

## AWARENESS CONTEXTS OF ONLINE INTERACTIONS AT THE CANNIBAL CAFÉ FORUM

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### Abstract

This paper demonstrates how Glaser and Strauss's procedural guidelines on awareness contexts can be utilised to study interactions in online deviant communities. This is, to our knowledge, the first time their awareness context paradigm has been used to examine the interactions of online communities of deviants. The research is based on a qualitative content analysis of Cannibal Café members' discussions. By analysing the relationship between the Cannibal Café members' identities, their awareness, and their interactions, our study has shown that the open awareness context, which is one of the four awareness contexts identified by Glaser and Strauss, was dominant within this online community of cannibals. However, although most of the interaction unfolded under the awareness context, this context actually coexisted with the suspicion context. One context did not transform into another: they simply coexisted, but the open awareness context prevailed, which proved crucial for the unconstrained expression of deviance.

**Key words:** awareness contexts, online interaction, online deviant community, cannibalism

## КОНТЕКСТИ СВЕСНОСТИ У ОНЛАЈН КОМУНИКАЦИЈИ НА КАНИБАЛ КАФЕ ФОРУМУ

### Апстракт

У раду се бавимо испитивањем могућности за примену процедуралних правила која су осмислили Глејзер и Штраус, за разумевање контекста свесности у онлајн интеракцији. Колико је нама познато, ово је прва примена ове парадигме за проучавање интеракција у оквиру девијантних заједница на интернету. Истраживање је базирано на квалитативној анализи садржаја дискусија чланова форума Канибал Кафе (енгл. Cannibal Café). Успостављањем везе између њихо-

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вог идентитета, свесности и интеракције наше истраживање је показало да је отворени контекст свесности, који је један од четири основна контекста које су идентификовали Глејзер и Штарус, онај који доминира у овој заједници девијаната. Међутим, иако доминантан, он није и једини који се овде може идентификовати будући да је и контекст сумње, иако у мањој мери, ипак јасно заступљен. Важно је додати и то да се ови контексти не преливају један у други већ једноставно коегзистирају, на крају, дозвољавајући неспутано испољавање девијантности љубитеља канибализма.

**Кључне речи:** контексти свесности, онлајн интеракција, онлајн девијантност, канибализам

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been growing interest in studying deviant communities in virtual settings (Deshotels and Forsyth, "Conjuring, Expanding"; Sendler; Kavanaugh and Maratea; Maratea and Kavanaugh). Since the interaction among deviants in virtual environments is mainly anonymous, members of these online communities are less concerned about stigma or legal penalties. On the other hand, this may encourage communal efforts at rationalization (Durkin et al.).

The virtual space of the Internet makes an ideal setting for the creation of Goffman's "back places" (*Stigma*), where individuals do not feel forced to conceal their stigmatising characteristics and need not worry about the tense consequential communication with others due to their stigma. Whether individuals appear in these "back places" voluntarily or not makes no difference: these places provide an atmosphere of special intimacy. Their visitors come across other persons who suffer similar stigmas and may feel relaxed enough to discuss this candidly. For this reason, the back places on the Internet are so precious to extreme deviants such as the cannibalism lovers' community examined herein, whose social stigma impedes any reasonable attempt to create a subculture in a physical space (Maratea and Kavanaugh; Durkin et al.).

Another significant aspect of the study of deviant communities on the Internet is that virtual spaces present a unique opportunity to analyse the interaction among forum users in the process of the development of online identities and during role play, which yields important insights into the social organisation of deviant online communities and the interactions within them. The relationship between identity, interaction and self-presentation in the online context has been examined in the past few decades from various perspectives, including Erving Goffman's social dramaturgy (*The Presentation; Behavior; Interaction Ritual*). The key assumption is that the communication of digital platform users is understood and interpreted by means of an interaction model which exists between actors and their audiences (e.g., Miller; Ellison et al.; Bullingham and Vasconcelos; Pejković). In this sense, visitors to digital platforms use expressive

resources (text, audio-visual content, etc.) to present themselves to other visitors (their audience) by assuming a desired role, thus forming their online identities.

Our study is based on the context analysis of online interaction among the Cannibal Café forum participants within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, and relies chiefly on Glaser and Strauss's approach to awareness contexts (Glaser and Strauss, "Awareness Contexts") They assumed that when men confront each other, neither can at all times be certain that they know the other's identity or the way in which their own identity is perceived by the other. We argue that interaction context in online communities of deviants is a paradigmatic example of this hide-and-seek identity interplay which inspired us to use Glaser and Strauss's approach to awareness contexts.

Although Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory has been applied to studying a community of online deviants, this is, to our knowledge, the first time their awareness context paradigm has been utilised to examine the interactions of online communities of deviants (see Sendler). Therefore, this study demonstrates the heuristic potential of the awareness contexts paradigm in studying online interactions. In addition, this paradigm is expected to help us establish the dominant awareness context in the Cannibal Café forum and ascertain if awareness contexts transform during the interaction.

