Cross-Dressers in Cyber-Space: Exploring the Internet as a Tool for Expressing Gendered Identity

By: Jane E. Hegland and Nancy J. Nelson

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Abstract:

The authors explore the ways in which the Internet functions to communicate about cross-dressing as part of a larger cultural discourse surrounding gender. As a widely used tool to dialogue on the topic of appearance, the Internet also helps to establish and even alter gendered identities. The seamless realm of the Internet allows such identities to cross cultural boundaries instantly and without regard for real physical space. Based on 30 Websites of cross-dressers collected and analyzed, this essay examines the ways that individuals use this virtual worldfor purposes of cross-dressing. As a study ofhuman behavior and dress, this research has important implications for furthering our understanding of how cyberspace operates as a newly established socio-cultural realm andparticipates in the current scholarly discourse on the topic of the Internet as a new vehicle for the study of dress and identity.
KEY WORDS: cross-dress; dress; gender; Internet.

Article:

Cross-dressing and cyberspace are two seemingly unrelated topics, yet both are increasing in popularity and practice. Cross-dressing can be defined as dressing in a manner opposite of one's gendered identity, while cyberspace is simply the virtual world created and maintained by the Internet. In this essay, we examine the ways the Internet is used to communicate about cross-dressing as part of a larger cultural discourse surrounding gender. As a popular tool to dialogue on the topic of appearance, the Internet has also been used to establish and even alter gendered identities. The seamless realm of the Internet allows such identities to cross cultural boundaries instantly and without regard for real physical space. Exploring cyberspace as a venue for the expression of cross-dressing opens up a wealth of opportunities for examining issues of gender, identity, and dress.

Although fast-becoming a new social location for the exchange of ideas and information, the Internet has only recently been used as a scholarly research tool. The boundaries of the Internet are virtual, and therefore, when an individual creates a Website to discuss or exhibit a transgendered identity, it is difficult to know if it is a real identity or a virtual one (McKie, 1997). Moreover, the constant changing and updating of Internet Websites creates data that is

always in a state of transition, as opposed to fixed. Thanks to the Internet, we have data that more closely resemble the transitory nature of the human experience, in much the same way that fieldwork done at a specific time and space reflects only the current state of the person or society under observation.

Based on the interpretation of 30 Websites of cross-dressers, we look at the ways that individuals use the virtual world of cyberspace for purposes of cross-dressing. We begin with a discussion of how the Web is used to create a transgendered identity, and then move to an overview of how the Internet can be used as a research tool, followed by a description of the methodology used for data selection and analysis. Next is a brief thematic interpretation of the 30 selected Websites of cross-dressers. We conclude with a discussion of cross-dressing as it is found on the Internet, and the implications of this research for examining cross-dressing within the context of cyberspace.

BACKGROUND
Defining the (Cross) Dressed Body
Dress, as used throughout this essay, is defined both as the outcome and the process through which an individual goes in order to create and manage her or his appearance within a social context. Dress, in this sense of the term, allows for the consideration of modifying and supplementing the entire body, whether through hair, make-up, accessories, or garments (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1992). The use of dress to establish, and in the case of cross-dressing, to alter one's appearance according to social dictates of gender has been explored in a number of different ways (Bullough & Bullough, 1993; Garber, 1992; Hegland, 1999). Central to this essay, however, is the notion of dressing the body to attain the temporary state wherein one physically and socially embodies the other gender.

Several different terms refer to the practice of altering an appearance to more closely resemble the other gender. Labels currently used by cross-dressers to explain their activities include ―transgender,‖ ―transvestite,‖ ―cross-dresser,‖ ―cross- gendered,‖ and even ―gender-gifted‖ and ―expressing the feminine self.‖ We use the term ―cross-dresser‖ predominantly throughout this essay, but interchangeably with ―transgender,‖ because the individuals themselves use both terms.

