

The Gender of Virtual Worlds: Gender Relationships, Cultural Practices and Symbolisms in Prayers of a Virtual Community

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to enrich the existing theoretical framework for the relationship between Folklore and the Internet, focusing on gender relations, cultural practices and symbolisms that exist in virtual communities. Initially, the contemporary international and national literature is studied that addresses these issues and then the methodology of online ethnography is applied with a gender perspective to a specific religious virtual community. The moderate participation of one of the authors in this religious virtual community had the purpose of gathering more information about women, members of this digital community. The main research question of this study was whether there is a gender perspective in a virtual community or not. The members of this virtual community pointed out that there is no gender discrimination or discrimination against women, and no gender inequality in the members of their community. Therefore, this study also clarifies processes and gendered behaviors that are shaped by it, but also highlights predominant beliefs, ideologies, behaviors, social actions, internalized patterns of behavior, as well as instruments and expressive features, etc. that exist in them. The results of the research help to fill bibliographic gaps and produce a new theory of the relation between folk culture, gender and new technologies.

Keywords: *Feminist digital ethnography, Virtual reality, Online ethnography, Gender identities, Gender relations, Internet culture, Digital folklore, Women ordination.*

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Highlights of this paper

- It enriches the existing theoretical framework for the relationship between Folklore and the Internet.
- It highlights gender relations, cultural practices and symbolisms that exist in virtual communities.
- It fills bibliographic gaps and produce a new theory of the relation between folk culture, gender and new technologies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, the analytical category of gender has been introduced into the sciences and culture. This term does not focus on the biological and anatomical characteristics of humans, determined by chromosomes and/or other physical characteristics. It is understood as a social construct, related to the roles within society and those characteristics claimed to be typically “feminine” or “masculine” (Gasouka, 1998; Gasouk., 2007). The introduction of the gender dimension as an analytical category challenged the concepts of dominance that characterize relations between men and women and were perceived as “normal”. Both Feminism and Christianity are committed to fighting for human dignity and equality, human justice, essential human relationships and gender equality. However, researchers dealing specifically with Christianity argue that its written tradition has influenced basic perceptions of Western culture and has helped to shape the gender identity and the distribution of roles in the public and private spheres. In particular, interesting modern international literature states that the Christian Church contributes to gender discrimination. Researchers say, when the interpretation of “Christian ethics” prevails, then the exclusion of women and the adoption of different forms of passive behavior, such as virtue, humility, self-sacrifice and self-denial, are intensifying. These characteristics prevented the development of women’s autonomy, pushed them to the margins and the ecclesiastical power was exercised by men (Kasselouri-Chatzivasileiadi, 2003). These powerful patriarchal gendered stereotypical perceptions are preserved to our day. God is referred to as the Father and Christ, the Apostles, the disciples, the Prophets and the priesthood are all men. The women participated mainly in the body/flock of the Church, they were not entrusted with central roles and were excluded from the hierarchy (Great and Little Tradition), occupying their male-centered designed gendered position as “preconscious” by their “nature”, as mediators between the sanctuary and the cosmic, between nature and culture. Men dominate, female gender appears much more limited and treated stereotypically, although Christ treated women equally and gave them an active role in early-Christian societies. Reflection arises whether this is related to the historical era in which the Religious study (New Testament) is referenced or is it a characteristic of the Christian interpretation itself. The feminist interpretation accepts that the exclusion of women has become so imperceptibly and tacitly, without dogmatic adoption (Kasselouri-Chatzivasileiadi, 2003).

In the Anglican Church, with about 80 million believers worldwide, there are disagreements about sexuality and sex. The Anglican Church is the set of autonomous Christian churches that follow the ritual tradition of the Church of England. It was created at the time of the Reformation in England, especially when King Henry VIII rejected the Pope’s rule in Rome and proclaimed himself the supreme ruler of the Church of England. This was combined with the Protestant Reformation that took place across Europe. Thus, a new form of Christian Church emerged that did not depend on the Pope and had the opportunity to bring some of these values to the Anglican Church, although still retaining much of the Catholic heritage. These views are displayed in a virtual community on “Second Life” (Campbell, 2010).

