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## COMPUTER ROLE-PLAYING GAMES: PLAYER MOTIVATIONS, PREFERENCES, AND BEHAVIOR

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Andreea LĂPUȘTE<sup>3</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** In recent years, computer role-playing games have changed the way we spend our free time. Traditional games have been increasingly replaced by digitized productions, and technology has made it easier to access videogames on multiples devices. Online games bring users together in a fantasy world in which they design avatars, manifesting their creativity and employing gaming strategies.

This study analyzed Romanian gamers' behaviors and perceptions of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (henceforth MMORPGs); by employing focus groups and a survey, the authors aimed to map preferences and habits of users in terms of gender. We found that users are not likely to engage in stereotypical activities in creating and using their avatars within the games, nor do they design female avatars solely for visual pleasure, but rather for opportunistic reasons. Moreover, the research subjects did not think of choosing female avatars as a safeguard for advancing through in-game levels, but rather consider other variables, such as hard work, skills, or strategy, as important to succeed.

**Keywords:** role-playing games, gaming behavior, gamer preferences, gender-swapping, avatar gender.

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## Introduction

In recent years, computer games have changed the way we spend our free time. Due to the availability of new consoles, platforms, and technologies, traditional games have been increasingly replaced by digitized versions. As mobile games, they are part of the basic configuration of any smartphone or tablet; as social games, they are conveniently available through a browser or accessible through social networking sites such as Facebook. And as online games, they usually bring young users together in a communal fantasy world.

What is more, increasing interest has been offered to gender dimensions of the gaming industry, from gender differences in gaming (De Castell, Larios, & Jenson, 2019; Jenson & de Castell, 2010) to gender construction in videogames (Heritage, 2021). Developers have tackled the increasing usage of gaming products by women by including behavior specificities of female players in gender-aware designs (Innholt, 2009). In 2020, women made 46% of gamers, yet only 16% of executives in the gaming industry (20-first, 2020), whereas the proportion of female game developers has increased from 22% in 2014 to 30% in 2021, so about 1 in 3 game developers worldwide are women (Clement, 2021).

In general, all games are classified as computer games that require a computer to run. This way, a digitally generated visual representation is used to display the game statistics (video or video screen games). Players must perform their actions on the computer using a suitable input device (Schirra & Carl-McGrath, 2002, p. 2). Computer games are programs in which a player interacts with a virtual game environment. Although computer games are mainly for entertainment and fun, they can also improve hand-eye coordination and problem-solving skills, for example. Each game features unique strategy, action, and imagination.

Game genre provides an established classification of entertainment games that is a useful method for identifying commonalities between games. There is no universally accepted taxonomy of genre, but Herz's (1997, as cited in Connolly et al., 2012) system is similar to the game industry classification. Herz distinguishes action, adventure, combat, puzzle, role-playing, simulation, sports, and strategy games. However, this classification entails a rather fluid concept, as many games are hybrids that fall into more than one class. We will further focus especially on the game genres that have an imaginative world with interaction between avatars. In specialized literature, this type of game is called *online role-playing games*.

### **MMORPG games**

The roots of online role-playing games reside in pen-and-paper role-playing games (RPGs) on the one hand, and text-based computer games (MUDs) on the other. In pen-and-paper role-playing games, participants sit together with a game master at the game board. As in all role-playing games, players embody a character whose development is recorded on a sheet of paper. Closely related to these pen-and-paper role-playing games are MUDs, where the computer is the game master and does the documentation of the game's events for the players. "These relatively primitive online games eventually evolved into the first modern online role-playing games, since then called MMORPGs, as the Internet spread *en masse* in the 1990s" (Cypra, 2005, p. 9).

The term *MMORPG* - Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game - is used to define a role-playing game played on the internet, characterized by two main features: it can only be played on the internet, and thousands of players can participate in it simultaneously. The most famous

example is World of Warcraft (WoW), with millions of subscribers, which is the largest base of all MMORPGs. MMORPGs are basically defined as cooperative games in which a difficult task, also known as a quest, is solved only with the help of other fellow players. "For this reason, many players here join together in communities called either guilds, clans, or player associations, depending on the program" (Cypra, 2005, p. 4). Guilds have a code that commits them to certain common activities. Another peculiarity of online role-playing games becomes apparent before the game starts. Players must create a character where gender, race, occupation are voluntarily chosen. "With this alter ego, they are henceforth part of a virtual world characterized by rules and behaviors, institutions, geographical enclosure" (Cypra, 2005, p. 4).

A typical MMORPG features a large-scale setting that supports storylines based on science fiction, fantasy, martial arts, or war themes of the realm. Many narratives are rooted in novels, movies (including animations), and comic books. Players navigate and interact in multi-layered game maps consisting of continents, countries, districts, cities, roads, and buildings. Most games contain "magic portals" for dungeons, where a limited number of players can enjoy more concentrated gameplay experiences. Basically, all games use non-player characters (NPCs). This is especially true for quests where non-player characters train in special skills, trade goods and currency, and combat. In some cases, NPCs serve only as background characters to create impressions of vivid and complex worlds. The player's sense of immersion relies in part on narratives involving NPCs - that is, maintaining the story that tells the legacy of past RPGs. New game releases usually contain updated or entirely new forms of game scenarios, NPCs, and objects. The longer the history of a game's world, the more diverse and varied its landscapes and displays tend to be (Lin & Sun, 2015).

The global characteristic of MMORPG is expressed in the form of routine and daily economic and social activities. Avatars need food to survive

or heal. They need tools or materials to repair damaged equipment. Therefore, players need to have a constant income in the game. Real or virtual currency can be used to buy decorative items like new hairstyles or clothes. To earn money, players can complete quests that reset daily. In return, they receive gold coins, which provide a base salary guaranteed by the system. One can also visit certain areas to collect raw materials (such as minerals, herbs, or leather) to sell at markets, or make various products from raw materials (using recipes or instructions provided by the system) that they can exchange with the gaming system or with other players in exchange for virtual or real money. Some players focus on making a range of increasingly lucrative deals to build wealth, either through game-supported auction mechanisms or through private channels that are not approved by game companies (Lin & Sun, 2015).

Modern MMORPGs are characterized by a wide variety of ways to customize the game: in addition to solving quests and fighting enemies of various kinds, players can work as craftsmen, create their own role-playing scenarios, trade, or even compete against other games. Some players also make it their mission to equip their character with the best possible gear. This variety of different ways to play often makes MMORPGs a very time-consuming leisure pursuit.