―Cross-dresser‖ is a more behavior-specific term commonly used to refer to someone who dresses in the manner of the other gender, thereby excluding those individuals who undergo processes that lead to a biological change from one sex to another (i.e., transsexuals). ―Transgender‖ is a broader term, encompassing all behavioral manifestations of feeling unlike their biological sex. These individuals transgress traditional gender norms by rejecting societal expectations of dress. The practice of cross-dressing from male to female is a serious endeavor for all individuals in this study, and the notion of achieving a realistic female appearance is of utmost importance. Throughout this essay, we address the cross-dressers as they are dressed.

Cross-Dressing on the Internet
The Internet is a global network. It is defined as a ―vast collection of networked computers‖ (Kardas & Milford, 1996, p. 3), both large and small. The Internet consists of data files in

numerous types or forms, including text files, multimedia files, spreadsheets, and postings to Usernet groups (Cohen, 1998). Probably the most widely used type of Internet data and most popular term in discussion of the Internet is the Website or Webpage. The World Wide Web allows for easy access to information from a variety of different servers that hold assorted Webpages, or Websites. As an individual, one can both surf the Web and post Webpages about a particular topic. Possibilities for creating a Website are limited to the range of technological resources available to the individual Web author (Kardas & Milford, 1996).

Today the World Wide Web provides us with an enormous amount of information, and is indeed considered to be uncharted territory with the potential of being the largest library ever to have existed. For most within an academic environment, it is an accessible and cost-efficient means of locating data, whatever the topic. The process and ethics involved in doing research on the Internet has been the topic of several recent books and journal articles (Jones, 1999; Miller & Slater, 2000; Smith & Leigh, 1997). Because it exists as a realm separated from reality per se, the Internet has been the subject of questions as to the reliability and validity of its information as a primary data source.

Any and all marginalized groups have turned to the Internet to express their unconventional behaviors. This makes sense, as the virtual world of the Internet provides a safe and anonymous place that allows those individuals who live at the fringes of society to reflect upon their own paths, meet others, and offer or receive advice and support without risking public condemnation or persecution. Through the Internet, these individuals in general, and cross-dressers in particular, have found a way to express the most intimate details of their lives—and yet are able to remain completely anonymous in the transaction, unless they choose to respond to ―e-mails‖ sent by readers of their Webpage.

One of many culturally marginalized groups, cross-dressers have found a forum for dialogue and acceptance through the self-publishing possibilities of the World Wide Web. There are thousands of Websites devoted to the experiences of individual cross-dressers. There is also the ―Transgender Web Ring,‖ which functions as a search tool for locating individuals, support groups, electronic magazines, as well as appearance management resources recommended within the transgender community. Indeed, as is indicated by the myriad of electronic discussion groups frequented by transgenders, one author writes, ―The Internet is not just an information repository; it is also a community‖ (Cohen, 1998, p. 9).

Websites of cross-dressers typically incorporate photographs and narrative descriptions of the individual. Other aspects of a cross-dresser‘s Webpage might include sound, video, and links to other cross-dressers and cross-dresser-friendly locations, events, and activities. However, it seems that the photographs are the most important element of the Webpages. As Marissa (2000) from Italy explains,

> When we spend an entire afternoon to dress up, the moment of shooting a picture is the crowning, the sublimation of our work. That‘s why our masterpieces must not remain in a drawer! That‘s why we have to seize ... the opportunities offered by the Internet! (Hi folks: A couple more words, ¶ 8).

METHODOLOGY
Data Selection
As is the case with other types of data, Internet data can be useful in providing a snapshot of a given subject at a specific point in time. In addition, the Internet allows anyone with access to a computer to create, view, and maintain one Website among hundreds of thousands of sites that change daily. Yet, this variability, coupled with the enormous amount of transgender Webpages available to the Internet user, creates the need for specific criteria to be developed to evaluate Web materials. Factors that are of crucial importance to members of the transgender community become obvious in an initial cursory search of relevant Websites on the topic. Because of the enormous amount of information on the Internet pertaining to cross-dressers, however, we found it necessary to adhere to a particular set of boundaries in the data collection process.