The Internet is no longer a material construct, not just a technological means, but also a means of communication, a field of coexistence and mainly of interaction between individuals and avatars, thus a field of

creating folk culture (Gasouka & Foulidi, 2012). McNeill (2009) accepts the definition of Georges and Jones (1995) who consider that the term “popular culture” denotes “expressive forms, processes and behaviors that:

1. We usually learn, teach and present during the face-to-face interactions.
2. We regard as traditional because: (a) they are based on pre-existing data or models and (b) they serve as evidence of continuity and consistency through time and space in human knowledge, thought, faith and the feeling” and for this definition she states that “communication technologies, especially the Internet, provide the framework for such an emergence and dissemination”. The field of the Internet was initially male-dominated, as well as other areas of new technologies. It is noted though that, as women’s access to the web grows rapidly across the globe, many persons live a “virtual life”, in which they adopt cultural practices and symbolisms similar to those they adopt in the real world.

2. IMPLEMENTATION CONTEXT

Cyber/Online ethnography (Netnography) was applied in this research, focusing on a digital/online community (Gasouka & Foulidi, 2017). Gender relations, cultural practices and symbolisms that exist in it were studied, as well as elements of the online identity of its members. That is, this research belongs to feminist ethnography. It is a research methodology that utilizes questions and interprets data, recognizing diversity based on Feminist Science. Feminist online ethnography responds to the need to disrupt the traditional relationship between researcher and research subject by actively seeking to reduce power inequalities and to participate in more democratic research processes. It makes women visible both as subjects and as research objects in digital fields. It embraces their diversity and focuses on their identity, on the changes in their lives. Digital ethnographic research redefines primary data. A female researcher has been involved, who, due to her social status as a woman, was more sensitized and therefore more competent for “approaching” her gender-kind in digital field research. This methodological choice aims at generating knowledge with the potential to transform social and practical problems by focusing on the field of New Technologies that can contribute to social change.

2.1. Problem definition - Scope

The purpose of this research was to gather more information about women, members of the digital community. The main research question of this study is expressed in relation to the main focus: Is there a gender perspective in a virtual community? In order to answer the main question, two minor questions are dealt with:

- 1) What kind of gendered relationships are formed in a virtual religious community?
- 2) What cultural practices and symbolisms exist in a virtual religious community, related to gender?

2.2. Research Methodology

The field of research is the community: Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in Second Life (Hutchings, 2017). This particular community was selected because it met the following criteria:

- (a) It had the required breadth of data available for online ethnographic research.
- (b) To be a popular site, with an increased number of members and a multitude of activities; to make the sample of the population as wide as possible, an internet site was chosen that does not charge subscription fees to its members.
- (c) To be friendly, humble and respectful to the research subjects.
- (d) To have several years of existence; this community has been active since 2007.
- (e) To have three-dimensional graphics.

- (f) The actions of the online community are directly related to the purpose of this research.
- (g) The activities developed in the community and their working hours are many and varied.
- (h) The feeling of being and integrating into the online community; the sense of being, one of the basic human requirements (Maslow, 1943) is related to the sense of connectivity when “ontological security” is provided (Giddens, 1984). Such security is developed when people realize that there is reliable and available support. The ability to quickly and frequently interact with others creates a sense of cohesion and reduces levels of isolation (Chayko, 2008).

It is a religious virtual community **Figure 1** in which worship, the study of the Bible and prayer take place. It belongs to the Church of England or it is an Anglican Church within Second Life (SL), where Anglicans or whoever appreciates the Anglican heritage participate, as well as those with other names that appreciate what is provided there.



Figure-1. The top view of the cross-shaped digital community.