The rest of the paper is divided into several sections. In the first section, we explain the approach based on the study of awareness contexts. In the second section, we explore the application of this paradigm for the awareness context examination to the online communities of deviants. The section titled *Methods and Materials* explains the procedural guidelines for the awareness context study. We then move on to discuss the findings of our research and to reflect on the final considerations.

#### AWARENESS CONTEXTS IN SOCIOLOGICAL LITERATURE

According to Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser, awareness contexts are a central concept in the study of human interaction (Glaser and Strauss, "Awareness Contexts", *Awareness of Dying, Time for Dying*). Their study of awareness contexts took shape after years of research of interactions in US hospitals, focusing primarily on the relationship between the medical staff and the dying patients.

Based on this, they defined the awareness contexts, and offered their typology and guidelines for studies in various social settings. These guidelines, in their opinion, constitute the paradigm components for exploration of awareness contexts (Glaser and Strauss, "Awareness Contexts" 669).

This theory has been broadly applied in the studies of social interactions, identity and awareness (Schmid and Jones; Schou; Timmermans; Seale et al.; Richards et al.; Harrop et al.; Albas and Albas; Muzzin).

While observing the process of dying (the organisation and structural conditions for secrecy, the course of interactions, etc.) in hospitals outside San Francisco, Glaser and Strauss learnt that terminally ill patients, unlike the medical staff who tended to them, were mostly unaware of their coming death (Timmermans). They assumed that the phenomenon of awareness in the interaction process can be quite complex because every interaction involves two or more persons and each person has their unique way of managing their own identity and the identity of the person they are interacting with (Glaser and Strauss, "Awareness Contexts"). From there on, they produced the theory of awareness contexts, which, in the broadest terms, encompass everything a person, a group of people or a community know about a specific issue. Consequently, the awareness context concept, as a unit of analysis, may apply to any social situation which involves interaction and includes all that the interactants know of the others' identities and their own identity as perceived by others. They constitute authentic structural units rather than mere attributes of structural units (role, group, organisation, community, etc). By "context," they mean a structural unit of an encompassing order larger than the other unit under focus: interaction. Awareness context is a structural unit "which exceeds" and "surrounds and affects" the units of analysis (Lee).

Glaser and Strauss ("Awareness Contexts" 678) identified four types of awareness contexts to be given special consideration since they proved useful in accounting for different types of interaction:

(1) **Open** awareness context refers to any situation in which each interactant is aware of the other's true identity and his/her own identity as perceived by others;

(2) **Closed** awareness context denotes a situation in which one interactant does not know either the other's identity or the other's view of his identity;

(3) **Suspicion** context is a modification of the closed awareness context. In this situation, one interactant doubts the other's true identity, or the other's view of his own identity, or both;

(4) **Pretence** context is a modification of the open awareness context, and it denotes a situation in which both interactants are fully aware of each other's identities, but pretend they are not.

This typology hinges on the consideration of two dichotomous variables, or awareness (pretence and non-pretence) and two interactants, and the consideration of two trichotomous variables: awareness degree (awareness, suspicion, and unawareness) and identity (own identity, and own identity as seen by the other and the other's identity) (Glaser and Strauss, "Awareness Contexts" 678).

The concept of awareness contexts and the paradigm for their study are useful for understanding different approaches to exploring awareness and interaction in various social settings. To demonstrate this, Glaser and Strauss made an overview of works of the precursors to the interactionist perspective, which contained the roots of their theory.

Goffman (*The Presentation*), for instance, speaks of closed awareness contexts and pretence contexts because people tend to manage their impressions by performing the desired identity. However, unlike Glaser and Strauss, who focused on the structural conditions imposed by social organisation, Goffman was more centred on situational conditions. He did not explore the consequences of interactions or their development.

On the other hand, Mead's interactionist theory revolved around the open awareness context (see Mead). Mead believed that the awareness of a person's gestures (speech, nonverbal gestures) affected one's definition of others and their future behaviour. According to Glaser and Strauss, he assumed that the consequential interaction would be open and sincere, with the exception of certain situations he mentioned, such as acting ("Awareness Contexts" 674).

The sociology of dying and social activism centred on these issues has greatly benefited from Glaser and Strauss's theory of awareness contexts in hospitals. It is also a product of the grounded theory as a qualitative method based on coding, which aims to form a theory (see Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery*; Timmermans).

#### *THE APPLICATION OF THE PARADIGM FOR AWARENESS CONTEXT STUDY TO ONLINE DEVIANT COMMUNITIES*

The awareness context study paradigm is applicable to various social units, especially to the development and course of social interaction. Glaser and Strauss particularly encouraged its application to "deviant communities whose actions are visible to 'squares'" ("Awareness Contexts"). An important novelty in our research is that it deals with awareness contexts in a virtual environment, whereas Glaser and Strauss's paradigm of awareness contexts is commonly applied to the physical world. This, of course, may be challenging given the fact that the identities created in virtual settings are far more flexible than those developed in the "offline" reality, and they are not necessarily based on the real identities of Internet users (Turkle "Cyberspace and Identity"). Communication on the earliest digital networking platforms and chat rooms, such as forums, involved "interplay between anonymity and fantasy, versus honesty" (Marneweck 249). At the very beginning of research into identity in cyberspace, e.g. in multi-player games and forums, Sherry Turkle realised that the virtual identity, personality and even the body may be constructed merely by textual description ("Cyberspace and Identity"). Furthermore,

the construction of multiple identities is an option as well, and Turkle claims that life in a number of different virtual worlds and playing with identities also has a mild therapeutic effect – from resolving certain conflicts originating in the real world to facilitating self-knowledge (Turkle, "Constructions and Reconstructions").