After careful study of numerous Websites, we began to develop criteria for those ultimately selected for analysis. In the process of narrowing the field, we excluded Websites of individuals who self-identified as pre-operative and postoperative transsexuals, and those who described themselves as female-to-male cross-dressers or transgendered individuals. Each of these categories has its own unique and fascinating characteristics, but for this project, we focused on male to-female cross-dressers who are not currently exploring the option of sexual reassignment surgery. Additional criteria included photographs of the Website owner in ―her‖ female persona, along with testimonials of personal experiences with cross-dressing.

Although not part of our initial criteria, most of the 30 sites include a listing of the individual's likes, dislikes, favorite places to shop, body measurements ―en femme,‖ and female celebrities or idols. All sites have an email address link, and many have links to other transgender individuals, resources such as support groups, wig suppliers, transgender cosmetics, and even ―passing consultants‖― people who are known for their skill in helping cross-dressers to achieve as realistic a look as possible.

Upon establishment of these basic criteria, we worked independently to locate and select appropriate Websites. Between the two of us, we gathered 100 sites from various Web rings that fulfilled our criteria. The final 30 sites were culled from the larger collection.

In our attempts to understand how and why cross-dressing individuals create and utilize Websites to communicate a transgendered identity, we began an interpretive analysis of the materials. Rather than setting specific parameters for analysis, we were interested in exploring themes that would emerge from the set of 30 Websites. Our preliminary study of the narratives revealed that similar themes surfaced—in a similar fashion—across the Websites. The interpretation presented here is structured around the themes and is based on an interpretive approach to textual data that focuses on understanding the meanings assigned to experiences of everyday life (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; van Manen, 1990).

Demographics
A variety of demographics surfaced when we looked across the 30 sites of cross-dressers. Their ages at the time of posting the Webpage span from early- 20s to late-50s, with the

majority being in their mid-30s. All state that they are heterosexual men—though a few claim feelings of bisexuality or sexual ambiguity while dressed en femme. Most are married or are in a monogamous heterosexual relationship. The cross-dressers live in such countries throughout the world as Brazil, Japan, Taiwan, Australia, Russia, Germany, Austria, Italy, and England. All regions of the United States are also represented. Education ranges from high school diplomas to four-year college degrees. Employment includes plumbers, retail sales, musicians, computer analysts, and information technology specialists. Four of the 30 refer to past military experience—particularly that of the US Navy, and three are veterans of the Vietnam War. Reasons for cross-dressing range from the sexual or fetishistic, to those of comfort, or achieving a feeling of "rightness" about dressing as a woman. Liz (1999) reveals a strong sense of comfort in her cross-dressing. She writes,

> For me, it's not a sexual issue, but one of comfort. I feel, well, comfortable dressed as a woman. My mental frame is comfortable, and that is all that matters to me (¶ 9).

Our 30 sites also reflect varying degrees of participation—from dressing one or two times a month, to living full-time as a woman. All have female names and refer to themselves as such when dressed. Most claim that dressing en femme helps them to relax—to alleviate the stresses of life. Finally, the overwhelming majority of these 30 sites share an obsession with their body and their age. Many are coy about their chronological age, and most are obviously trying to achieve and maintain a thin, but curvaceous figure. For example, Claudia (1999) from England reveals that she is 6'1" tall, and her weight—at 140 lbs—is falling. Most of them also "love to shop"—especially en femme (see Fig. 1).

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DATA ANALYSIS
Upon examination of descriptions of experience across the 30 sites, themes surfaced with respect to our selection criteria. Each theme is illustrated through excerpts of text taken from the Websites. The interpretation begins with a discussion of the use of the Website as a journal, revealing such experiences as one's first incident with cross-dressing, as well as present-day experiences. From there, key visual components of photographs published as part of the Websites are considered. Our interpretation concludes with a discussion of the importance of the Internet as a tool and a forum for dialogue—for individuals and for the global transgender community.

Webpage as "Virtual Journal"
Remembering the First Time
It is common to use one's own Website as a confessional of sorts, thus many of our participants begin their personal page with an account of the first time they cross-dressed. The earliest age at which most can remember wanting to cross-dress ranges from 5 to 15 years of age—with many recalling their first experience at around age five. Barbara Ann (2000) from Long Island, New York writes,

> Like most adult cross-dressers, I started wearing women's clothing at a very early age....

