

Chapter 45

Processes of Socialization to Sexuality and Discrimination in the Web Society: An Exploratory Research on Transgender People

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ABSTRACT

The diffusion of new media, of online communication, and the increasingly evident overlap between on-line and offline environments generates a specific question for scientific research on how these contents can represent an opportunity for “emancipation” and at the same time new areas in which can experience processes of exclusion, in particular for the LGBT community. In this sense, social media offers transgender people a wide range of tools and applications to create new knowledge, interact with other people, create new meeting opportunities, or trace new relationships and/or new emotional and sexual experiences. This research work aims to investigate the psychological, relational, and social aspects of transgender people who use social media and dating apps as communication spaces and relational environments in order to outline the peculiar aspects of media consumption, regulatory access and processes of stigmatization, and social discriminations by the web.

INTRODUCTION

The diffusion of new media, online communication and the increasingly evident overlap between online and offline environments, generates a specific request of scientific research on how these contents can represent an opportunity for “emancipation” and at the same time new areas in which to experience discrimination and processes of exclusion.

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These processes of communicative emancipation would seem particularly suitable for LGBTQ subcultures and specifically for transgender people. In this sense, social media offer transgender people a wide range of tools and applications to create new acquaintances, to compare themselves with other people from the LGBTQ community, to create new opportunities for meetings or to find new relationships and/or new emotional and sexual experiences.

In order to satisfy this growing demand for online socialization, in recent years several apps for dating have been created for non-normative identities and non-heteronormative sexual orientations. In fact, it is possible to find apps for homosexual dating (e.g. Grindr for male homosexuals and Wapa for female homosexuals) and dating apps for transgender people (e.g. the Transgender app).

These new communicative arenas would become true “virtual marketplaces” where sexual identities and affective, emotional, and sexual compatibilities can be experimented with and tracked.

In this chapter we will present a research, with a qualitative approach, which has set itself the goal of investigating the psychological, relational and social aspects of transgender people who use social media and dating apps as communicative spaces and relational areas, in order to outline the peculiar aspects of media consumption, the regulatory lines of access and the processes of web-mediated social stigmatization and discrimination.

A first part will briefly present a description of the current scientific literature on the subject, analyzing the concepts of sexual identity, gender identity and transgenderism, fundamental aspects to build an epistemological frame of reference in which to understand and interpret both the results and the reflections expressed; in addition, the first theoretical part will be completed by the presentation of two “ecological” theories of human interaction: the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (2006) and the theory of sexual markets (Gagnon e Leumann, 2004).

Also within the first part of the chapter, the concept of medial capital will be briefly presented, and the main social media and dating apps used within the process of socialization to sexuality of transgender people will be presented.

A final part, however, will describe and analyze the psychological, social and relational aspects expressed through the use of social media and apps for dating, particularly in relation to the processes of social inclusion and exclusion experienced through the web by transgender people in Italy.

THE EVOLUTION OF SEXUAL IDENTITY: FROM THE VETEROSEXUAL MODEL TO THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL MODEL

The concept of sexual identity, of the relationship between biological sex and the social construction of gender, of the complementarity between male and female, of non-normative sexual identities and orientations, have been debated in Woman’s Studies and LGBT Studies from the second half of the 1980s to the present day, initiating a rich scientific production that has fueled the sociology of sexuality (Piccone Stella, Simonelli 2007; Leccardi, 2002; Saraceno et al. 2008).

Thanks to the interaction with other important disciplines that have sexuality as their object of study (just think of psychology, biology and gender medicine), in recent years the multidimensional concept of sexual identity has been consolidated, overcoming the veterosexual model that had dominated studies and scientific research on sexuality for over three centuries.

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