

## CYBERQUEER – MAJOR TOPICS AND ISSUES IN CURRENT RESEARCH

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of the opportunities opened by the internet raises also questions of interest for research regarding the extent to which these have an impact on the formations of non-heterosexual life and on the experience of marginalised sexual identities. There have been different approaches in this regard and answers vary from optimistic and utopian appraisals concerning cyberspace in the early 90s to the more moderate and sceptic visions in the 2000s. Starting from this framework of debates, the present paper aims to explore the meaning of the term “cyberqueer”, including the theoretical context of its occurrence, to briefly highlight some critical considerations relating to cyberqueer research and to look over the main recurrent themes linked up with this concept, such as queer and cyberqueer identity, body and (dis)embodied practices and the forthcoming process of blurring the dividing boundaries between real/virtual, online/offline and public/private.

**Keywords:** cyberqueer; cyberspace; queer; cyberqueer identity.

### INTRODUCTION

It has become by now a truism that the emergence of the internet has had a deep influence on the nature of human life. The internet has opened new possibilities for communication, social interaction and communities” outlining and maintaining. Concurrently, the internet has contributed to creating new forms of social spaces, by blurring the boundaries between the public and private sphere of human life. Thomas Swiss and Andrew Herman investigated and reflected ever since 2000 upon the internet as a unique and complex cultural technology:

The technology of the World Wide Web, perhaps *the* cultural technology of our time, is invested with plenty of utopian and dystopian mythic narratives, from those that project a future of revitalised, Web based sphere and civil society to those that imagine the catastrophic implosion of the social into the simulated virtuality of the Web (Swiss & Herman, 2000: 2).

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The internet has provided space for manifestation and use also to spatially or ideologically marginalised social groups (Fluri, 2006; Ashford, 2009), such as sexual minority groups and/or those groups considered sexually deviant. Limited by the constraints of space and norms in the “real” society, such groups have found in the virtual space of the internet – whether it takes the form of bulletin boards, chat rooms, profile based sites and location-specific networking through cell-phones via new technologies such as Grindr<sup>1</sup>, etc. – a place where they are able to interact (Ashford, 2009: 299) and to form groups and communities with similar ones.

One can argue that marginalised groups in general have gained expression space through the extension of space by the internet. Yet, as Tudor (2012: 4) points out, this fact raises questions – which may be also of interest for research – like to what extent the rapid development of the new information – and communication technologies has shaped the experience of marginalized sexual identities and/or desires, or which is the significance of these technologies for formations of non-heterosexual life?

Utopian vision of the possibilities offered by the internet in the early 90s also included the idea that in cyberspace someone could impersonate whomever he/she wanted to be, in other words in virtual space one could be what in “real life” one could not or was not able to be. For example, Ashford (2009: 307) remembers the (in)famous case of the couple David Pollard and Amy Taylor, who in the virtual life of the avatar-based programme *Second Life* had successful careers (he as a nightclub owner, she as a club DJ) and social-stereotypical good-looking appearances (slim, beautiful), whereas in “real” life they were unemployed, obese and ordinary people.

With regard to marginalized sexual groups, many have seen in the 1990s the potential of the internet as a very queer space, where any LGBT/LGBTQ<sup>2</sup> could “practice” the queer life and explore their identity (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). Also many works, in the nineties, of scholars like Haraway (1991), Rheingold (1993) or Swiss and Hermann (1996) have pointed out the utopian ways in which the internet was offering new spaces for political and ideological changes through debates about freedom, power, identity, autonomy (Dasgupta, 2012: 121), and inaugurating a new era of democracy in which people were handled equally beyond their race, colour, socio-economic status, gender or sexual orientation belongingness.