I was about 4 or 5 years old.... As a child, I always wished that I had been born a girl. I remember going to bed at night and praying that I would wake up and be a pretty girl....

I don't know when it happened, but at some point in my life, I learned to be ashamed of my desire to wear women's clothes, and to do whatever I could, not only to keep my cross-dressing a secret, but to make it impossible for anyone even to entertain the slightest suspicion that I would ever want to do anything as weird as wearing a dress. In fact, I covered it up so well, that I almost convinced myself (Beginnings, ¶ 1, 2).

Descriptions of early experiences with cross-dressing are found on all of the 30 sites, and range from being dressed as a girl by a female family member, to covertly borrowing a female family member's clothing such as underwear and pantyhose just to see what it would be like to wear these items of apparel. Positive feelings brought on by the way the clothing felt or the sound it made are mentioned as the basis for an on-going fascination with women's dress. Pantyhose overwhelmingly rank at the top for the most important component of the first and subsequent cross-dressing experiences. As Nicole Asahi (2000) from the US writes,

When I graduated and started working, I always had some hosiery squirreled away in the house. My favorite is Hanes Silk Reflections pantyhose and stockings. I just love their silky feel & the way they glisten. Especially the Hanes Silk Reflections Ultra Silk (now called Evening Sheer) hosiery; girl, nothing is more silky, soft and shiny! (How it all started, ¶ 4).

Wearing pantyhose for the first time resulted in sexual arousal by some, but it is primarily the feeling of the hose against the legs and lower torso—as well as the reflective visual quality that surface as most important. Both invoke in the wearer a feeling of femininity.

Fear of Being Caught

According to the 30 Websites, sharing fears (especially those of exposure and condemnation) is an important component of the virtual journal. The clandestine act of gathering women's forms of dress and later discarding or destroying the collection (purging) occurred for the majority during teenage years. Debra Helen (1999) from England reveals,

There was a little bit of a thrill attached to secreting a piece of female clothing and trying it on without getting caught! It's that childhood notion of knowing that you're doing something ―naughty" but you want to do it anyway and you're willing to take the risk (Debra's story, ¶ 4).

Similarly, as Cláudia (2000) from Brazil writes,

My mother used to work as a seamstress, and there were a lot of blouses, dresses, and skirts in my house all the time. Also, my sister worked out of town all week long, so her closet was also available. The only thing I didn't do at that time was make-up, because I was afraid of going too far into this ‗woman' thing. I don't think that anybody at home had any idea of what was going on, and I was never caught, although there were some close calls. I was careful not to make a mess I couldn't fix very quickly in case someone returned earlier than expected (My bio, ¶ 5).

The consequence of being caught in women's clothing is no small matter, according to many of the cross-dressers. Sharing one's own experiences via the virtual realm helps others to

cope with similar situations. When Jayne (1998), a cross-dresser from England, was caught wearing women's clothing as a teenager, her parents placed her in a psychiatric hospital for six months. She recalls the experience as painful, and writes,

> Of the memories that I am willing to relate of my time in the hospital, I was not allowed to shower or change my clothes without a member of the staff present. I was watched 24 hours a day (at least during the time that I was not in school or sleeping), and I was not allowed to enter the clothes storeroom alone (I suppose that this was to ensure I did not wear any female clothes) (¶ 10).

In light of such terrifying early experiences, it is no great surprise that adulthood appears to be the time when most begin to accept and indulge their need for cross-dressing. According to the cross-dressers in this study, this is a result of achieving independence from parents and acquiring their own place, where they do not have to hide their collection of clothing or accessories.

Relationships and Coming Out

Adult cross-dressers maintain all of the 30 sites in this study. Hence, most include journal-like discussions about how their cross-dressing is an integral part of their daily lives, whether in terms of relationships, sexuality, or coming out in the real world—as opposed to their coming-out process in cyber-space.