Bartle (1996, as cited in Xue Qiang, 2008) analyzed the motivation to play MUDs, and classified players into four types: Killers, Achievers, Explorers, and Socializers. Yee (*ibid.*) divided the motivational factors for playing MMORPGs into three categories: the achievement component, the social component, and the immersion component. Some players feel more secure and powerful in the game than in real life. They can gain power, advance quickly, and accumulate symbols of wealth or status in the game. They can also analyze the underlying rules to optimize character performance. In addition, they can challenge and compete with others. All of this can fulfill the human desire to gain achievement. The achievement component is defined

by the above-mentioned traits. Socializing is the defining trait of human nature. Since MMORPGs have the features of computer-based communication, players may be interested in helping other players and chatting with them. This can build long-term meaningful relationships with others. Also, to complete a task, they need to build a team and being part of a team can also increase satisfaction.

Immersing oneself into the game by role-playing a different identity and escaping from reality also constitute motivations that attract people. For example, some players like to create an avatar with a backstory and to interact with other players to create an improvised story. Some players are interested in customizing their character's appearance. Other players enjoy exploring the cards in the game to find something they like. Most other players do not know anything about it, or some players like to use the online environment to avoid thinking about real-life problems.

### **Gender swapping in videogames**

Scholar's attention to the computer games industry has increased massively in recent years. Computer games have been perceived as a new medium of entertainment, especially by the younger generation. This is also one of the reasons behind researchers' increasing interest in topics related to games. Consumption patterns of games and their effects are the focus of researchers all over the world. Nevertheless, there is little research on other game-related topics, such as the aspects of interaction, gender differences in players, or reasons for gender-switching online.

Addiction to online role-playing games is one of the most discussed aspects of recent cyberpsychology, primarily because of its potentially negative impact on young people's social lives. One study focused on some

aspects of addiction in adolescent MMORPG players, namely the connections between players and their game characters and whether and in what ways players' relationships with their game characters influence potential addiction. Players' attitudes towards their characters seem to be relevant, as players often wish to be like their characters in real life. The study also reiterated that younger players are generally more prone to addiction (Smahel et al., 2008).

Gender differences in online gaming constitute a relatively under-researched yet increasing body of knowledge. Griffiths et al. (2004) found that more and more women are gaming online. The increase in female gamers could be attributed to the fact that online games tend to appeal to a broad audience by allowing players to develop their own characters (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008). Alternatively, it could be that online games are moving away from traditional video game content that focuses on stereotypical representations of women and men. Yee (2005, cited in Hussain & Griffiths, 2008) found that men were more likely to play MMORPGs for the achievement and manipulation functions, while women played to build supportive social networks. Research examining the experiences and attitudes of male and female gamers is needed. The phenomenon of *gender swapping* is a common online practice. Griffiths et al. (2004) reported that 60% of their sample of online gamers had played a different gendered character online and argued that the introduction of game icons such as Lara Croft in Tomb Raider meant that it had become normal for men to play female characters. Huh and Williams (2009) argued that women playing male characters tend to display hyper-masculine behaviors. Chou et al. (2014) found that players use gender-swapped avatars to experience *increased enjoyment*. Moreover, Tseng et al. (2018) showed that gender swapping can lead to relational switching costs and online gamer loyalty. Further research delving into reasons for gender swapping and its impact on video game stimulation constitutes an interesting area of research.

Several other studies found similar gender differences in motivation, play style, and player type. Lou et al. (2013) showed that male players play longer sessions and reach a higher level. Cole and Griffiths (2007) found that males were motivated by elements of curiosity, surprise, and discovery, while most females played games for their therapeutic function. In a comprehensive study on *League of Legends* avatars, Ratan et al. (2019) showed that women hold stronger preferences for gender-consistent avatars than men, supporting the idea that women experience more pressure to perform their gender identities.

### **Videogames studies in Romania**

Research on online gaming is a relatively new feature of Romanian scholarship. However, the phenomenon of video games is very popular among young people, who grew up with and alongside technology. A considerable number of young people have a YouTube or live streaming channel where they mostly talk about the games or demonstrate their gaming skills while live streaming. Very few videogame studies have been conducted to date.

In Romania, the focus was more on the impact of violent video games on aggressive behavior. Călin and Cernat (2016) explored the strengths and weaknesses regarding the impact videogames bear upon youth development, proposing a set of best practices in managing access to young children. In a study of prosocial behavior related to videogames, Nicola (2020) argued that online cooperation can translate into prosocial behavior among adolescents in everyday life. Ghirvu (2013) focused on consumer attitudes, discovering that online video advertising usually generates superficial attitudes, influenced by aspects of game design and characteristics of the online environment such as interactivity. Ghirvu also identified differences in perceptions of these elements based on demographic factors such as gender or age group of the consumer.

In studying voice communication usage, Ghețău (2021) found that, among videogames enthusiasts, higher use of voice communication negatively correlates with perceived anonymity. Moreover, Ghețău and Iovu (2021) discussed an increase in the number of women playing videogames and found evidence that voice communication facilitates social capital – namely bonding and bridging. Investigating multiple voices on the influence of videogames upon behavior, Drugaș and Ciordaș (2017) emphasized gamers’ motivations of entertainment and educational purpose associated with videogames.

## **Methodology**

This research is based on behavioral differences between male and female users of a MMORPG and the impact of these differences on player performance and motivation and aims to tackle two research questions and subsequent hypotheses. Based on previous research and the aim of the present study, the following research questions and hypotheses were formulated:

***RQ1: How do preferences and habits of male and female MMORPG players differ?***

*H1: Men are more likely to play MMORPG than women.*

*H2: Female players deem narrative as the most important aspect of a game.*

*H3: Male players are more likely to choose a female game character.*

*H4: Male gamers are more oriented towards winning during a game.*

*H5: Female gamers are more oriented towards socializing during a game.*

***RQ2: Why do users swap genders for their avatars and does this have an impact upon the game?***

*H6: Men choose a female avatar only for visual pleasure.*

*H7: Female avatars secure a higher level of play than male avatars.*

To address these research questions and hypotheses, two methods were employed. First, two focus groups were designed and carried out to map gaming habits and gamers' perspectives on gender-swapping. Participants were divided into two subcategories: male gamers aged between 19 and 27 years old and female gamers aged between 18 and 25 years old, five for each group. Both groups were selected via a snowballing method, and the focus groups were conducted via Skype, to keep them in the environment in which the behavior is studied. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the results from the focus groups, and MMORPG elements such as plot, strategy, avatar creation, social interaction, player progression were studied. A Romanian-language survey was then designed and distributed during May - June 2020 on Facebook groups and Reddit, addressing gamers, to be able to draft a profile for the Romanian MMORPG gamer. The results were entered and analyzed using Google Forms, and the survey gathered 243 participants.