However, these utopian views have not been materialized, mainly because “disembodied performance has faded in the face of the inescapably raced, sexed,

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<sup>1</sup> *Grindr* is one of the biggest applications in the world for gay men, primarily used on smart phones and tablet computers. See <http://grindr.com/>

<sup>2</sup> LGBT or the variant LGBTQ is the acronym that stands for *lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender*; the last letter used sometimes, Q, stands for those who identify as *queer* and/or are *questioning* their sexual identity.

and gendered body” (Paradis, 2009: 447). Scholars in the 2000s (Tsang, 2000; Fernandez, 2002; Campbell, 2004; O’Riordan & Phillips, 2007; Laukkanen, 2007; Nayar, 2010) have begun to depart from the utopian visions characteristic of the beginning of the World Wide Web. The experiences and the studies have shown that the racial, sexual and gender affiliation in the “reality” is reproduced also in the cyberspace, and the social internalized definitions of beauty and “normality” transcend the borders between the two spaces. Thus, persons like gays, transsexuals, Asians or obese (only as some examples) are constantly reminded that they cannot meet the mainstream standards of society (Tsang, 2000). Thence the present cyberqueer studies move beyond utopian appraisals of online possibilities to the real online experiences of queer people.

This paper aims to explore the meaning of the term “cyberqueer”, to briefly highlight some critical considerations relating to cyberqueer research and to look over the main recurrent themes linked up with this concept, such as cyberqueer identity, body and (dis)embodied practices. Furthermore, some aspects of the debates regarding relevant dichotomies will be approached, such as real/virtual, online/offline and public/private.

#### A FRAMEWORK FOR THE CONCEPT “CYBERQUEER”

##### *THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT OF “CYBERQUEER” OCCURRENCE*

The emergence and establishment of the concepts “queer” and “cyber” synchronized during the early nineties (Tudor, 2012: 6). The “cyberqueer” or “cybersubject” appeared to be “the ultimate manifestation of queer theory, as it was seen to transcend the physical world in a parallel space, where it freely and flexibly could pick and choose who to be” (*ibidem*).

In his essay *Birth of the Cyberqueer* Donald Morton (1995) spoke about “the return of the queer”, explained as “an oppressed minority’s positive reunderstanding of a negative word, as the adoption of an umbrella to cover diverse marginal subjectivities” (Morton, 1995: 369). The author understands the (re)appearance of the concept in the larger historical and global context of changes occurring from the acceptance of the premises of ludic (post)modern theory in the dominant academy and cultural industry. According to this theory, the category of *desire* (mode of signification) prevail over that of *need* (mode of production) and therefore the “mutant subjectivities” – such as the cyberqueer – from the advanced techno-culture are seen as occupying a “new and freeing virtual reality of desire beyond mere need, where they can write their own histories instead of being written by history” (*ibidem*).

### TOWARD A DEFINITION OF "CYBERQUEER"

Not only the transcendence of the physical space and the access to a freeing virtual world, but also more practical advisability – such as giving LGBT subjects the possibility of interacting and locating each other online – has substantiated the queer potential of the internet. Therefore, the concept of “cyberqueer” is best understood in terms of the actions of individuals and groups who subvert the norms of heterosexuality (Wakeford, 1997: 20) and benefit from the numerous opportunities for interaction and communication opened by the internet. Tudor (2012: 6) emphasize that the rapid and extensive development of online gay forums indicates the particular relevance of the internet for these individuals and groups.

### CYBERQUEER AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

Nina Wakeford (2000: 410) stressed the mixed character of the term “cyberqueer” and asserted that it indicates an uneasy amalgam consisting of two words themselves not too rich in specificity, *i.e.* queer and cyber (space). Yet, creating this hybrid was a calculated move which laid weight on the interdependence of the two concepts and their relevance both for the daily practices of the creation and maintenance of a “LCBTQ” cyberspace, and for the research of these fields. Because in critical cultural studies of technology there has been a persistent silence on matters of sexuality, the creation of the term “cyberqueer” was itself an act of resistance in the face of such suppression (*ibidem*).

### CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING CYBERQUEER RESEARCH

In what she describes as a critical reading of cyberqueer studies, Nina Wakeford (2002) identifies four dominant themes within the cyberqueer research field. The first theme is a central one for most cyberqueer studies and relates to the “identity and self-presentation” of queer individuals. Wakeford critically states that the existing studies of queer sexuality and the internet have tended to reduce issues of identity (or formation of self-identity) to issues of self-presentation (or presentation of self online) (p. 123), and a consequence of this equating is that “the relationship between activities involved in creating an electronic character and the ways in which that character is implicated in everyday life and social institutions may be left unclear” (*ibidem*, 124). Therefore cyberqueer research should better capture the relationship between online activities and the implications on everyday life.

The second research theme is “the creation of queer space” and the exploration of the kinds of spaces that are created for queerly identified users. Regarding this aspect, Wakeford emphasizes, the focus should be not only simply

on online exchanges of electronic text, but also on the contextualization of the interactions within online spaces in their own right (*ibidem*, 126).

The third key topic within cyberqueer writing regards the “electronic facilitation of social networks and virtual community”. Wakeford refers to the analysis of Howard Rheingold (1993) regarding “the third space”, *i.e.* a space in which people could gather, away from the first and second places of home and work, a place fundamental for the democratic society, where “community-making could happen”. Rheingold suggested that the virtual community would be another third space, providing a supplement to traditional meanings of finding information and offering support. Wakeford remarks however that groups of users who interact online are assumed often to automatically achieve a community. Therefore more detailed studies should analyse and eventually recognize the electronic communication as a facilitator for both “weak and strong ties” (*ibidem*, 128). Wakeford also criticizes those expectations, according to which the online communities would replace the communities of the “offline scene”, such as gay bars and clubs, whereas a clear mode of comparison between these two types of community was not developed.

Finally, the fourth theme is that of “new technology and erotic practices”. The online environment, which appeared to be a new arena for queer sexual experiences, made also possible a new kind of sexual practice, often referred to as “cybersex” or “virtual sex”, in which the experience of computer-mediated communication itself is constructed *as* sexual experience, rather than being an addition to other activities (*ibidem*, 132). But the online eroticism may occur also in less explicitly sexual spaces and cyberspace may provide the possibility not only to have cybersex, but also to be part of the way sexual practices themselves are defined, and such aspects should also be aimed at or captured by cyberqueer research.

Wakeford’s considerations emphasize the relevance of empirical work for further theoretical and conceptual development regarding cyberqueer, whereas empirical data should be gathered by using more methods (by the so-called methodological “triangulation”), in order to apprehend the online/offline dialectics, all the more so as nowadays the technological innovations (such as mobile internet devices) are rapidly developing and spreading.

### CYBERQUEER IDENTITY

A central theme of cyberqueer studies is that of cyberqueer identity. Nina Wakeford (2000) assesses that the construction of identity is the overarching thematic that resides in most of cyberqueer studies. But in order to understand what brings new the “cyberqueer identity” we should first explore the general characteristics of queer identity, as they have been outlined by queer theory.

Queer theory not only forsakes traditional humanist literary and aesthetic studies, but also departs from gay and lesbian studies, pursuant to the assumptions of ludic (post) modern theoretical developments (Morton, 1995: 374). Queer theory denies the normative status of heterosexuality and questions binary labels that describe gender, sex and sexuality (Ashford, 2009: 299). Moreover, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) states, the concepts of gender and sexuality should themselves be dissociated, as part of an axiomatic change in the antihomophobic approach.

This dissociation reflects also in the meaning of the concept of identity given by prominent queer theorists like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, which interpreted queer as a way to include all non-normative sexualities as identities. According to Nina Wakeford (2000, 411) this view of identity was usually taken for granted and appropriated for cyberqueer; yet, there are also alternative approaches of cyberqueer identity outside those proposed by dominant queer theory (*ibidem*, 412), departing, for instance, from the immobile breach between categories of sexuality, gender and race.