The majority of cross-dressers in this study are involved in heterosexual relationships, and many have children. Perhaps this is why the benefits and risks of coming out are obviously a topic of importance on the Websites. Overwhelmingly, most who come out are in their late 30s or early 40s. This may be attributed to the notion of the mid-life crisis, albeit a not-so-typical one. Robin (1999) came out to her wife at age 54. She writes,

> The hardest thing of all was getting the courage to tell my wife of 30 years. Had I known how she would receive my news, I would have done it years ago. Since coming out to her officially in February of _99, I have been on a cloud. It turns out that I have married the world's most wonderful woman. She has accepted this turn of events, and is probably having as much fun with this as I am (¶ 1). (See Fig. 2.)

The Internet is a public forum, and as such, there are often multiple layers of discussion happening on one Website. As a result, many of the Websites include detailed accounts of how wives have come to terms with their husband's ―hobby." Debbi's (1999) wife, Charlotte, shares these thoughts on life with a cross-dresser:

> Finding out that my husband was a cross-dresser was a real surprise to me. But then, in looking back, it should not have been. Although my husband is not effeminate, he has some deep feminine qualities in his personality that attracted me to him over 22 years ago.... While I do realize that cross-dressing is not the norm in most marriages, it's certainly not the worst thing that could happen, either. And two people who truly love and respect each other can work most anything out to each other's satisfaction. After all, it's the person I married and the clothes are just that... clothes (The joy of sharing: Thoughts on life with a cross-dresser, ¶ 1, 3).

Questions of Sexuality

The Internet is vast in its potential for expressing the self. As a result, it allows for individuality, but also a certain degree of anonymity. It is therefore somewhat difficult for a spouse or significant other to find out about their partner's cross-dressing simply by surfing the Net. Many times, the spouse or significant other will find out about the cross-dresser's hobby by coming across unfamiliar feminine garments, perfume, or discovering lipstick stains. Upon noticing these signs, she will likely make the assumption that her husband is seeing another woman.

Yet when it is discovered that the objects are used for the purposes of cross-dressing, many times a second, similarly powerful, reaction occurs: the fear that

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her partner is homosexual. Barbara Ann (2000) writes,

> Although I had often imagined telling my wife about my cross-dressing, I'm sure I would still be trying to keep my secret today if I hadn't gotten careless one day and left some items lying around that not many men, other than cross-dressers, would find a use for. When my wife found these and questioned me about them, I could not explain them away.... I assumed that she had figured out that I was a cross-dresser.... So I was surprised when her first question... was ―Are there other people?" By her use of the word ―people" instead of ―women" I understood the subtext of her question as ―Are you gay?" (Recent history— coming out, ¶ 2, 3).

More often than not, revealing a penchant for cross-dressing results in tension within the relationship, but many claim their partners eventually became okay with the feminine identity, though to varying degrees. Shaving legs and chest, while necessary for some cross-dressers to be able to fully pass as female, is often unacceptable to the spouse or significant other. Yet, often the biological female in the relationship will assist the cross-dresser in achieving a realistic look, particularly by shopping together and providing assistance with makeup application. As Claudi (n.d.) from Germany writes,

> By now my significant other helps me in the department store to find the right shoes or [other] kind of ―equipment" you need as a cross-dresser (¶ 25). (See Fig. 3.)

Many Websites include a clear declaration of sexual orientation—with cross-dressers referring to themselves as ―straight" or ―heterosexual" or ―attracted to women." Andee (1999) makes this statement right upfront,

> I prefer women, especially beautiful women, but that does not only mean physically beautiful. I believe all women have an inner spiritual beauty that is anxious to be discovered (Andee's FAQS, ¶ 1).

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All within our group of 30 cross-dressers claim to be sexually attracted to women, yet a few have mentioned instances of dressing en femme and being hit on by a man while at a bar. These cross-dressers view this experience to be an indication of their success at establishing a ―real" female identity. Tiffany Michelle (2000) has this to say on the topic,

> When I dress up, I really work hard at presenting a passable feminine image. Not only do I like to portray the ―girl-next-door‖ look, but I also like to flirt and get a little sexy at times. Guys are motivated by visual clues and imagery (Tiffany's FAQ, ¶ 10).