As we see deviance as a relational category rather than as a substantive attribute of individuals and groups (Goffman, *The Presentation; Stigma*), we argue that the open awareness context is crucial for the unconstrained expression of deviance. Cannibalism is a taboo thing, often associated with horror stigma and monstrous behaviour which makes people restrained in expressing their interest in cannibalism in offline settings. However, virtual communities allow deviants to experiment with their preferences freely, without the constraints of stigmatization (Jenkins; Quinn and Forsyth; Deshotels and Forsyth, "Postmodern Masculinities"), and thus they offer a fruitful research landscape for understanding deviant behaviour.

The interaction designed by the Cannibal Café forum (CCF) organisation, which is the subject of our study, created a space in which participants assumed roles and thereby created their online identities. CCF has been inactive since 2002, when the last message was posted. The content of the forum was intended for users with cannibalistic fantasies and desires<sup>1</sup>. Forum participants discussed and shared pictures, photos, stories and advice on cannibalism. Some even appear to have been intent on meeting other users in the physical world. According to the forum's home page, the CCF represents an *UnderNet* channel for *snuff sex*, accessible from any *UnderNet* server in the world. The forum, it claimed, intended to facilitate sharing stories, fantasies and photos among adults concerning such topics as sex and death as a result of sex, and encouraged the members to post comments, impressions and suggestions in the designated section. An adult was defined as a person recognized in his or her geopolitical reality as such, but the forum would respect a member's wish to misrepresent his/her age, this being attributable to role playing.

Role playing is quite common in digital culture: participants may engage in pretence, making things up and sharing their fantasies (for more information, see Brown). Participants who pursued hobbies such as role play have a notable propensity for self-concealment since their activities tend to deviate from a broader social context and from what is understood to be "normal behaviour". An important effect of the forums in which sexual context is shared through role play designated as deviant is that individuals who are ostracized in the real world establish strong collective bonds based on the same interests (Brown 5). This results in social

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<sup>1</sup> All information cited herein as the content of the forum was downloaded from *archive.org*.

recognition, a subtle expression of affinities, a stronger identity and relaxed tension caused by stigma suffered in reality.

Despite the CCF's proclaimed intention to enable role play and sharing cannibalistic fantasies and content, it can be reasonably assumed that some members were serious about their cannibalistic intentions.<sup>2</sup> German Armin Meiwes, for example, murdered and ate his willing partner, videotaped the whole process and posted the recording. Meiwes had profiles in the CCF and similar websites. The forum was suspended after the event (Lykins and Cantor 181).

From a legal point of view, cannibalism is definable as an "act of one individual of a species consuming all or part of another individual of the same species" (Schutt 7). Human cannibalism is an exceedingly rare occurrence in today's society, perceived as an extreme act of violence. Of the three broadest categories of cannibalism: ritual, survival, and pathological, the last is the least common. Pathological cannibalism is a deviant type of behaviour, harshly condemned by the community at large and often connected with different kinds of paraphilia and psychotic disorders (see Raymond et al.).

The relational characteristic of deviance may be the most notable one from several aspects. The first aspect is that the CCF was meant to facilitate content sharing and role play which are problematic in relation to normative normality predominant in the real world. In this aspect, the interplay of reality and virtuality as a specific setting in which deviance is defined is quite significant (Boellstorff; Adler and Adler; Bullingham and Vasconcelos). Therefore, the norms of normality originating from the physical world, and the fluidity and anonymity of the virtual environment produce a field in which users may seek interaction on the Internet where they would not be forced to conceal their deviance, otherwise stigmatised offline.

The second aspect is the atmosphere in the forum, where the idea of deviance is disregarded because participants of similar disposition are expected to bond. The forum participants disclose their fantasies and thus produce the intended impression of cannibals. Nevertheless, regarding the

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<sup>2</sup> The American Psychiatric Association defines many of the fantasies and desires described by the CCF members as paraphilic disorders, so collectively they may be qualified as a deviant community. These fantasies indicate sadistic, masochistic and fetishist disorders, which are common paraphilias by comparison, but may have harmful consequences, including injuries, murder, and inflicting damage to others, so some qualify as criminal offences (American Psychiatric Association 685). Relatively often, the forum discussions would involve paraphilias like necrophilia, zoophilia (705) and vorarephilia, defined as erotic desire to consume or be consumed by another human being (see Lykins and Cantor). Due to physical and legal constraints, illustrations, photos, and audio-visual content displaying elements of these paraphilic affinities are frequently shared by and among members of various online subcultures or digital communities such as CCF (Lykins and Cantor 181).