In the context of its postmodernist heritage, queer identity is seen as fluid and/or performative. The fluid cyberqueer identity is tightly correlated with the cyberqueer spaces – which could be understood as potential free-areas for less regulated self-expressions – that enable various ways of “being” within the space (Tudor, 2012, 46). The idea of being able “to be whoever you want to be” in cyberspace, that is to change yourself along with different presentations of self, is part of the vision of fluid (cyber) queer identity. The fact that the internet offers possibilities of expressing not only one identity, but also an array of identities, gives scholars the opportunity both to explore the self, and to distinguish the “true” self from the “ideal” self or other possible selves (Bargh *et al.*, 2002, cited by Ashford, 2009, 301).

As Lisa Nakamura (2002) noted, we are faced with “a radical interrogation of the nature of personal identity” (p. 70). She spoke about a desire of elasticity in identity-construction, noticing that millions of cyberspace users create various online identities, which may be quite different from the “real-life” identity. This could signify that people would like “to be read” differently than they are and they use the cyberspace in order to create versions of self that not only *look*, but also, somehow, *are* different from the real-life self. However, until now no consensus has been reached regarding the dilemma, whether this aspect of the internet is positive and/or progressive, because the users are liberated from the all-over (offline) social constraints and encouraged to have democratic social relations, or, on the contrary, it only reduplicates old gender and race hierarchies (*ibidem*).

Following Nakamura’s theorization, Pramod Nayar also remarks that, on the one hand, cybercultures encourage multiple and fluid identities, but on the other hand, for marginalized people in the real world, to have fluid identities and to be free in cyberspace “might provide a temporary thrill, but it does not change their marginal, material realities” (Nayar, 2010, 161).

One of the issues discussed in cyberqueer identities” approaches is that of anonymity and the subsequent possibility of creating “false” identities. Since anyone can access the internet, the issue of false identities has raised many questions and fears regarding the availability of cyberspace inclusive for sex offenders, who for instance could lie about their age so as to enable themselves to interact with people who otherwise would reject them (as, for example, minors).

Also in queer cyberspace were reported cases in which users pretended to be transgendered, or lesbians who “played” as being gay men. For the research, this aspect is interesting in the perspective of studying the internet as a medium in which identity can be explored or “queered” beyond the bounds of the corporal “reality” (Ashford, 2009, 304).

Jeffrey Weeks (1995) consider identities “necessary fictions” that need to be created, especially in the gay world. From this point of view, we can speak about the multiplicity and the continuous reshaping of identities.

Behind the quest for identity are different and often conflicting values. By saying who we are, we are also trying to express what we are, what we believe and what we desire. The problem is that these desires are often patently in conflict, not only between communities but within individuals themselves (Weeks, 1995, 115).

In the era of the prevalence of anonymity on the internet (especially before 2000s) the main tool for (self) identification in the cyberspace was the language. The text was and still remains largely central to creating and reshaping the cyber profiles/identities, from the choice of a name and the representation of the physical self, to the ability of self-expressing the way one is, believes to be or wants to be. Anyway, with the emergence and proliferation of online social networking services such as Facebook and Twitter the era of domination of anonymity on the internet started to decline. The cyber identities are less and less able to hide behind the words (usernames, nicknames, information requested by registration, etc.), considering that nowadays the use of visual images plays a pivotal role in the presentation of self on the internet. Thereby also the idea of “disembodied identities” has faded and along with it the utopian visions of an egalitarian online space, with no discrimination related to race, gender, physical appearance and so on. Cyberqueer identities are hereupon vulnerable, even if the internet might seem to be the quintessential “Safe Space” (O’Riordan & Phillips, 2007; Paradis, 2009). In other words, online-identities are just as vulnerable as the offline ones. However, as Kupczak (2002, 179) stated, the time of dilemma between accepting and rejecting cyber identity is over, as we are already men and women of a computerized society, and this society, in which we are deeply embedded, offers sometimes no alternatives to the technologically mediated reality.