## Results

### *Focus groups*

#### *a. Storyline*

The first variable in the focus group referred to the background story of an MMORPG. The minority of female players deemed a good story to contribute to a better gaming experience, doubled by the variety of plots:

*"To me, the storyline is very important, because I pick new games based on the story. They need to have a different story than those played before. I don't like doing repetitive things and have no patience to play the same thing for a long time. So, I frequently move towards new games."* (Player 1, female, 18 years

old); *"I would say that a good story about the world in which you are playing can add great value to an MMORPG. Explaining things such as why the world is what it is and the way in which various parts see each other based on past interactions helps create a certain in-game atmosphere"* (Player 2, female, 20 years old)

On the other hand, some players must ignore the storyline completely, as most of the team play is based on a quick eye to hand reaction, and the story is not as significant, while clearly established rules and an intense experience seem to be more important than the actual plot.

*"I usually play alone and then I can enjoy the story. But when I play on a team, I cannot focus on the story, because everyone clicks a hundred times and hits combinations of keys and especially if we talk via headsets, everyone makes comments and shouts. This way you can't really enjoy the story."* (Player 3, female, 19); *"I don't think MMORPG needs a story or NPCs. The game needs good rules for multiplayer gameplay and an immersive experience for RPG. And RPG does not mean playing solo."* (Player 4, female, 24); *"I am not very interested in the story of a game. I rather focus on gameplay and the missions. I don't even think the story has a more important role, because my actions do not always coincide with the narrative."* (Player 5, female, 25)

Regarding male players, the plot is considered equally important; players hold some standards about the quality of the game, which are not always met by game developers. The variety of plots was also a reason why men prefer role-playing games.

*"For me the storyline is very important, because I do not even play games that share the same story. I'd rather refine a certain game and then pick up another one with a different story and other quest types."* (Player 6, male, 20); *"I do not play MMORPGs that don't have a really good story. The problem with modern*

*MMORPGs is that stories are generally awful. Full of cliches (that sometimes can work, don't get me wrong), the story in most MMORPGs is not made for reading, even if you are interested in understanding the idea behind. Also, I should stress that we, as players, have come a long way, and our standards for a good story have increased a lot since WoW, for instance.*" (Player 7, male, 25)

In contrast, some players decide as a team which games they want to try. Regardless of the story, their main goal is to have fun and enjoy team play.

*"We talk on Discord and consult each other which game we want to play. This also applies to when one of us finds a new game and wants to play as a team. It's better this way, as none knows how it works and what we should do. We are not really interested in the story, as long as we can all play as a team and, at the same time, develop our own characters.*" (Player 8, male, 19)

Some participants deem the stories pointless, as they do not follow the players' actions. The story has a certain course of action, but players' actions can create a different plot, that disrupts continuity.

*"I don't really like stories in MMORPGs. A story can be great but may not match my actions as a player. I have the story telling me one thing, and my actions telling me a different one. This invalidates the story and makes me waste my time."* (Player 9, male, 27); *"I am not really interested in the story. I go in to play, I am not interested in developing the story or creating a new one."* (Player 10, male, 20)

Thus, it can be argued that male and female gamers do not consider narrative fundamental to a game. Narrative is important when choosing a new game or understanding the backstory, but game developers find it difficult to meet these expectations, as gamers also look for well-designed game graphics and logical game designs.

*b. Strategy and interaction*

On whether the players are win- or interaction-oriented, female players preferred a winning-based game strategy – whether playing alone or as a team. One player even stated her goal was to become one of the best players of World of Warcraft.

*“[...] when playing on a team, everyone talks at the same time, and we don’t have a well-defined strategy. However, all team members are win-oriented, and we look for various methods to make it.” (Player 3, female, 19); “Just like the story, the way you play is very important. It is true that these games are meant for entertainment, and it is nice to interact with people and exchange objects within the game. Though, winning comes first for me, I aim to reach far and be one of the top WoW players.” (Player 2, female, 20)*

Interaction with other participants plays an important role in addition to success, as it sometimes creates friendships outside of MMORPGs: *“I mostly play to win and take my character far, but I don’t ignore the interaction with other players. I’ve actually made friends through games, and we usually make a good team, but we also talk outside of the game” (Player 4, female, 24).*

Sometimes, the interaction is the most valuable thing about this type of game, and participants take on roles requiring contact with others: *“I like these games because you can easily interact with other gamers. I usually take on roles involving many interactions with other players. Anyway, I am not very good at fighting, so I probably wouldn’t win too often” (Player 5, female, 25).*

One player even showed a lack of interest in winning a game or interacting with players: *“I get bored easily and if I don’t manage to win after a few attempts I give up. I don’t interact much with people because I don’t spend much time within a game, but I don’t want to level up my character either. I play to pass time.” (Player 1, female, 19).*

Most MMORPG players focus on winning and succeeding in a mission, quest, or task. By looking for tips and tricks, they can achieve their goals, some of which entail reaching a higher level in the game world and gaining new skills.

*“I’d rather spend time with methods helping me win and I don’t like to waste my time socializing. I mostly play solo and don’t need to communicate with others about strategies and improving skills” (Player 7, male, 25); “I’ve started to invest more time and interest in these games, and I would like to get as far as possible. For now, I try to experience levels and earn as many points as possible, while customizing my avatar and help it to develop skills.” (Player 6, male, 20)*

Nevertheless, there are some factors that might prevent gamers from achieving their goals. MMORPGs are sometimes populated by children who do not know the rules and disturb experienced players. There are not always options to pick game partners. Therefore, some players choose to play with friends in guilds or in single missions.