second aspect, it is important to bear in mind the variability of roles played in relation to the context of interaction. Even though the CCF is clearly supportive of people's cannibalistic urges, it is still important to ascertain how the infusion of non-deviant opinions in the CCF changes the role play mode (Goffman, *Stigma*). In other words, we wish to problematize the question of whether the cannibalistic preference discourse changes when the discourse which disapproves or condemns cannibalistic urges infuses the interaction. Would users share their fantasies differently and would communication move towards self-stigmatisation, and therefore towards the "attenuation" of deviance, which would be an expected reaction in the offline settings, or would an altogether different scenario emerge? The last aspect of deviance we consider here is whether the virtual spaces designed especially for users most often designated as deviants imply a *sui generis* discursive organisation of areas of perversion (Foucault) in conformance with strict criteria. More specifically, is this a new area in which types of perversion are delineated through interaction?

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

An attempt at a qualitative analysis of textual content generated through interactions in the CCF and its examination by applying the Glaser-Strauss's paradigm of awareness contexts constitute the methodological basis of this research ("Awareness Contexts"). The paradigm consist of six procedural directives: (1) the description of awareness context(s) in the given interaction; (2) the structural conditions under which these contexts appear; structural conditions refer to the units of analysis which may vary from simple (role, status, relationship) to more complex (group, community, organisation); (3) the resultant interaction; (4) changes of interaction which correlate with the transformation of awareness contexts, as well as the structural conditions for such transformation; (5) tactics used by interactants as they attempt to manage the changes of the awareness context; and (6) the consequences of the original awareness context, its transformation and associated interactions for interactants and the affected organisations or institutions (Glaser and Strauss "Awareness Contexts" 671). And yet, the above guidelines need not be followed to the letter if the specificities of certain social phenomena require a somewhat modified approach (Glaser and Strauss, "Awareness Contexts" 678).

The unit of analysis includes members' posts/correspondence visible to other users. CCF's content (posts/correspondence) was archived in a special file for safety reasons, as the disappearance of data from the In-



ternet can never be completely excluded.<sup>3</sup> The sample consists of the longest 30 posts/correspondence in the CCF to provide full insight into the course of conversation and potential transformation of awareness contexts.

Research data was coded by using a method which is the most similar to the grounded theory. Coding was concept-based and involved three stages: open, axial and selective (Babbie 423). At the first stage, conceptually similar events or actions in online interactions were grouped into separate categories. During axial coding, we analysed the codes produced in the process of open coding in order to identify more general concepts. In the last phase, the results of the two earlier processes were categorised so as to come up with the codes related to the central concept of the study, i.e. awareness contexts. QDA Miner software<sup>4</sup> was used at all stages of data analysis.

*Table 1. Examples of code development*

Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
Sharing a fantasy of being eaten	Disclosing a fantasy	Open awareness context
Looking for a girl who wants to be eaten	Wants a real manifestation	Open awareness context
Asking where he can find stories about cannibalism	Asking a question	Open awareness context
Asking how realistic girls are when it comes to the desire to be eaten	Asking a question	Suspicion context

All registered forum members and the administrator used nicknames in their communication. Users' privacy is protected in this paper by concealing their nicknames since some participants in the digital world are easily recognisable by their nicknames and avatars (Petrović; Petrović et al.; Varis). Users' identity is thus protected.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Awareness Context Relative to Interactions*

CCF is a digital community whose members partook in interactions by mutual correspondence, and by posting and sharing content related to cannibalism and similar subjects. They started the posts/correspondence by presenting themselves, disclosing their fantasies, posting stories, posing ques-

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from *archive.org*. This website is a digital library created to store old, inactive websites and other digital phenomena. Scientists, journalists and researchers may find it useful.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about the software, visit: <https://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/>

tions to other users and the administrator, etc. At the point of self-presentation, the users stated what they were after in order to satisfy their fantasies or urges (e.g. *seeking a female who wishes to be eaten, offering their body up for sexual slavery* and the like). The most frequently asked questions were about where they could find films, photos and illustrations with cannibalistic motifs, and questions about the website directed to the administrator. The forum also included an app for a kind of cannibalistic auction. Members could use this app to put themselves (and their bodies) up for “sale” while the others made bids. Those who wanted to be sold were required to fill in a form and send their photos. In the form, they listed the kinds of (sexual) acts they were trained for and what could be done with them, which was the major expression of their masochistic, suicidal and submissive tendencies. They would also indicate if their participation in the auction was voluntary or not; ergo, being “sold” by somebody was also an option. The auctioned off participants were often discussed by other participants, who debated their price and profile, reducing them to meat and referring to them symbolically as “cows” and “pigs”. The forum administrator participated in the communication among the members. His profile on the app featured a photo apparently of himself and his daughter. He also took part in some interactions involving role play in the forum. Judging by the content of his posts and replies to other participants, he was a connoisseur of arts, the erotic role play subculture and cannibalistic fantasy sharing.

The openness of communication which was meant to create an impression of a person with cannibalistic urges appears to support the assumption that the CCF was a space in which the self could be realised through virtual identity. This identity in the forum settings was free of the usual stigma suffered by deviants in their daily offline reality. Furthermore, the anonymity of their virtual identities granted them a non-discredited status in interactions, while the participants’ unification ensured more spontaneous interaction and lower probability of judgment.