### DISEMBODIMENT CYBER-OPPORTUNITIES VS. DEEPNESS OF BODY AND EMBODIMENT PRACTICES

There are, as previously stressed, less and less utopian answers to the question, whether the internet could be an egalitarian space of disembodied identities. One can remember the statement of Donna Haraway (1990) in the early years of the internet, according to which bodies are maps of power and identity (p. 222) and even cyborgs, which would be creatures of a postgender world (p. 192), are no exceptions.

Maria Fernandez (2002) mentions theories of embodiment, which emphasize the interdependence of mind and body, and feminist theorists as Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Jane Gallop a.s.o., who viewed the body as a social and discursive object essential to the production of knowledge, desire and power (Fernandez, 2002: 37). Also Pierre Bourdieu (1977) spoke about the deepness and resistance of the embodied practices which become naturalized and immune to questioning due to their unconscious nature, and about the bodily habits, which – being manifestations of political mythologies – reinforce distinctive ways of feeling and thinking (*ibidem*). Furthermore Lakoff and Johnson (1999) also argued that mind is inherently embodied and saw reason as being shaped by the body (*ibidem*, 38). Nayar (2010, 78) mentions the “mixed reality” paradigm identified by Mark Hansen, which he finds attractive because re-establishes the body at the centre, refusing a simple embodiment/disembodiment binary and considering that body is “the interface to the virtual”.

All these considerations denote that the hopes from the beginning of the internet, which saw it as a democratic and egalitarian space for all, regardless of gender, race, physical characteristics/disadvantages and so on, were not justified. In time it became more and more obvious that people, even when they act in the form of virtual identities, cannot abstract entirely from their bodies and – in terms of Bourdieu – their embodied practices, and cannot be liberated from their bodily characteristics and habits, which, according to the same author, shape and strengthen the specific ways in which individuals – queer including – think and feel.

According to Tudor (2012) the cyberqueer platforms targeting gay men “are not discursively disconnected with offline gay culture or freed from social and bodily constraints” (p. 7). Such queer platforms and forums have rather distinct embodied dimensions – like the focus put on face and/or body image – and frequently queer individuals use these online services for the purpose of – after virtual interacting – meeting others in person and experiencing embodied sex (O’Riordan & Phillips, 2007, 26). However, by offering highly stereotypical images of the male body, many commercial gay platforms (such as for instance *Planetromeo*<sup>3</sup> – see Tudor, 2012, 29) promote the commodification of eroticism.

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<sup>3</sup> Planetromeo.com is one of the biggest all-male online communities in the world (Tudor, 2012: 5). See <http://www.planetromeo.com/>



Photos hold a central place in many websites and online social interactions. The photograph can be an “important factor in the process of self-constitution” (O’Riordan & Phillips, 2007, 26) and a critical display of (gender) queer identity (Paradis, 2009, 447). According to Marjo Laukkanen (2007, 82–3), who studied a community of Finnish queer youths, “the user’s body (...) has three social dimensions: material, represented, and imagined”, all of which being part of online social interactions. The analysis of these youths has revealed that they put plenty of effort in their self-representation by presenting – through a calculated use of pictures – their sex/gender and sexual orientation, concurrently with reading other people’s bodies in the same way. The photos that LGBT youth post of themselves (re)present their bodies in manners that signal queer affiliation, sexual orientation and gender identity. Laukkanen emphasizes that these youths spent definitely a considerable amount of effort on (re)presenting their material bodies, and aligning them to their imagined essence. Thus, by placing an exceeding quantity of energy into their gendered appearance, the queer community Laukkanen studied was far from being a disembodied one.

For that matter, as theorists (Fernandez, 2002; Campbell, 2004; Nayar, 2010) point out and many studies (Tsang, 2000; Gosine, 2007; Dasgupta, 2012) have found out, individuals and groups face also in online interactions forms of discrimination based on their material bodies’ characteristics in offline life (race, ethnicity, gender etc.). The internet as a social technology neither confers integral freedom, nor contributes to the desired equality between people. On the contrary, it seems to be involved in reproducing patterns of the omnipresent offline social inequities (Paradis, 2009, 447). With regard to cyberqueer, Campbell (2004, 191) points out that cyberspace retains and reproduces the “disenfranchisement of the other” and online interaction, far from being a way of escaping the body, is rather “a mode of rearticulating our relationship to the physical body” and of reproducing the dominant models of beauty and erotic.