The researcher joined as a visitor to the Epiphany Island community, on February 23, 2018. Initially, she contented herself to a simple presence in the research field, which is a passive form of participation and is often referred to as “staying” in it. She systematically observed its members, without interfering with them and without participating as an equal member in community activities. After completing a two-month stay in the digital field, the researcher chose the “Anglican” designation/tag. Through her moderate participation, she had become recognized as a member of the community and then systematically started interacting with its other members. Besides, the participants’ observation method requires initially some degree of passive participation in both traditional and digital ethnography. After completing her three-month stay in the digital field, the researcher made her role as a researcher visible and clear (Baym, 2000; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002) having immediately submitted a request for approval to the group of Anglican Cathedral of Second Life. After communication via e-mail, permission was granted by the current Chair of the team, who runs Anglicans of Second Life, on July 20, 2018, while discretion, confidentiality and respect for the personal life of participants was agreed. At this stage of the survey, the researcher had already applied both active and full participation, since she had actively participated in almost all the community’s activities for eight months. She listened to the voices of the subjects of the survey,

participated in conversations with them and took part in religious rituals. She constantly photographed the community's spaces, its members, the events that take place in the community and other forms of interaction that take place. She also made recordings, which she deemed necessary.

3. RESULTS DESCRIPTION

This research is part of the digital folklore (e-folklore) research field (Foulidi, 2015). It approached a virtual potential community from a gender perspective, which is a component of popular culture on the internet, since "virtual body-ness" is "a situation in which a user of New Technologies so consciously immersed in his/her digitally mediated experiences understands them to be equally tangible and real" (Blank & Howard, 2013).

Initially, it was found that the particular digital community was created, but it also develops numerous and varied religious activities daily, because it limits and eliminates the social and physical barriers of geographic/natural spaces. Everyday people participate in religious activities taking place there Figure 3, having moving disabilities, being from all over the world, sick, elderly and living in remote areas (Wellman & Hampton, 1999). The religious perceptions are transferred from real life to the virtual/potential one, to meet the religious needs of the people. No one in the Pastoral Ministry wore sacred clothing (vestments) in the community's digital fields. All of them had avatars, which had common elements with their personal physical characteristics and a pseudonym. They accept the mission of the members of the Anglican Church, identified by the following "five signs":

- 1) To proclaim the good news of the Church.
- 2) To teach, baptize, and nurture new believers.
- 3) To respond to human needs with love and willingness to offer.
- 4) To seek to improve the unfair structures of society.
- 5) To strive to preserve the integrity of creation and to retain the life of the earth.



Figure-2. The Cathedral, where many community actions had been carrying out in the last period of the research.

Community members have the right to express their thoughts and suggestions for enhancing community services and events. There are confidentiality and solidarity among community members. Inappropriate behavior is considered to be physical and verbal violence in the community. The following is an indication of the researcher's ("equalep") dialogue with members of the pastoral community.

[12:46] equalep: *Are there any rules women should observe more than men?*

[12:46] H.M.: *no*

[12:47] H.M.: *our rules of behaviour make no reference to gender. They state: You are welcome to visit Epiphany, but in doing so you agreeing to abide by the following rules:*

- 1) *The privacy of others using the sim must be respected.*
- 2) *No offensive language, or violence.*
- 3) *No grieving or other behaviour that prevents or may prevent other avatars from using the facilities on our sim.*
- 4) *No nudity, public chat or actions of a sexual nature.*
- 5) *No drawn weapons.*



Figure-3. The posting of the weekly community's program.

Anglicans of SL accept diversity. They recognize that, although there are disputes and tensions in their church as well as in the world today, they must rejoice in God's request for us to accept diversity. They emphasize the need for everyone to remember their primary responsibility to "make Christ visible, together" in their words and deeds. In this context, gender equality is acceptable for SL Anglicans. Gender is not a problem or even an issue. They think that men and women all work together as a team. They pointed out that there is no gender discrimination or discrimination against women, and no gender inequality in the members of their community. They emphasized that they have not identified actions that women are not allowed to perform in the digital community, because of their gender. This is because women in the Anglican Church do not face gender discrimination. However, there were

community members who stated that they either did not have personal experience/view on the subject or could not substantiate their views with strong arguments, because they lacked relevant scientific knowledge. Of course, it is emphasized that in this particular community, especially for those who perform priestly duties or belong to a subgroup of the community, they need to be honest about their true gender.