#### *Structural Conditions for the Emergence of Contexts*

The organisation of communication in the forum (see Turkle, “Constructions and reconstructions”; Marneweck) facilitated structural conditions which favoured the development of the open awareness context. They included: (1) accessibility of expressive resources and visibility of actions in one place; (2) anonymity and unlimited freedom in the creation of virtual identity, and (3) “situation definition” i.e., the concept of a community which encourages fantasy sharing and role play.

(1) By a mere textual description, participants could create their virtual identity and develop further communication. As in other forums, there was a designated space where all participants could see others’ posts and correspondence, whereby their actions became visible to all. Expressive resources available to them for the creation of virtual identity were

nicknames and the content they would post. For example, of the 220 randomly selected nicknames, 46 included connotations which served the participants' self-presentations. The words *hungry*, *meat*, *vore* and *cannibal* as part of the nicknames indicated cannibalistic urges; *sir*, *master*, *dom* indicated the urge to dominate; *slave*, *boy* referred to submissiveness, etc. Other nicknames did not feature any special connotations. Therefore, much of the participants' self-presentations consisted of their posts and the ability to share hyperlinks, photos, illustrations and graphs, which were also an indication of their tendencies and fantasies in the mentioned app.

(2) As in the forums, participants were anonymous and presented themselves by their nicknames. They did not have to state their real names or present any other information that could reveal their everyday identity. Although the participants assumed certain roles by using the available expressive resources in an effort to manage the other members' impressions of them, this represents the very nature of virtual identities, so it cannot be interpreted as the pretence context.

(3) The forum's concept and apps are intended for role play, especially for erotic role play, during which the focus is on the narrative and the characters (virtual identities), and during which the narratives are developed through communication in relation to the overall story, participants' interactions and characters' features (Brown 4). Such a concept strengthened the open awareness context because it was understood that the participants were free to create their own roles and, therefore, to design their communication with others.

### *Consequential Interactions*

Consequential interaction in the forum was very brief, with the tendency to switch to private communication. Public correspondence was often interrupted and presumably continued privately since the participants, in many cases, wrote their emails and then stopped communicating with each other publicly in the forum. This is why the sample included the longest 30 threads, each of which consisted of 8 to 33 posts/replies within the correspondence. The analysis of the longest threads singled out three categories of user interaction: (1) sharing fantasies; (2) role playing, and (3) ridiculing the forum's concept and other users' fantasies.

(1) When participants only shared their fantasies, these were described verbally or by means of artistic content, such as stories. Further interaction tended to develop into the exchange of fantasies or discussion about them. The following discussion in the forum illustrates this well:

Participant 1: I've been into the idea of being a willing live roaster, or sushi for years now. It's my biggest sexual fantasy. It's purely fantasy for me, but i do sometimes think it would be really sexy to meet a guy in real life who is into the same kind of fantasy, to be

able to just talk freely about it, maybe even roleplaying things etc - so far i've only ever shared my fantasies with people over the internet - never face to face. I just wondered - have any of you ever shared your fantasies with partners? I love the idea of playing out fantasies with a guy, rather than having to keep it all purely on the internet. I'd be genuinely interested to hear if anyone out there is able to share these fantasies with rl partners, and what it's been like. I can't help feeling that if i did tell a guy in rl that i fantasise about him roasting me alive, he just might think i'm a bit weird.

Participant 2: Yes, there are most certainly those who have shared their fantasies with their lovers and whose relationships subsequently 'lived' to tell the tale.... My personal kink isn't quite live-roasting, but it's close enough to the ballpark for my experiences to be able to perhaps shed some light. It is not everyone who will be able to handle the truth but many people, if they love and respect you, will. I'm not sure just how you could roleplay live-roast, but the sushi thing would be a snap. Eating sushi from the body of a naked lady stretched before one has long been available in Japan. Check out the stories I mentioned above. You can reach me after by Email if you'd like to correspond about anything.

Participant 3: I dont think its weird at all. I think, acting it out in real life is more of a rush and yes i have fantasied it with a prior girlfriend :)

(2) The difference between role play interactions and fantasy sharing interactions is that the former focuses on the characters. Although role play interactions often included sharing fantasies, the focus was not on the fantasies themselves but rather on the communication between participants through their created characters or roles:

Participant 1: Your work is so great that it makes one hunger, makes one a slut for more. Your approach, your creativity makes your work unique, in the same light as one would look at works by Dolcett and some of the other famous snuff artists and writers. Only you have taken it one more step farther, a gigantic step forward as you have taken your unique style and applied it to the creation of a site like non other, one that we all cherish and enjoy. You are a master among masters and mistresses (Doms), you are a great one. Your Cow (mmmmooooo)

Participant 2: You are too kind. But in all modesty... I have to say that I am but a follower of the master, Dolcett. However... I will be happy to use you as a 'Dolcett Girl' .. just say the word.