A couple of individuals go so far as to admit to being attracted to men while dressed en femme. Nicole Asahi (2000) from Texas writes,

> I must be honest with myself. I am definitely heterosexual. I *love* to look at women....
> Yet... [w]hen I am dressed as a woman ... I *love* the attention I get from men.... Apparently, from my correspondence with various _Net sisters, I am not at all unique in this respect. It is somewhat comforting to know that there are many others who feel the same way (I am heterosexual—I think, ¶ 1).

Passing in Public

Anyone who wants to, can pass as a woman in the virtual realm. Therefore, being able to pass in public is the ultimate achievement for many of the cross-dressers in this study. The Internet is now fertile ground for getting advice and instruction on this very crucial component of cross-dressing. Joanne (2000), a cross-dresser from Australia, has passed on many occasions, and writes a word of caution to other cross-dressers who are considering coming out,

> Once you are out, it is all go, go, go, just keep an eye on the bank account. I have found that once you have laid the groundwork for coming out the rest is confidence building, your attitude adjustment and achieving the look that you are happy with. Stick to some basic ground rules of where not to go.... [R]emember if you are at all nervous you are a dead give away and you will be read every time (My CD life, ¶ 13).

Juliana (1999), a cross-dresser from Taipei, Taiwan, recalls how her confidence began to grow after the first few times she ventured out in public dressed en femme,

> Whenever I went out, I would adopt some security procedure: putting on the eyeshades (dark colored glasses). I began to go out at night, traveling around on my scooter, buying things at convenience stores, shopping at department stores.... It was really exciting. Whenever I went out as my feminine self, I would put all the outfits in the back of my car. When I found a quiet park, I would sneak into the toilet. Twenty minutes later.... [a] charming young lady had appeared. The only thing I couldn't do was talk.... Other than this, I was confident with my feminine look (¶ 7).

Achieving a feminine-sounding voice is one of the biggest difficulties faced by cross-dressers who want to pass in public. To help cross-dressers learn what it takes to sound like a woman, the Internet once again comes to the rescue with a valuable site called ―Developing a Female Voice.‖

Communicating a Feminine Identity

Some Websites have only one or two photos, while others have extensive virtual albums available for viewing. A common thread among all sites is the importance of communicating a believable level of femininity through one's cross- dressed appearance. However, as Amanda (1999) from the US writes, it is as much about looking the part as feeling it:

> The moment I slip on my wig is when I become a woman. It's like stepping into an alternate universe. I leave my male self behind and Amanda walks the earth (¶ 3). (See Fig. 4.)

Because it is so important to many cross-dressers to achieve a believable or passable look, creating a realistic feminine image is central to many Website texts.

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Sharon (2000), who lives as a full-time woman in London, has this to say about communicating a feminine identity:

> I'm getting closer to the look I desired when I first started on this adventure.... I'm a perfectionist however and I know there are those TVs [transvestites] who don't care if they pass or not and the attitude of the rest of the world doesn't matter, but I'm not like that. I fall into the category of TVs who desire a realistic girl look and I can't face the general public until I'm ready (Telling friends and family, ¶ 18).

To further establish their female identity, many seek out assistance with dress, makeup, and hair, and then have photos taken through such professional services as ―Glamour Shots.‖ Others rely on transgender friends, female friends, or family members to transform them and take their photographs.

Dress
As a kind of stage open to any and all people, the most effective Websites of cross-dressers contain photographs with clear depictions of the dressed body, including apparel, make-up, and shoes. The majority of the Websites include photos taken in a skirt, with lengths ranging from mid-thigh to ankle length. While some photographs are quite conservative, others reflect a sexy image—and some even border on erotica. Regardless of the outcome, the transformation from male to female is taken very seriously, almost to the point of caricature of a biological female—hair, nails, clothes, shoes, all discussed in a manner that clearly relates to stereotypes of feminine appearance in cosmopolitan cultures (see Fig. 5).