*“I feel like there are too many children playing randomly and really disrupting your missions. This is why I have my own team with whom I play all the time and we can really get along and interact well. Our goal is winning.” (Player 8, male, 19); “Unfortunately, MMORPGs are full of children who cannot play well. You lose your mood to play and your motivation when you have no one to get across with. Interacting with them is difficult and I’d rather mind my own business and make sure that I achieve my goals.” (Player 9, male, 27)*

For one of the gamers interviewed, interaction is more important than winning. The key to progressing through levels are players with different skills. Good communication must be maintained by both sides, and players must be fair to one another: *“Interaction is the most important, and it is good to know people with different skills who can help you advance. This also applies reversely if others need my help” (Player 10, male, 20).*

In terms of game strategy, both men and women are highly motivated to win and advance through levels; this strategy can be contributed to by an entire team or by players sharing methods of solving missions on game forums. Socialization is inherent, especially when players work as a team, and it usually involves real-life friendship.

*c. Avatar creation*

Avatar creation is a mandatory step in an MMORPG, and it gives users the opportunity to experiment with gender, race, outfits, appearance, and traits. Players usually opt for female avatars, but in certain circumstances they must select the opposite gender. In most cases, female avatars are sexualized by other players, thus it is safer to create a male avatar.

*"In general, my avatars are female, but I've created male ones when I got tired of men hitting on my female avatar. It's absolutely ridiculous, annoying, and this is one of the reasons why I'd give up such games." (Player 1, female, 18); "I've never had a female avatar, because people do not offer the same level of trust and respect to a female avatar. I have friends playing MMORPGs and I know how they react when coming across a female avatar. They act like behind them there's a girl that they can impress. I bet that most times there are boys behind those avatars." (Player 3, female, 19)*

Some female players create male avatars because virtual identities might not always match reality:

*"I've created a male avatar out of pure curiosity and fun, and to see if I'd feel differently." (Player 2, female, 20); "I mostly play with female avatars, but sometimes I create a male character without disclosing my real identity. It is interesting to see how other players treat you when you have a male avatar. They give you a sneak peak of their minds." (Player 4, female, 24); "I love customizing my game avatar*

*in all sorts of ways. I always choose something I don't find in my reality, and this sometimes implies the avatar's gender. I often waste a lot of time creating the avatar, and don't feel like actually playing." (Player 5, female, 25)*

Players are more biased when it comes to avatar creation; their mixed responses show that they can take advantage of opportunities from the opposite sex but are also less interested in how their avatar is perceived.

*"A female avatar gives you many advantages because you get help from all parts. I did an experiment and I saw players treating me differently when I play a female avatar. I played exactly like I always do, I've just made my avatar more appealing to males." (Player 9, male, 27); "If you play with a female avatar and know what most players want, you know how to approach them, odds are high you'll get free in-game stuff. Sometimes I pass these things over to other friend players." (Player 8, male, 19); "People tend to treat you differently when you have a female avatar. But I think this is the charm, you get to be in girls' shoes and probably see how misogynistic some boys can be." (Player 7, male, 25)*

One of the players deems it an advantage to be able to experiment with the avatar. The goal is not necessarily to achieve something, but to interact with different features of a female avatar. This would not be easy to achieve in real life: *"It allows me to play with different parts of my character, which are not easy to experience in real life" (Player 10, male, 20).*

For a player, opting for a female avatar is more a visual preference and has nothing to do with strategy or a hidden agenda: *"I usually don't invest a lot in my game avatar, if I have an opposite-gender avatar is because I like their looks when moving within the game. It's strictly a visual preference and has nothing to do with game tactics or other aspects" (Player 6, male, 20).*

In terms of avatar design, perspectives are more clearly defined; on the one hand, female players feel it is an edge to have a male avatar to avoid unwanted behaviors from male players. Moreover, they can create a virtual

identity completely contrary to reality. Therefore, their male avatars are taken seriously by other players. On the other hand, men have discovered the edge of adopting female avatars; it can bring benefits in the form of gifts or useful in-game items. Therefore, some men opt for female avatars, when being profit-oriented and willing to resort to any methods to succeed, even gender-swapping.

*d. Player progress*

In terms of the relationship between avatar gender and game level increase, female players' perspectives were not clearly defined. Some claim not seeing a significant influence of gender on level performance, but that of good gameplay techniques and skills.

*"I haven't tried to compare the two genders. As I only use male avatars, no one messes with me, and I mind my own business. I've observed that avatar gender does not especially influence advancing through levels." (Player 3, female, 19); "I do not think that avatar gender significantly contributes to level progress, but rather game technique and the game itself. Some games are designed to pass quickly through all missions, and you can't realize which factors led you to success" (Player 2, female, 20).*

Other players noticed advantages of female avatars; however, they have not actually tested gender differences in this regard:

*"Even if when I have a female avatar I'm bothered by gamers' behavior towards me, there is an edge, that of receiving things that I need in the game and sometimes I don't have to buy them. I have not tested yet the same game with two opposite gender avatars, but I can say that I get faster to the top with a female avatar." (Player 1, female, 18); "I sort of have better luck when I have a*

*female avatar, because I manage to win battles easier. Now there are many heroines in movies, books, or games, and probably it's just in my head. But it makes me feel good that not only boys play well, and I am not judged that harshly if I made a mistake" (Player 5, female, 25).*

One player's goal is not necessarily to level up, but she emphasized that female players have more options in terms of appearance when designing the avatar. Still, this does not contribute to in-game progress: *"I don't think I've ever thought about it, because my goal is not necessarily to move through levels. What I've noticed is that when you create a female avatar, you have more options about looks, but I don't think it would influence level progression" (Player 4, female, 24).*

Most players expressed their views about gender not impacting upon level progression. Moreover, other aspects such as team play, accumulated knowledge, and experience are vital factors to reach an advanced level:

*"I don't think avatar gender influences game level. What matters more is technique and whether you have the necessary knowledge to move through missions. There are other factors determining how far you can reach." (Player 7, male, 25); "It is more likely team play that helps you advance. Yes, you have solo missions where you don't need help from others, but also group games where every skill is welcome. I've played with both avatar genders, and I haven't noticed and difference." (Player 9, male, 27); "I can't say that I agree with the statement, although I've seen some advantages to having a female avatar. I've mentioned before that the odds to get free stuff and gifts from other players are rather high, but you have no guarantee that those skills or things are needed to advance" (Player 8, male, 19).*

One player added that a female avatar only holds a visual impact upon other players and gameplay. Also, what matters is how the game was designed by the developer. If designed as difficult to reach a high level,

gender cannot alleviate this. In addition, being the best player in a lesser game is not a top priority.