The women, members of the community, form groups, discuss the problems of everyday life, share their concerns and also provide support and help to those who need it. They are not confined to the traditional “women’s” themes and they play important roles that do not always exist in the real life of its members, such as the role of a priest. They do not feel that their freedom of expression is restricted. Yet in some cases, they reproduce gender stereotypes and distinctions that exist in real life, since behaviors, features and roles in non-computer life are also transferred to life within the computer. Although there are female priests in the community, they do not always believe that all religious events take place independently of gender, since gender identity in the virtual world is shaped by elements of gender identity in the “real world”. The subjective experience of gender on the web reproduces power relationships of reality.

In this context, cultural practices and symbolisms that exist in real life also appear in virtual/potential communities. In Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL there are two regular liturgies, prayers and weekly reading of the Bible. The weekly Bible study is held on a Sunday morning (Second Life Time). It is a regular worship event that is repeated on an annual, calendar basis and is included in the daily worship life of the community. They were held every Sunday in a place called “Enorchestia”, shortly before the Sunday prayer was performed at the community cathedral [Figure 2](#). Attendees, as they enter the community space by touching the Bible [Figure 4](#), which is placed and open on the table, they receive with a notecard the text that they will access and interpret in their weekly meeting.



Figure-4. Touching the bible and excerpting from the holy book.

“Today we have a Bible Study, which is conducted each week and during which only specific excerpts from the text are triggered. We usually discuss the passage of the Gospel for the day.”

The entire content of the Bible or Holy Bible, Devine Scripture, Scriptures, Sacred Letters are the sole source of Christian faith and unique authority. The sacred tradition of the church is important to the Anglican Cathedral in

SL. The Bible defines the first part of both their faith and their conduct. The next is necessarily dictated by logic. After that, the voice of the church follows. This means that they are firstly studying the Bible [Figure 5](#), in order to get the proper answers, understanding the true meaning of the written words. If the concept is not completely clear, they use logic, that is, common sense. If there is still any doubt, the traditional interpretation adopted over the years is accepted. The Bible, tradition and discourse must agree with one another, with priority given to the Bible. In this combination, the personal experience of each and every one of them is an additional source of understanding. During the weekly Bible study, they discuss other issues related to personal concerns and/or current affairs. Discussion groups are occasionally hosted on the island. The entire Bible could be read by anyone in any of the languages, in the basement of the temple, by clicking on the relevant field.

Women, just like the community's men, believe in praying to communicate with God, expressing their faith and asking for forgiveness or asking for something else. They pray not only anywhere in the digital environment of their community but also in whatever way they wish, either alone or with others (morning prayer in the chapel, Sunday prayer in the Cathedral), praying the official Anglican Church prayers or prayers which each one creates alone. In the Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL, a study of the Bible is carried out every Sunday morning, in the area called "Orchestration", shortly before Sunday's prayer. Those present, as they touch the Bible that exists in the digital environment, receive the excerpts that then comment. Their interpretation highlights the values of the community, such as altruism, freedom, love and acceptance of diversity.

Prayer is a key element of religious life on Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL:

Aug. 6, 2018 [12:19] H.M.: *"Everyone should rely on prayer"*.

It is a ritual act, a customary practice involving either a single person or a group of individuals. Women in the community have revealed that it is a dominant way of communicating with God, "speaking with God", expressing gratitude to Him, His doxology. They do not choose a home space, but they prefer the digital field. Believers, regardless of their gender, express their faith and ask for His will to be done, seek forgiveness or beg for something. They feel joy, fear, regret, and hope as well. Members of this digital community often pray continuously throughout the year and throughout the day without interruption, since prayer occurs not only during planned community actions, but whenever a believer feels this need. They admit that the choice of conscious prayer has to do with personal beliefs, ideology and family tradition.



