepts such as the golden rule of psychoanalysis (a.k.a. the use of free association), and its counterpart, evenly hovering attention on the part of the analyst, open up paths for exploring how social media platforms are used by patients. Winnicott's transitional phenomena (1953), in general, and the concept of transitional space in particular, can help inform our understanding of how marginalized patients use these virtual spaces to support their inner worlds and their identities in a world that threatens their existence in public.

The virtual is not new. Since remote communication through handwritten letters, both reviewer and recipient of messages use the transitional space by accessing it and its illusory space to uphold a tacit agreement, where reality can be imagined and co-constructed. We can find this illusory space that provides a possibility of existing in public, having a voice, and being accounted for. Online communities supported by online platforms offer opportunities for marginalized communities to exist in the public sphere in a safer manner. On the flip side, they also give avenues for people to express their uncensored (unmediated) hatred, disgust and violence against queer, trans, disabled, racialized and/or neurodivergent people while remaining anonymous. It is important to acknowledge the rise of anti-trans legislation in at least 20 states in the United States.

IG and TikTok provide a monetized alternative to engage with ourselves and the world without apparent restrictions outside "community guidelines". These platforms allow users to engage with an audience and communicate gender expressions, without the concrete restriction

of a biological body corseted by the conflation of gender identity and gender expression with genitals and reproductive organs. In clinical situations we see how gender experiences outside the opposed categories of male/female tend to be erased by biological reductionism (Saketopoulou & Pellegrini, 2023); where the subject's genitals identified at birth (or the fetus' reproductive system identified via ultrasound) and the reality of sexual health control of female bodies operate consciously and/or unconsciously in how psychoanalysts may participate as a regulating body enforcing hegemonic masculinity, limiting categories for public existence of marginalized communities.

Given that our brain's wiring responds to socialization (Solms, 2021), identity formation is an interesting developmental process directly impacted by our relationships. This developmental process can also operate as a defense mechanism that can help us ward off intense forms of anxiety. The way we integrate information (external and internal) as part of our identity (who we think we are), specifically the forms in which we think we are experienced by our environment, is an example of Fonagy's mentalization process (Allen, Fonagy & Bateman, 2008). This exchange of information between the user and their followers/fan base/viewers provides the creation of an illusory space where participants agree on creating a common play space. In this transitional space, fantasy and reality can merge and create new possibilities.

The external feedback that confirms to this part of ourselves that we can perform in a virtual/illusory space can influence the way we experience ourselves in the world. Identities explored in a virtual space can be extremely helpful in the constructions of a solid, mature and cohesive ego. Social media platforms and online dating are current examples of online (virtual, imaginary, remote) communities that have existed long before the internet, inside computer systems and outside, in the community. These community networks started as tools to effectively communicate needs and find connections and support. Online communities still happen electronically, through networks other than the World Wide Web, and they have flourished with the appearance of the Internet and the commodification of anonymity.

Nonetheless, it can also provide a space for unmediated and anonymous violence. Psychoanalytic neutrality, the rule of abstinence, and the clinician's capacity to manage intense experiences in the countertransference, can support sophisticated management and prevention of iatrogenic enactment with LGBTQ+ and other marginalized patients.

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