**“REAL” VS./AND “VIRTUAL”; “OFFLINE” VS./AND “ONLINE”;  
“PUBLIC” VS./AND “PRIVATE” – BLURRED BOUNDARIES OR DIVIDING LINES?**

As stated previously, the emergence of numerous possibilities opened by the internet have blurred boundaries between private and public sphere of human life. Also the dividing lines between “real” and “virtual” world, respectively “offline” and “online” life faded more and more. As Kozinets (2011, 11) observed, “it is increasingly complicated to separate life online and offline; as the two have merged into one world: of the real life such as people live it; and this world includes the use of technology of communication” (cited by Tudor, 2012, 15).

Markham (1998, 120) spoke about the “reality” of the “virtual environment”, asserting that “real becomes a double negation”, in the sense that when experiences

are experienced (even in virtual environment), they cannot be “not real”. The aforementioned “mixed reality” paradigm also rejects the “real-embodied” *versus* “simulation-disembodied” opposition (Nayar, 2010). The case of the couple David Pollard and Amy Taylor is here again relevant and brought at times as example. The two met in a chat room on the internet and both came to extensively use the avatar-based programme *Second Life* (Ashford, 2009, 307). They were married both in “reality” and in the virtual world of *Second Life*. When Taylor found out that her husband first was having (in the virtual space) an affair with a sex worker and later a “new online flame” (the avatar of an American women), she decided to end their real life marriage<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the development in their couple’s virtual life had a major impact on their real lives.

Such experiences led scholars (Morton, 1995; Ashford, 2009; Nayar, 2010; Kozinets, 2011) to conclude that we cannot actually make a distinct cleavage between “real” and “virtual” world or between “offline” and “online” life of people. In fact, the virtual/online experiences of individuals are – as are various other experiences – parts of their life, sometimes even considerably contributing to the future paths they follow.

The “reality” of queer people can be likewise influenced by the virtual environment. Cyberqueer interactions could rarely be seen as purely online or offline, even in the cases in which they are online originated and remain for a while only so. But the many queer individuals use online platforms, chat rooms, forums etc. as means of “real world” appointments and embodied “in person” sex, and such insights determined Tikkanen and Ross (2004) to affirm that the “virtual” can shape a new reality.

In this context queer identities should be perceived as “fluid constructions rather than fixed notions of self that may be “masked” or hidden behind smoke screens” (Ashford, 2009: 308). As the example of the couple Amy Taylor and David Pollard has shown, individuals can assign to “virtual” lives an equal, if not greater value than to their “real” lives, considering that cyberspace is understood as a means of expressing a highly self-valorized version of self (*ibidem*: 310).

On the other hand not all virtual places are similarly valorized or regarded by the users. While some platforms are used by queer individuals to enable explicitly sexual approaches and contacts for further embodied sex, others are seen as places for finding information, for discussion or social networking. That means that identities and self-expressions take different forms also in virtual space dependent on the values or status attached to those places. Tudor (2012) has noted that her research subjects perceived *Facebook*, for example, merely as a “public” place and for that matter “the online space of *Facebook*, where half the population of Sweden now holds an account (...), might perhaps be the most public space we have” (Tudor, 2012, 46). In such places the users – especially those who don’t want to

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<sup>4</sup> See also <http://metro.co.uk/2008/11/13/second-life-sex-causes-divorce-145922/>

disclose their sexual orientation or interests – project their image of themselves in terms of “socially respectable”, *i.e.* related to the (hetero) normative sexuality. Not only *Facebook*, but also some queer platforms and networking services have been perceived by the informants as “public” in the same way as the general public, “once again highlighting the blur between the online and the offline” (*ibidem*, 47). At the same time, for many queer individuals the cyberspace is not a place to hide, but rather an emancipatory way that gradually enables their offline openness (*ibidem*, 61), either in form of experimenting with their sexual identity, taking part in discussions on sex-chats, practicing intimacy in chat rooms or simply finding out that they are not alone.

### CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

“Cyberqueer” is an amalgamated concept consisting of two terms: “cyber” and “queer”, which simultaneously emerged and established during the early nineties. It relates to individuals and groups who disrupt the heteronormativity and use the various ways of interaction made possible by the internet. The concept occurred as a result of practical considerations, so as to delimitate the LGBTQ cyberspace, as well as its research. Its emergence can be also seen as an act of resistance, given the fact that at the time the topic of sexuality was not considered as a subject of debate or discussions in the critical cultural studies of technology.

Cyberqueer research focuses on various directions, such as identity and self-(re)presentation of queer individuals, queer space, online communities and social networks, and the ways in which new technologies have affected the erotic and sexual queer practices. Among these the issue of cyberqueer identity distinguishes as the central theme of cyberqueer studies. Cyborg would be a creature of a postgender world, asserted Donna Haraway (1990). Yet the gender identity remained an important issue that could not be ignored by those who would have wished to transcend the traditional categorizations. Being mainly outlined by queer theory’s distinction between gender and sexuality, but not limited only to this dominant perspective, (cyber)queer identity is considered fluid and/or performative and is closely related to the cyber-spaces, seen as potential free and less regulated areas for self-expression. Correlated with the issue of cyberqueer identity is that of body and (dis)embodiment online opportunities and practices. Whereas some early views saw the internet as a liberating, egalitarian and democratic space, where people could be the same regardless of their body (and, consequently, regardless of those inherent bodily characteristics – race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation etc. – that made them subject of discrimination in the “real” world), more recent views and studies highlight the significance of the body inclusively in cyberspace. The emphasis put on photos on platforms like *Facebook*, but also on exclusive gay-platforms, and the efforts put by queer persons to (re)present their bodily

distinctive attributes show the “weightiness” of the body in the generic self-(re)presentation. It seems that people cannot abstract from their own body. Moreover, cyberspace retains and reproduces the dominant models (including those discriminatory on the basis of material bodily characteristics) of the non-virtual world.

These considerations are even more reinforced as the boundaries between “real” and “virtual”, respectively “offline” and “online” seem to be blurred. The “virtual” cannot simply be seen as breached from the “real”, as long as it can majorly impact on the paths people choose for their lives. The virtual environment is rather part of “reality”. Online and offline experiences are tied to each other and shape the reality in which people dwell. Furthermore even the dividing lines between “public” and “private” became lately blurred. For instance otherwise private information, such as personal happenings, preferences, activities and especially photos are to a high degree public as they are posted on platforms like *Facebook*, but also on other platforms and networking services, including queer ones. However this blurring can act as an emancipator way for certain queer individuals in their process of gradual social openness.

Nevertheless some problems still remain open for research, especially questions like: to what extent is cyberspace a democratic, liberating, even “revolutionary” place for queer individuals, contributing to the general emancipation of societies in this respect (e.g. in the form of acceptance, tolerance, changes in “hetero”-mentalities, or, in those societies where non-heterosexuality is still prohibited, in the form of the eventual recognition of the “existence” and the rights of LGBTQ people)? Or, on the contrary, is the internet a space that reproduces the social and cultural inequalities and asymmetries, prejudices, stereotypes, discriminatory patterns and unflattering/ invective apprehensions concerning queer individuals?

Relative to aspects of this last question Maria Fernandez and Faith Wilding had early in the 2000s a not too optimistic view regarding cyberspace, which they critically described as an arena “embedded in a framework of pan-capitalist social relations and economic, political, and cultural environments that are still deeply sexist and racist” (Fernandez & Wilding, 2002: 24). To these, I think, “homophobic” may be added too. To what extent such considerations are still actual after more than a decade remains an issue to be approached by future research.

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