(3) In five threads, the discussion progressed through derision of other participants' fantasies and of the very concept of the forum. The basis of communication in these threads was the argument between the mockers and the mocked. The example below is a part of one such thread,

in which one participant mocked another, who fantasized about being eaten by a man:

Participant 1: Go to northern shores of Australia, you could either get eaten by a great white sharks or choose to get eaten by large saltwater crocodiles.

Participant 2: It doesn't appeal I'm afraid. South America on the other hand would be great, to get eaten by a hidden tribe! Now you're talking!

Participant 1: Well I don't know, you had said that you wanted to be eaten, and if a shark eats you or anything eats you it's all the same being eaten is being eaten isn't it?

Despite the predominance of an open awareness context throughout most of the communication in the forum, this research has found that the suspicion context emerged as well, depending on the participants' definition of the purpose of the forum. Participants were mostly uncertain about how serious others were about living out their fantasies, which were themselves taboos. One participant named a thread *How real is this?* His truncated post was as follows:

Participant 1: Hello, I am wondering just how real these girls are about becoming meat. Has anyone actually spit-roasted, or been to a real spit-roasting of a female human? How does one get invited to one of these? Please ladies, if you are for real respond, I would love to hear just how willing you are to self terminate in this manner. Responses by lurkers are welcome as well. Please I really want to hear from you.

In many cases, participants insisted they were really intent on playing out their fantasies and welcomed only the responses from those who were serious about their cannibalistic intentions. Some of their truncated posts are listed below:

Participant 1: I'm a Oriental 19 Year Old Female Prime Meat. Looking for a serious Male Cannibal to eat me. Write to me and tell me how serious you are about eating me and tell me just how you plan to do it and ask for my pics and anything else and I will send them to you. I really am serious about wanting to be eaten up.

Participant 2: please tell me more. if really serious send more info.

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Participant 1: i am looking for a man who would love me in his belly, i have a beautiful delicious figure and i'm deadly serious about being eaten, please reply so we can arrange ur feast.

Participant 2: if your really serious and not playing. Drop me a line. Lets o dinner

Participant 3: i would love to eat u and have u in my belly. i am also deadly serious, very serious. if you want to know more e-mail me... what is your age where do u live and do you have any pics.

These posts illustrate the participants' uncertainty about the actual intentions of other forum members and about the general purpose of the forum. Some believed the forum was intended for real cannibals, and some that it was all about sharing fantasies and role playing. This gave rise to the development of a suspicion context with some participants. Some of them doubted the virtual identities of others, depending on their subjective definition of the purpose of the forum. Out of the 30 analysed threads, 29 began with an open awareness context, and only 1 with a suspicion context. The suspicion context was noticed in 5 threads.

#### *The Connection between Interaction Changes and Awareness Context Changes*

Contrary to what occurs to the open awareness context in interactions in the physical world, the open awareness context in online interaction does not get transformed into a suspicion context. Instead, the open awareness context and the suspicion context appear to coexist from time to time. The structural condition which enabled this coexistence is the very nature of communications in forums, which is asynchronous and does not depend on time or space.

All instances of a noticeable suspicion context were related to the subjective definition of the forum's purpose, which in turn made some participants doubt the virtual identities of others. Three categories of such participants were identified: (1) those who suspected that some of the participants were too serious about their cannibalistic intentions or overly determined to realise them, (2) those who doubted that the participants who claimed to be eager to live out their fantasies were actually serious about it, and (3) those who expressed general suspicion that some participants could not be trusted with their fantasies for fear of abuse.

(1) Two examples below illustrate the suspicion context with the first group of participants. In the first, a participant shared her fantasy of being eaten and played a role in the forum the whole time. Having exchanged messages with another participant, she claimed the correspondence had scared her and that he was, in fact, a sadist. Other participants, including the administrator, replied to her post in a role play mode. She then wrote that the administrator was a sadist too and left the forum shortly afterwards.

In another case, a participant became suspicious of the true intentions of a member who described his cannibalistic fantasies in a post. In her reply, she condemned his post and suggested that the moderators should remove it because the forum was actually about role play and fan-

tasies. Her reaction reveals her suspicion that he was too serious about his fantasy and that his post alone could qualify as a criminal offence. She referred to him in offensive terms and described him as a deviant person. He then remarked that her reaction was absurd because the forum was intended for cannibals. Several participants joined the discussion. One of them also voiced suspicion and asked: *“Isn't the keyword here fantasy? roleplay? Is someone gonna tell me that girls are really being spitted, roasted & eaten? I tend to think NOT! If I'm wrong, please fill me in.”* Yet another member ignored the questions and the outrage altogether, and continued playing the part of a cannibal and describing his cannibalistic fantasies. In the end, the participant whose fantasy was called into question in the first place decided to justify himself and replied: *“Yes It is just fantasy and roleplay. No, no girls are being harmed! I did take the post to to much of an extream. I apologize for that.”* He apologised and admitted to having crossed the line with the description of his fantasy.