Figure-5. Reading of the Bible on Jan. 6, 2019.

Members of Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL make use of standard texts available in the digital field. These texts may in some cases block them but also help them to think of ideas, images and word formats that they can use. The values that emerge in most prayers on Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL are love for fellow human beings, power, humanity, and other intercultural values, such as respect for diversity.

Prayer requests from anyone wishing to pray for the needs of their community or other members are lodged at Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL. Prayer requests are studied by members of the Pastoral Ministry Team. They are lodged in the prayer box but then added to the "Last prayer requests" tab. In this box, anyone can write a prayer request by clicking on it. These requests are being implemented in the digital community over the next week or two. If the prayer request concerns a member of the community, it may be submitted anonymously or not, as desired. If the request is for someone else, it is emphasized that no part of their real identity, such as their full name, will be disclosed out of respect for their privacy. It is suggested that they use the initials of their name, believing that God will know for sure who they are. They still urge communication not to stop with the prayer request, but they feel joy and happiness if they share the prayer response.

Examples of submitting prayer requests are the following:

- *We pray for D and her husband in the US, who need a home, a car, and a job. Her husband was injured in his last job. He had a disability in a car accident, so he could not work. Pray also for peace and wisdom and hope for both, as well as anticipation for their future [February 4th, 2019].*
- *Please pray for my sister, M., who has been hospitalized in Wellington, New Zealand, for the last few days with brain and ocular injuries, following a fall.*
- *Let's pray for VERA, who today has great pain and many family problems, we ask our God to forgive her and lift her sin.*

At Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL the motives and causes of prayer are many and varied. They are always related to personal situations in real life, whether pleasant or unpleasant, such as guilt, mourning, healing, family problems, issues of concern to children, the arrival of a new baby, pregnancy, adoption or the need to obtain justice. They respond to the need for guidance in difficult situations with the fear of responding to them. The purpose of prayer is related to the fulfillment of private affairs, such as difficulties in personal and family life, problems at school, studies, associations, travels, sports, work and retirement. Prayers for the memory and the posthumous fame of those who are no longer with us take place. Prayers are sometimes made to tackle global difficult situations, such as prayers for peace and security, conflict and disorder elimination, tragedy prevention, and sometimes support for those who have been victims of tragedy and disaster, for refugees, immigrants, prisoners and captives. Characteristic is the following prayer that was made on March 17, 2019, for those who are experiencing tragedy and disaster:

*Lord, our God,
source of all kindness and love,
receive the intense prayers of your people.
At your plentiful mercy, look with compassion
to all who turn to You for help.
Because You are kind, You love souls,
and to YOU we give glory, to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
now and forever.
Everyone: Amen.*

Finally, it was found that prayers were made for those serving in the Armed Forces, and the security forces, either in active service or enrolled in the British Army Field Service Book. Sometimes they found it necessary to perform “urgent prayers”, which called for God’s immediate help in a particular situation:

Aug. 16, 2018 [17:19] H.M.: *“But fortunately we don’t live our whole lives in times of extreme crisis”.*

At Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL traditionally prayer time is mainly either morning or evening, but believers can choose the time that is right for them. Of course, they appear to be in a quiet place in the digital field, where they can devote the time needed to accomplish it. The frequency of prayer is not specified. The prayer process is a personal choice for each member of the community; there may be regular, attendance on Sunday and morning prayer, but there is also the irregular execution of prayer when one of the aforementioned reasons occurs.

The Second Life Anglican Cathedral emerges as the main place of worship and prayer. It is a place of gathering, prayer and meditation, not used by other external groups. Its interior is dominated by the wooden cross, the absence of icons, the iconostasis and the simplicity of space. Believers upon entering the Cathedral used to light candles to perform their worship duties and then approach to the benches. Every Sunday, the prayer for the members of the community is held. There were private prayers in the meditation chapel, which can be used by anyone for meditation. At Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL the structure of prayer is not always stable:

“Welcome everyone to this prayer service, which takes place [Determination of time, such as Lent Sunday]. We will be using voice and text during this service today. Feel free to get involved with either.”