*“I think that a female avatar strictly influences players visually. I’ve created a female avatar that I like, and it hasn’t helped me to grow. I like how it moves through the game, but that doesn’t mean that I’d play better if I created a male avatar.”* (Player 6, male, 20); *“It matters a lot how the game was created. Regardless of the avatar, it is not always easy to move to the next level and get points. And you can play well and rank in top 10 at a game that is not so popular, but it won’t matter to anyone”* (Player 10, male, 20).

In terms of avatar gender and its influence of game progress, participants did not observe significant changes, regardless of gender. Having a female avatar does not guarantee a higher level, but other factors such as game technique and experience and determination to reach a high score.

### *Survey*

The online questionnaire consisted of four parts: general information about MMORPG playing habits, gaming habits and preferences, more detailed data on MMORPG use and views on gender-swapping, as well as socio-demographic data. Of the 243 respondents, nearly 1 in 4 (24.6%) were female, and 75.4% were male. In terms of age distribution, most respondents fall within the 20-24 years old group (37.5%), closely followed by the 25-29 years old segment (33.9%). The age category 15-19 made up 18% of our population, and 31+ years old made up nearly 10%. Regarding occupation, about 38% of subjects were still in school, 44% university students, and 18% were employed in IT or customer service. In terms of their hobbies, most respondents named videogames, followed by sports, and walking outdoors; other subjects picked movies or series, music, or reading, and less popular choices included anime, travel, cooking, photography, illusionism, and dancing.

*a. Habits of MMORPG players*

Most respondents (58.7%) asserted they enjoyed playing role-playing games. The other 41.3% stated not having tried them; these respondents justified their answers diversely, arguing that younger players do not follow the rules of role-playing, that they prefer games where interaction is not mandatory, or that dynamic games seem more interesting.

In what concerns the frequency of gaming, over half (52.9%) of subjects play MMORPG daily, 19.6% only play 3 to 5 times a week, even less subjects play once or twice a week (13.7%) or once or twice a month (11.8%), and only 2% engage in this activity about once a year. These results show that subjects play these games regularly, which enables us to generate a gamer's profile based on the results.

*b. Gaming habits and preferences*

In terms of platforms used for role-playing games, most respondents (65.2%) use a gaming computer, followed by laptops (47.8%), gaming consoles (37%), and smartphones (34.8%). Among MMORPG players, nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  have user accounts on the Steam distribution platform, half have accounts on Xbox Live, and around one third are subscribed to Playstation Network. About subscriptions to specific game streaming channels on YouTube and Twitch, the most frequently mentioned gaming channels were PewDiePie, SovietWomble, Shroud, Videogamedunkey, GameGrumps, JackFragz, and Creative Monkeyz. Moreover, respondents also declared preferences for other types of games besides MMORPGs, such as adventure action style games (such as GTA, Assassin's Creed), or shooter games (like CS: Go, Battlefield), or racing games (Need for Speed).

Asked to rate the importance of game features such as gameplay, narrative, user interface, audio/ music, and level of customization, nearly half consider gameplay to be essential, followed by narrative, and graphics. Moreover, nearly 1 in 3 respondents deem user interface, artificial intelligence, and music to be important. The level of customization, however, was deemed important by only 1 in 4 gamers.

*c. MMORPG use and gender-swapping*

Aiming to map reasons for playing MMORPG games, respondents mostly named relaxation, boredom, and the ability to play with friends or acquaintances. Very few respondents considered this type of game useful in problem-solving or improving memory. Moreover, the most popular MMORPG games among respondents were World of Warcraft, Guild Wars 2, and The Elder Scrolls. Games such as Tera, Black Desert, Final Fantasy XIV, Eve, Blade and Soul, or RuneScape were less frequent among choices.

At the very beginning of a MMORPG, players must choose game roles for their avatars; there are several available roles, but the three categories relevant here are tank, healer, and damage dealer. Tanks deal damage to the party and protect others from attacks, and usually have good health and armor. Healers nurture others when injured, to keep players alive and tank enemies. Damage dealers eliminate the monsters (Tregel et al., 2017). These descriptions may sound somewhat simplistic, but it takes skill and know-how to deal damage without destroying the armor or causing the monsters to attack back. Among the subjects of this study, 83.8% prefer to play damage dealer roles, followed by a 76.8% preference to play tanks, and a 70.4% preference for a healing role (see *Figure 1*).

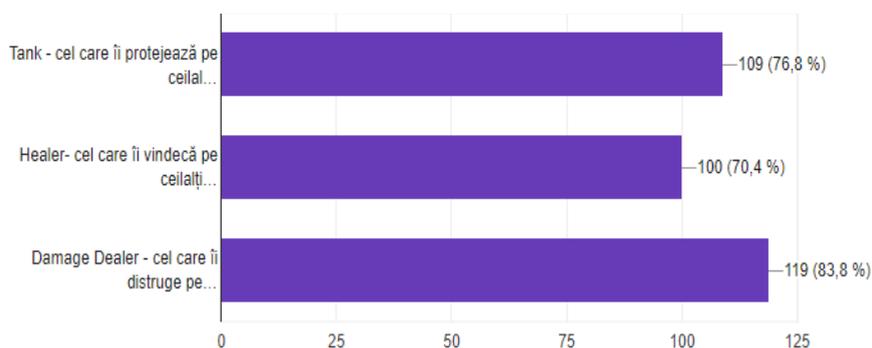


Figure 1. Classification of avatar roles among MMORPG players

What is more, nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of gamers in this study prefer to play with friends, whereas the others prefer to play alone.

For evaluating views on gender-swapping, a scale of six statements was employed. In terms of their preference for creating avatars of the opposite sex, 56% of respondents gave a neutral answer. About game tactics being changed to match avatar gender, most responses varied between outright disapproval and neutral attitudes. In what concerns relying on gender stereotypes for communication when adopting an avatar of the opposite gender, nearly half of the respondents disagreed, while the other half remained neutral; no subject fully agreed on the topic. The following statement focused on relying on appearance stereotypes when adopting an avatar of the opposite gender, and the answers were nearly evenly divided between disagreement and neutrality. The last two statements asked participants to rate the success of their games in terms of gender, and most subjects disapproved of either avatar gender providing a higher level of gameplay than the other.