In this part of the interactions, the relational characteristic of deviance category is notable. Participants' posts include information on the concealment of the discrediting element of the self (cannibalistic urges) in offline interactions, even in communication with the people with whom they are closest. On the other hand, the specific setting in which the interaction takes place allows the members to not only openly manifest the self but also to use a richer repertoire of techniques in communication with outsiders (the mockers) than the ones deviants usually activate in face-to-face interactions. Instead of resorting to the adaptation strategy<sup>5</sup> directed at non-deviant practices, the participants actually go on playing their roles and deepen the communication from the position of deviants who control the meanings, or word connotations, thus reflecting arousal.

In addition, it is interesting to mention that the principal boundaries of perversion moved towards the discourse level. In their interactions, participants obviously tried to determine acceptable perversion practices. There were those for whom sharing fantasies and role playing were acceptable perversions, and those whose expressions of fantasies were too serious and who wished to live out their sexual fantasies. In other words, in their interaction, the members and the administrator attempted to establish a typical and clear identity of a cannibal. This is a clear reflection of the deviant virtual community members' urge to push interaction towards the open awareness context, or in Glaser and Strauss' words “to know of the others' identities and their own identity in the eyes of others”.

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<sup>5</sup> This mainly refers to the attributes of a person's identity that can be controlled by will. These attributes include a discrediting characteristic, but they may be concealed so that the actor can avoid stigmatization. Otherwise, they are intentionally expressed (activated) so that the actor can assert his/her identity (Goffman *Interaction Ritual*).

(2) The following examples, unlike the previous ones, illustrate the suspicion context with the participants who maintained that the others were just pretending to be serious about their intentions, when in fact they only wanted to play roles and share fantasies.

In the first example, a participant who fantasized about being devoured claimed that nobody she communicated with was serious about realising her fantasy and that they were only into erotic role play. Once it was over, they would back out. She thereby expressed doubt over the identities of the participants who claimed to be serious about their cannibalistic intentions. Her post elicited two types of reactions. Some members replied in the role playing mode and tried to convince her they were serious. Two participants, however, wrote they doubted her intentions, referring to their previous communication with her. One of them had the impression that she was only interested in sharing fantasies and photos, whereas the other claimed that all her suggestions for real manifestations involved excessive legal risk, and that she was reluctant to accept any of his ideas.

The second example refers to a post written by a participant who also shared a fantasy of being devoured. A few participants replied, expressing interest in making her fantasy come true, but they complained the emails they had sent her could not get through. Another participant then expressed doubt in her identity, claiming she was not serious about her plans, that she only wanted to play with their fantasies and desires, that he had seen such things happen before in other forums, and that she had probably already deactivated her email address. She did not respond, and several more replies ensued before the correspondence under this thread died out.

(3) The third category includes the participants who expressed a general suspicion about other forum members. One participant, for instance, responded to a post by a member who had a fantasy of being eaten and claimed to be serious about it. He was one of the members who expressed interest in helping her play out her fantasy. They agreed to meet offline, but then he refused to go on making arrangements or to outline his plan for the realisation of the fantasy because it was too risky for him. This was an expression of his suspicion that some participants could use his posts against him. He insisted on arranging the offline meeting through private communication only. After that, he posted his email address and all further communication under the thread stopped.

*The Tactics of Awareness Context Management, and the Consequences and Transformations of the Initial Awareness Context*

The open awareness context produced an ambivalent situation: the participants' awareness of their freedom to create their virtual identities made some of them doubt these identities, which was further spurred on



by the forum's controversial subject. Whenever a participant expressed doubt, communication would either continue as before or come to an end. No special tactics of awareness context management have been identified in the cases in which the suspicion context emerged. The only reaction was registered in the first example, when the participant admitted that everything he posted was a fantasy and that he had not really hurt anyone.

In this case, the suspicion context in the CCF was based on awareness of the consequences of switching from the virtual to the offline world. Participants indulged in role play, leaving the legal sanctions against such practices in reality as an implicit interaction framework. CCF also appears as an appropriate (safe) space for playing cannibalistic games for another reason. Fantasizing about being devoured in the virtual space may be a source of constant (sexual) arousal, whereas in real life such a perversion may end fatally. This means that the barriers between the online and the offline worlds are not impassable, and that such interactions are essentially bound by the aspects of the offline reality.

### *CONCLUSION*

This research aimed to examine whether Glaser and Strauss's paradigm of awareness contexts as units of analysis is applicable to online communication. The use of the paradigm was also expected to help determine the dominant awareness context in the Cannibal Café Forum and whether the awareness contexts transformed one into another during the interaction.

The application of the Glaser-Strauss paradigm to the interaction in an online community of deviants was fraught with challenges as a consequence of online communication and the flexibility of virtual identities. Still, adherence to the procedural guidelines for the analysis of awareness contexts helped us get a clearer view of the openness in deviants' online interactions.

Our research has shown that the open awareness context was dominant in the CCF. However, although most of the interactions unfolded under this awareness context, it actually coexisted with the suspicion context. One context did not transform into another: they simply coexisted, but the open awareness context prevailed.