Most often prayer is expressed in words, seeking to break through emotional tension and the persuasive need to fulfill demands. Silent or whispered prayers related to magic were not observed in the community. Phrases of respect and appreciation are given to God. His generosity is highlighted with tender recalls; vows are taken; persuasion and invocation of emotion are used. At Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL, body posture during prayer is the same as for anywhere else. Kneeling is the traditional posture of belief and will for praise. Women and men can pray not only anywhere but also in any way they want and feel comfortable, such as walking, standing or sitting. They can choose one of the positions offered as options, shown in [Figure 6](#):

Aug. 16, 2018 [17:19] [12:34] A.S.: *It depends on the avatar, customs, kinds and available animation abilities.*

It is accepted in the community that in daily prayer the believers can use their hands. Their fingers are used to remember various things during prayer. In particular, the thumb is considered the strongest finger in the believer’s hand; its use in prayer indicates thanksgiving for all the powerful things in life, such as home, family, and relationships that support you. The index is used when prayer is made for all those people and things in life that guide and help the believers, such as friends, teachers, doctors, nurses, emergency services, and so on. The middle finger is used when prayer is done for all the important people in power in the world, such as world leaders and their governments, members of parliament and local councilors, the royal family or other leaders of the world and their governments. The fourth finger is a weak one, since it cannot do much on its own. It is used to remember the poor, the weak, the helpless, the hungry, the sick and mourning people. The little finger, the smallest and last one is used if the prayer concerns the believer. Repeated words in all prayers on Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL are “Amen” and “Alleluia”.



Figure-6. Options for praying postures.

One of the most frequently repeated prayers on Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL is the following:

Father/Mother/God,

thank you for bringing us back to this place, this place is not only a place for discussion, it is our world dominated by love and care.

Sep. 16, 2018 [11:10] Mimsey Borogove (mimseyborogove.susanowa): *Help us see what we want today and help us achieve it in our coming weeks and in our lives.*

[11:10] Mimsey Borogove (mimseyborogove.susanowa): *In the name of Jesus, amen.*

At Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL occasional worship events take place over the course of time. The Feast of Creation, Posada, Palm Sunday, Easter, Pentecost; they are celebrated with rituals and ritual revival equivalently with what is happening in real life. The Feast of Creation at Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL is dedicated to God as Creator and supporter of every life. In the psalms and prayers of this day, the forests, the rivers and the fields are included that give their own praise to the Creator. On the occasion of the celebration of Posada at Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL, two young persons of the community, dressed as Maria and Joseph, go from home to home in the village and ask for hospitality for the birth of Jesus. On the Palm Sunday celebration at Epiphany Island - Home of the Anglican Cathedral in SL, the triumphant entrance of Jesus to Jerusalem in procession and palm trees is depicted in a digital environment. During the celebration of the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit's epithet is celebrated to the 12 disciples, the Apostles, and others by the lighting of a candle. There are elements of cultural material in the community, such as the cross, the candle, the rosary, etc., that have the same symbolic value as those that exist in real life.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This research, having identified and chosen on the basis of specific criteria the gender perspective in the appropriate virtual community, investigated, analyzed and interpreted gender relations and cultural practices, as well as the produced Discourse, but also the symbolic sphere within which they are being developed. It concludes with relevant findings similar to those of traditional Ethnography, as expressed in the previous section. This research also highlights new fields of knowledge, such as gender in new technologies and digital folklore. It broadens the international dialogue between women and men on folkloric issues related to Netnography, gender,

digital folklore, etc. It creates a good research practice with the application of online ethnography, through the participation of the researcher to the digital community. So in the context of digital folklore, it enriches the existing international literature and contributes to cover important bibliographic gaps.

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