Based on the survey results, we argue that answers were significantly less nuanced than those provided by the focus groups, and it is likely that respondents provided desirable answers to the gender-related questions.

Also based on these findings, we can draft a profile for female and male MMORPG players in Romania.

### **The Romanian gamer's profile**

Thus, the typical Romanian female gamer is a young woman aged between 20 and 24 years old, who holds a steady job or is studying at the university. Besides playing videogames, the female Romanian gamer enjoys reading, traveling, and watching movies. She usually plays games about 2 to 5 times a week on her computer or laptop and has a Steam member account. She is not interested in game streaming accounts, but also likes racing, simulation, and strategy games besides MMORPGs. In the latter, she deems gameplay, narrative, graphics, and the level of customization to be important, and she likes to play out of curiosity, social aspects, relaxation, out of boredom, or due to her ability to multitask. The Romanian female gamer likes World of Warcraft, Eve Online, and Guild Wars, and oscillates between tank and healer, showing her orientation towards helping or supporting. She plays with friends in guilds or by herself, and when creating an avatar, she usually chooses male avatars, but maintains her tactics. She also communicates consistently and does not use gender stereotypes, nor does she think gender can affect in-game level progress.

The typical Romanian male gamer is a young man aged between 20 and 29 who holds a steady job or studies in a university. Besides games, he enjoys sports, musical instruments, fishing, or taking walks in nature. He plays videogames daily, on his computer, laptop, or game console, and has a Steam member account. He is interested in game streaming accounts and subscribes to several gaming channels, and prefers action/ adventure style, racing, or shooting games besides MMORPGs. In the latter, he considers all

aspects to be equally important, and he plays out of boredom, for multitasking, curiosity, relaxation, as well as to socialize. His favorite games include World of Warcraft, Guild Wars, Tera, and the Elder Scrolls. He usually varies between tank and damage dealers, as he enjoys eliminating monsters and helping other teammates. The Romanian player likes to play with friends and colleagues, and when creating an avatar, he usually chooses the same gender, but also considers switching his virtual gender. He tends to change game tactics when adopting a female avatar and does not have a clearly defined perspective on using stereotypes. He does not believe that gender can affect in-game level advancement either.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

This research aimed to investigate gender-related differences among MMORPG players. Through focus groups and a survey, the Romanian gamers' profile was studied to analyze how and in what ways preferences and habits of male and female players are different, and how they perceive gender-swapping and its influence upon game performance. Although the subject samples were convenient and not large enough to clearly assess the hypotheses, there are still results that are relevant and need to be discussed. In what concerns RQ1 and the associated hypotheses, our results showed that men were indeed more likely than women to play MMORPG games, yet the difference in usage were not vast, and we can argue that these numbers will continuously change as more and more women engage in this activity. H2 concerning stereotypes could not be confirmed, as neither approach showed that female gamers were only interested in the narrative part of the game. Similarly to their male counterparts, they have certain expectations

from these games in terms of gameplay and design. While narrative is important to some users, it is not considered so by a vast or representative majority. Male users tend to notice positive aspects, they know how to leverage virtual identities to their benefit, even if it entails changing their virtual gender. They admitted that their winning strategies implied gender-swapping, yet this finding cannot be generalized either. The choice for an avatar of the opposite gender may also be based on visual preference or desire to experiment.

Results for H4 and H5 show that men are focused on winning and improving their performance when playing a MMORPG, yet female players display the same interest. Both genders acknowledged that playing with friends and acquaintances involves a deeper level of interactions; on the other hand, these games inevitably enable interaction with other users, this feature is inherent to massively multiplayer games of this sort. H6 discussing visual pleasure as a reason for men's choice for female avatars was invalidated by results showing a variety of other reasons. No clear answer can be offered in the case of H7, but a cause-and-effect relation between an avatar's gender and in-game advancement cannot be established in this study, as results show that progress is conditioned by hard work, techniques, game skills.

As any such endeavor, this research work has various sources of error and limitations, as it also reveals opportunities for further investigations. The sample used in the survey study is not a probabilistic, representative one, but it did allow us to design a profile based on the results. As the pool of female videogame users is expanding, future studies should focus on executives in the gaming industry and its gender dimensions.

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# SCHOOL-STAKEHOLDERS COMMUNICATION IN INNER AND OUTER CIRCLES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Kiraly DALIT<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** I will discuss in this article the COVID-19 implications on school communication with stakeholders in the inner and outer circles. This article's starting point is that especially in crisis times, school communication is the key to development, maintenance and preservation. The article will refer to the school climate in crisis and teacher-student-parent communication. The first part will deal with crisis implications on school communication, harming communication processes and its new characteristics, as a transition from face-to-face communication to online communication and its implications. The second part will deal with the school climate in crisis and how this climate changes communication. Research shows that the stress resulting from crisis causes many hardships in the school climate and influences the welfare and resilience of those who are involved in the school communication process: students, teaching staff and parents. The third and last part will present communication models taken by schools in crisis and demonstrate the technological and social characteristics and patterns of its implementation, which repeats for schools in crisis. The summary will present general recommendations for effective school communication in crisis when it is recommended to adjust each communicational action plan to the school's unique characteristics.

**Keywords:** crisis, school communication, online communication, parent-school, communication in crisis.

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## **I. Introduction**

Crises have a direct and negative impact on school climate. Therefore, it harms school communication processes both the students, on an individual level, and at the class and school level, with the community and other external parties [13]. Crises cause much distress in the school sphere and stress that the communication processes, which characterized the school before the crisis, find it difficult to respond in a crisis. These stresses are reflected in mental health [9] and accessibility and providing services [14]. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report has indicated that over a billion teachers and 575 million students all over the world were influenced by closing all learning institutes as part of the strategy of preventing the COVID-19 pandemic spread in many countries and that closing the institutes had a direct impact on school communication methods with the communities [18].

This article engages with the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on school – stakeholders’ communication while referring to the school climate during the crisis and the communication expressions on the technological and social levels. The article examines how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced schools’ inner and outer communication circles through an overview of local stories as expressed in articles that reported worldwide occurrences in the first two years of the crisis, and by creating a common denominator that enables an overall and global statement. The starting point of this article is that school communication is the key to developing and maintaining relationships, especially in times of crisis.

## **II. The COVID-19 crisis implications on school communication**

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a global crisis that has affected school communication with parties in the inner and outer circles of school. This impact changed communication processes and created new communicational characteristics, like moving from face-to-face communication to online communication [5].