Posture
Feminine types of body manipulation and poses are seen across all Websites, obviously because it is paramount to the believability of the cross-dresser as female. Photos of the head and face generally include the head positioned in a downward tilt with eyes looking up to the camera. Seated poses generally depict legs crossed, with pantyhose and high heels, and hands on the lap. Overall, the photographs reflect a studied impression of femininity, clearly suggestive of traditional modes of photographing women. In most of these photographs, there is a sense of pride and ownership on the part of the cross-dresser. As the vehicle for dissemination, the Internet provides other cross-dressers the opportunity to learn from those who have perfected the art of capturing femininity on film.

Internet as a Global Community
Coming-Out Process

Each of the 30 Website authors mentioned that participation in the Internet transgender community was crucial to their psychological and emotional

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well-being as cross-dressers, particularly for those who have yet to ―come out" to family members, friends, or co-workers. The majority of those cross-dressers who have come out say the Internet helped them to dare to go public. It is also described as an important resource for advice and support for those who would like to come out, but have yet to muster the courage. As Cl´audia (2000) from Brazil writes,

> Then I found the Web! Suddenly, a whole new world opened up before my eyes, and a lot of questions were finally answered. Yeah, I can love cross-dressing and not be gay! Yeah, there are other men like me, and some of them even have wives and relatives who know about their [cross-dressing] and support (or at least put up with) it!.... This Website is an attempt to overcome these fears and sort of ―come out..." (My bio, ¶ 8).

Access to resources for transgendered people available on the Web is also critical to many new cross-dressers. Learning how to dress like a woman is one thing, but to carry oneself and even to apply makeup can be a mystery for many who are just beginning to fully realize their desire to cross-dress. Such resources were once only available through obscure mail-order catalogs, but thanks to the Internet, are now readily accessible at the click of the mouse.

In addition to surfing the Web for information on cross-dressing, creating one's own Webpage has helped many individuals to not only come out to others, but also to develop an understanding of their own behaviors. Some Webpage creators view it as an opportunity for reflection and for redefining identity. As Siobh´an (2000) from San Francisco writes,

> What do I expect from this site? Well, I've made many friends over time, and hope to continue to do so. It has helped me to come out, especially by writing my life story. It has helped me to face who I am, both good and bad. I also want it to help others, so that they can learn from my experiences and not, necessarily, go through the same pain and anguish that I have in the past. I want it to show that you can have both— truth in who you are, and a life! (Who is this person, ¶ 7). (See Fig. 6.)

Part Within a Greater Whole

One factor not to be overlooked when using the World Wide Web as an outlet for expression is its potential to inform and enlighten, and in particular, to lead to the discovery that one is not alone—that there are thousands of cross-dressers out there. Many experienced an enormous sense of relief at this discovery, as it has provided comfort and reassurance that one is truly not a freak. As Barbie Lanai (1997) from California explains,

> One of the problems at the time was that I wasn't actually sure what I was, either. There certainly were no Websites, or support groups, or news groups on the subject as can be found so easily now. All I knew was, I like women, but I also liked to wear their clothes; I must be weird (Biography, ¶ 28).

Indeed, the Internet is an important communication device used by cross-dressers to participate in the local and global transgender communities. As with most types of information found on the World Wide Web, the numbers of cross-dressers who are creating

their own Websites is increasing exponentially. It is the hope of many that this community will continue to embrace all transgendered people, and provide a safe place to express themselves and speak of their experiences. Yvonne (2000) from New York puts it like this:

> I don't know how many Websites exist today that address gender issues in general, or cross-dressing specifically, but I doubt you could visit them all. The good news is that the number is growing every day. Each one of us who makes the time and effort to share their life and their story makes it possible for others to grow, to cope, to come to terms and to make peace (Changes, ¶ 18). (See Fig. 7.)

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DISCUSSION
Why is there the need to create a whole Webpage devoted to yourself and your own personal experiences as a cross-dresser? It is obvious that in many cases, this is done to participate within the larger community of Websites and Internet dialogue on the topic. It may also infuse a sense of "realness" into the experience of something that is, at least according to strict social dictates, based on artifice and deception. In many cases, however, while it was easy for us as researchers to

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understand the experiences that shaped these individuals' need to cross-dress, we found it difficult to reconcile feminist concerns about the female body with the content of the Websites. This was particularly true with respect to the use of dress to express "woman" as a state of being.