In this case, the influence of the context of digital communication and the specificity of the very platform for communication was also notable. CCF's concept and topics are controversial for the previously explained reasons. They produced an ambivalent situation in which communication revolved around sharing fantasies and role play on the one hand, and curiosity and the desire to live out those fantasies on the other hand. Forums with a similar purpose surely have members who wish to turn their fantasies into reality. In the case at hand, the problem is in the

nature of these fantasies: if realised, the participants would risk criminal charges. Such a complex situation gave rise to the emergence of the suspicion context, especially because some members fuelled it by insisting on the real manifestation of their fantasies.

With regard to the specific consequences of the interactions among the CCF members for the purpose of expressing deviant identities, we might say that CCF mostly helped the participants suspend the stigma of offline reality and freely indulge in sharing cannibalistic fantasies and role play. Their self in the CCF was not under threat of being discredited by non-deviants. It just opened new options to resume the interaction, which would be unimaginable in the offline reality. CCF, however, also harboured the tendency to codify and typify perversion practices. Participants in the discussions attempted to classify perversion practices through discourse, delineating strict boundaries between the acceptable and unacceptable perversions. Declaring oneself a cannibal was not enough. He or she had to exhibit acceptable attributes – to express himself/herself in a certain way and not to cross the line of fantasy. In broader terms, an assumption worth further examination is that in such virtual spaces the field of perversion is organized by defining clear, non-problematic, coherent identities of perverts. Virtual spaces would therefore turn into places where deviants could become normal, but where their identities would also be forced to conform to certain norms in order to make the interactions more predictable and the expectations of each role clearer. Additionally, virtual spaces turned into places where a new differentiation between the normal and the deviant took place.

Finally, the studies of cyber-deviance have some inherent limitations, and our paper is no exception. One of its limitations results from the nature of the communication in forums and on other digital platforms. Such communication is asynchronous, and independent from time and space, which makes tracking its course, and therefore identifying important transformations, quite challenging. The second limitation arises from the fact that this research involves the examination of secondary data, from forums or chat-room discussions. This data provides little insight into the specific motivations or intentions of the participants (Maratea and Kavanaugh). The third limitation is that CCF is no longer active, so we cannot observe or analyse interactions in real time. This would have allowed us to gain better insight into the course of interactions and the potential transformations of awareness contexts.

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## КОНТЕКСТИ СВЕСНОСТИ У ОНЛАЈН КОМУНИКАЦИЈИ НА КАНИБАЛ КАФЕ ФОРУМУ

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### Резиме

Виртуелни постори нуде јединствену могућност за проучавање интеракције у процесу њеног одвијања. Ово је посебно важно када говоримо о проучавању онлајн заједница девијаната у тренутку док преузимају улоге чланова ових заједница. Наиме, ови простори су заправо идеалан оквир за формирање Гофманових *back places* где појединци не морају да скривају своја стигматизујућа обележја, нити да се оптерећују око напете комуникације са другима као последица њихове стигме. Због тога су ова места посебно драгоцене за екстремне девијанте попут заједница љубитеља канибализма којима се у овом раду бавимо, јер је за њих практично немогуће, због друштвене стигматизације, стварање поткултуре у реалном простору. Њиховим посматрањем у процесу креирања онлине идентитета добијају се важни увиди о социјалној организацији девијантних онлине заједница и интеракцији у њима.

У складу са тим, у раду се бавимо испитивањем могућности за примену процедуралних правила која су осмислили Глејзер и Штраус, за разумевање контекста свесности. На основу емпиријског истраживања интеракције у шест болница, издвојена су четири типа контекста свесности који се могу применити и на друге структурне јединице: (1) Отворени контекст где је сваки учесник интеракције свестан идентитета других и свог идентитета у очима других; (2) Затворени контекст где један учесник није свестан идентитета других, нити свог идентитета у очима других; (3) Контекст сумње где један учесник сумња у идентитете других или у свој идентитет у очима других, или у оба; (4) Контекст претварања где су учесници свесни идентитета других, али се претварају да нису (Glaser & Strauss, “Awareness Contexts”). Колико је нама познато ово је прва примена парадигме контекста свесности за проучавање интеракције у оквиру девијантних заједница на интернету.

Истраживање је базирано на квалитативној анализи садржаја дискусија чланова форума Cannibal Cafe. Јединицу анализе представљају објаве/преписке корисника које су видљиве свим корисницима. Садржај са CCF (објаве/преписке) архивиран је у посебан документ због сигурности јер је увек могућ нестанак података са интернета.

Иако смо се током примене ове парадигме на интеракцију у онлине заједници девијаната сусрели са изазовима који су последица онлајн комуникације и флексибилности виртуелних идентитета, праћење процедуралних упустава за анализу

контекста свесности нам је помогло да стекнемо јаснију слику о отворености он-лине интеракције девијаната.

Успостављањем везе између њиховог идентитета, свесности и интеракције наше истраживање је показало да је отворени контекст свесности, који је један од четири основана контекста који су идентификовали Глејзер и Штраус, онај који доминира у овој заједници девијаната. Међутим иако доминантан, он није и једини који се овде може идентификовати будући да је и контекст сумње, иако у мањој мери, ипак јасно заступљен. Важно је додати и то да се ови контексти не преливају један у други већ једноставно коегзистирају, на крају, дозвољавајући неспутано испољавање девијантности љубитеља канибализма.