Examining the crisis implications on school communication demonstrates gaps between the coping of schools that have technological accessibility and schools that do not have infrastructure or communication literacy [15]. Many countries were forced to cope with a lack of adequate and efficient communication infrastructures both in responding to pedagogical needs and student psychological needs due to the crisis. These needs include coping with fear and anxiety, managing the feeling of sociologically and pedagogically “staying behind”, and coping with uncertainty [1].

One of the notable examples in this context is expressed in the Kenya Ministry of Education report [16], by which closing all learning institutes to stick to the international and national instructions of social distancing, lockdown and self-isolation, disrupted learning processes for over 18 million students and threatened their ability to achieve sustainable education. Before the pandemic, the common learning system in public schools, elementary and high schools, in Kenya was based on face-to-face teacher lectures and did not include distance learning platforms. The crisis has disconnected the interpersonal communication between schools and the community and instead, one-way mass communication was established between the students and parents and the government through continuous national broadcasts on radio and television, and online platforms. This harmed marginal communities where most of the parents are computer illiterate and have no access to technology [15].

Having computer infrastructure became crucial during the crisis and its absence interrupted the education processes of the “pandemic children” and caused a significant threat to their life quality in the post-crisis society. In the absence of communication infrastructure, the forecast is that the “lost generation” will be uneducated and will not be able to renew economic, educational, and social processes in the post-crisis world. For this reason, education institutes were required, and still are, to quickly adjust to crisis reality and implement distance learning communication models through computer infrastructure [2].

Depending on infrastructures is only one part of the change in the communication process. The second part is the way the crisis “forced” schools to rely on the families in the communication process with the students, especially in communication with young students in elementary classes. School communication, including staff, teachers, and management, changed from direct and immediate with the students to mediated by the parents or other significant factors in their lives [5]. Adding mediating factors to student-school communication requires consideration of the social and economic background of the families, who were required to join the communication process since there is a gap between teaching times and the educational value received by students from different backgrounds [3]. The lack of continuous and regular communication based on face-to-face interaction between students, parents and teachers had a negative impact on children from low-income families and children with mental health problems. While families of high socio-economic backgrounds tended to invest in their children’s online learning and help their studies [17].

Another aspect of the crisis impact on school communication is the impact on the school staff, especially the teachers. With no regular communication, teachers had difficulty implementing their professional role in teaching and supporting their students [17]. With no infrastructures and teaching programs

suitable for a crisis in alternative communication means, teachers were forced to engage in professional development in order to succeed in the transition to distance learning, both in the content, and the accessibility and quality of communication [6].

This perception requires long-term communicational thinking since these characteristics are not unique to the COVID-19 pandemic. Humanitarian, economic and health crises tend to be long, complex and have a long-term impact on welfare and education [11]. Although school closing during the pandemic was on an unprecedented scale, crises are usually not like that. Reviewing historical situations in which schools were closed and the communication routine was disrupted shows how this caused enormous losses in learning disruption unequal access to learning and social isolation. For these reasons, planning the response and immediately establishing alternative communication in the medium to long term is essential [8].

### **III. School climate in the COVID-19 crisis and its implications on school communication**

School climate changes in crisis and influences school communication. The stress resulting from the crisis affects the welfare and resilience of all the parties involved in school communication and coping with the crisis should refer to the students, parents and school staff [13].

This framework should consider implications on the cognition level of students whose learning processes were influenced by being exposed to stressful and traumatic situations; implications on student social-emotional development and academic ability; and implications on social-emotional level, while the common reaction is emotional and social isolation as a result of trauma that may include avoidance or over-arousal behaviors. All these

implicate the school climate. With regard to teachers, two sets of stresses should be considered. One is the teacher coping with the challenges the whole public faces, simultaneously managing work and family in crisis, for example. The other is their professional functioning which requires them to support their students' coping. These tensions also seep into the school climate in times of crisis [17].

School climate was significantly influenced during the COVID-19 crisis by moving learning to home and as a result, transferring the authority and supervision of learning to the parents. The Technology Acceptance model demonstrates that the degree to which the individual uses technology is directly correlated with the degree to which the individual accepts the technology. Therefore, parents' decision to use distance learning technology will directly influence their children's learning and academic success [7]. In the current crisis, many parents did not have the tools for learning skills through online communication and without direct communication with the teachers, or their support, parents complained about incompetence to help and guide their children in using the technology and learning [15]. Additional barriers were parent reports of pedagogic difficulties, as not knowing teaching strategies or how to motivate for learning, as well as new difficulties in their relations with their children, as struggling with them when they do not want to learn or coping with children's different behavior in the learning space comparing to their regular behavior at home [5]. In crisis reality, learning became inconsistent and discontinuous. Most of the parents did not communicate with the teachers during the distance learning period and those who did communicate regularly were part of private institutes that have anyway offered Zoom meetings and technical support. In this sense, the experiences of parents whose children studied in private schools and kept in communication with their teachers were more positive [15].

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The teachers, on their behalf, were required to have adapted training for communication with parents in crisis. For example, in Indiana, in the United States, teachers have created unique communication strategies with parents in cases where student learning gaps were identified. A school survey indicated that in these cases, parents were not aware of the assignments or how to check them, so the school concluded it should help teachers communicate with the families, support and provide dedicated professional development. This professional and proactive development of school-parent communication supported the increase of opportunities for positive teacher-student-family communication [6]. Accordingly, in cases where continuous communication was maintained, positive findings were found. For example, in a school that based communication on Maslow's needs model to maintain a positive school climate, a sense of security was established by creating parental involvement and preserving the school culture, community pride and a sense of self-esteem of the parties [10].

#### **IV. School communication models during the COVID-19 crisis**

In crises, schools use alternative models of communication with factors in their inner and outer circles, which reflect the technological and social characteristics of the communication process. An optional framework for school communication in crisis relies on the life circle of Grissom & Condon [12], which proposes five stages for coping: (a) mitigation/prevention (b) preparedness (c) reaction (d) recovery (e) learning. In the pre-crisis period, crisis management requires mitigation and prevention strategies and preparedness strategies. An immediate and accurate reaction to the crisis allows the model to move to the recovery stage and to learning for the next crisis. Successful navigation between the crisis stages requires effective use of communication systems.