Many male-to-female cross-dressers—even those who can pass—do not tend to dress like the typical biological female. Instead, they seem to don all the trappings of "femininity" and appear to embrace boldly what many women have been struggling against for decades—the objectification of the female body. Though many of the cross-dressers presented here are clearly conscious of the messages they send, they nevertheless prefer to dress to the extremes of femininity and embrace age-old stereotypes that conflate femininity with an overt sexuality. Barbie Lanai (1997) includes a comment that reflects this preference,

> Real women just don't seem to wear dresses very much any more, and any girl wearing a short dress and heels is bound to be looked over closely (Barbie's first shopping en femme, ¶ 18).

Creating an identity that is meant "to be looked at," and solely for the purposes of consumption by the male gaze does little to erase the imprint of male desire on the female body so deeply-rooted in culture, history, and social convention.

Interestingly, an oft-used phrase on these Websites is that cross-dressing allows men to "get in touch with their feminine side." The concepts of male and female and masculinity and femininity are complex and are a mixture of physicality and enculturation. There is nothing innately "feminine" about a pair of pantyhose or a slinky dress or big hair with lots of makeup. Instead, by reflecting on the process of cross-dressing via the Internet, perhaps these

individuals are able to create a particular understanding of femininity—albeit, culturally specific— thereby ―getting in touch with" what is perceived to be a more nurturing side of themselves. Coreen (2000) puts it this way:

> I had always felt confused about my identity, because I was unknowingly trying to maintain an unreal male facade that wasn't natural. I have changed my attitude. I am very aware now of being drawn into macho stancing and competitiveness....I have tried more and more to let my natural female mannerisms flow, which is hard to do, due to so many years of keeping that guard up. A lot of this has to do with not caring so much of what people think of you, and just being yourself (More recent attitudes, ¶ 14; State of the art at the end of 98, ¶ 10).

Through the creation and publication of personal Websites, the Internet has become a forum for the exchange of experiences, an expression of self by and for cross-dressers. Our examination of these Websites highlights several common issues cross-dressers deal with on a daily basis, issues that are important to talk about with others who have had similar experiences. The Internet has become their primary medium of expression, often sharing their understanding of difference in themselves at a very young age, and what it was like to live in fear of having their ―peculiar" behavior exposed to others. In the process of coming to terms with their need to cross-dress, our Web authors began to nurture the ability to create a feminine identity—many to the point of being able to pass as a woman in public. Finally, all expressed an acute awareness of the ways the Internet has helped them to see that—although they may be an uncommon lot—they are not alone. Rather, they are part of a rich and complex virtual global community. No Website author expressed her gratitude for the Internet more eloquently than Karenanne (2000) from Oregon. She writes,

> During the past several years, I have met and learned from a number of fellow travelers. We have each taken our own paths. Some have paralleled mine. Others have been quite different. Whichever route we take, I believe we are all attempting to reach a common destination. While our goals may seem different, I believe we each share a yearning to express, in our lives, our own personal degree of transgenderism (TG resources, ¶ 1).

Exploring the experiences of these 30 cross-dressers in cyberspace is the first step in understanding this group of marginalized individuals and how they use the Internet to participate in the larger cultural dialogue of gender. The Internet is not only a means of expressing the cross-dressed body, but it is also an entirely new social realm where the body is both transnational and transgendered. Moreover, the Internet is the vehicle through which the self becomes public, in that anyone with access to a computer can create and broadcast his or her own narrative. By generating personal Websites that reveal experiences of life at the margins, the Internet becomes both a community and a context for discourse on gender as a temporary embodiment of social norms and dictates. While it may not solve deep- rooted difficulties some have with maintaining a prescribed gendered identity, it makes clear the fleeting and transitory nature of this identity, as it creates a fixed location for revealing the self as the starting point for understanding the social.

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