For example, using several communication modes to reach different parties with targeted messages and create reassuring, clear and transparent content that places the problem in the community context. There should be two-way communication to collect information from the field and send it back to the field. The information transfer should be frequent and constant. Emotional intelligence should be developed. Regulation and emotional self-management and managing others to cope with the stress and trauma created by the crisis. For this, one must actively listen, accept criticism, and develop authentic relationships with the students and staff.

The economic and social status of the school and the community has great significance in implementing a communication model in a crisis. As seen in the research of Bonal & González [3], who have examined school closing influence on learning gaps of children from different social backgrounds in Spain, found that middle-class families have managed to keep higher standards of education quality whereas children from socially weakened families had fewer learning opportunities. The gaps had some reasons, including learning conditions at home and social and technological differences. The learning condition at home changes according to the physical space at home, the accessibility to the internet and access to technological devices. In addition, the unequal impact of the crisis on parental employment, for example, dismissal, change the social and psychological conditions that guarantee adequate learning processes. Examining the learning opportunities and homework working space found that the public schools did not develop school communication or assignments and waited for new instructions from the Ministry of Education, while subsidized and independent schools did not stop their teaching activity. One of the possible explanations for this difference is the economic dependence of private schools on parent payments and they have required to continue and serve the families despite the unusual circumstances.

*A. Review Stage Technological patterns and characteristics of school communication during a crisis*

Having technological, accessible and software infrastructures are crucial for school communication in a crisis. Work models should be coordinated with the dominant communication means both technologically and in its content.

One of the models developed in this field is the model of Bojović, Bojović, Vujošević & Šuh [2], which allows a fast move from the traditional learning model to the distance learning model in a crisis. The assumption is that distance learning has to be student-focused, and teachers should know students' characteristics to identify potential barriers to learning. The acquaintance will create a strategy that reduces barriers and increase motivation to distance learning. Therefore, two methodologies should be adopted: (a) activity-oriented teaching, for example, active learning; flipped classroom; project-based learning. (b) technology-oriented teaching, for example, online courses, teaching through social media, and game-based learning.

The model implementation has five stages: (a) preparation that includes practices as redefining the course objectives; effective support for student needs, for example, technological need, costs of geographical constraints; establishing technical abilities like virtual class and access to infrastructure with organized learning materials; establishing administrative structures compatible with distance learning and organized technical support. (b) planning that includes checking teacher knowledge in preparing teaching materials; selecting an online platform that matches the institute budget; guiding students in using the selected platform. (c) updating the infrastructure to support a stable internet connection. (d) an implementation that includes resource allocation, for example, creating virtual classes, distance laboratories, or social networks; making high-quality presentations, recorded lectures, and electronic books; monitoring learning and technology use. (e) evaluation that includes content

and technical feedback; the online platform performance evaluation; testing of student knowledge [2].

The most important technical aspect is accessibility, equipment and technical support must be provided to children from weakened backgrounds. Along with accessibility, technology-adapted content must be taken care of. Distance learning methods should include effective teaching and consider the mapping subjects that are expected to be affected by not having face-to-face communication [17]. In adapting learning contents to technology, a distinction must be made between online learning and emergency distance training. during the pandemic, many teachers decided that the best way to communicate with the students in laboratory classes is through synchronic lectures and keep the students involved by (a) adjusting lecture guiding materials to distance teaching needs. (b) developing new methods to involve students like using Instagram or making an online portfolio as an alternative to research work as a final evaluation. (c) creating a digital internship for developing scientific thinking skills and creating scientific literacy exercises for use in distance classrooms. In addition, distance laboratories and online research experiences have been established, for example using home laboratory kits [4].

Teacher training for online teaching required professional development. In Indiana, preparatory work was done that included vacation days to prepare the courses; building an alternative schedule of 3-4 lessons a day; the technology department created user accounts and encouraged them to use Google Suite for Education, especially Google Hangouts and Meet; teachers created "How to" videos: developed methods for sending emails to students from the grade books, formulated tips and tricks for using Zoom classes; and finally, the technology department developed a call forwarding feature from the school phone so that teachers could call from personal cell phones while keeping their numbers private. Schools operated from the assumption that

relationships have to be built to help the school identify the needs of students and parents as well as create opportunities for community involvement through communication technologies [6].

### ***B. Patterns and social characteristics of school communication in a crisis***

Social aspects of school communication in crisis are aimed to provide for the social welfare needs of the students, the parents, and the teachers, even when there is no traditional and ordered learning in school due to the crisis.

Community involvement is a significant parameter in establishing school communication in a crisis. The Finn church aid [11] working model has proposed the following activities: when the emergency allows, start explanation activities that aimed to bring the children back to school; harnessing existing mechanisms and key stakeholders to lead explanation; involve the community in identifying children who remain out of school; using language and media accessible for children. The communication must emphasize improving student welfare: paying attention to lonely students; giving space for personal and emotional expression; paying attention to interests; positive encouragement for achievements; creating welfare teams; creating a routine that allows a sense of normality and security. In addition, the communication process should distinguish learning by using various methods of collection: interest, ability, and often switching groups, as well as peer learning.

Communication with school in a crisis influences also social aspects related to the students' home sphere. Research on coping with distance learning in Mindanao, Philippines, found that parents became more involved in their children's education and replaced the teacher role. Accordingly, it was found that they tended to lower their expectations of learning results, and focused

on the positive fact that their child even studies during the crisis [5]. This support involved more the mother than the father and in younger children. In addition to the technological accessibility aspect, families with lower parental education have fewer resources and knowledge to help their children with school tasks. These limitations became more acute as support from the school was reduced and demands for autonomous work by students increased [3].

An effective communication model in crisis will make the crisis characteristics into learning and development opportunities. This strategy application is shown in Balica's [1] research, which deals with coping with fear and anxiety in crisis by making the brain look for knowledge and solutions for action and adjustment. For example, worry may trigger curiosity to know more about the virus or how the body functions. A communication strategy that enables this would be the establishment of social networks where students and adults positively interact about their feelings and share knowledge. In this context, the research of Dryden-Peterson [8], which deals with the importance of hope and providing a perspective for a positive future, should be mentioned. Children need belonging relations and sense of purpose, even if they are not at school. In other words, communication is required to establish a school climate even outside the physical school. Belonging relationships are the basis for learning, and in times of uncertainty, it is even more important. Diaries of children isolated in their homes revealed similar patterns. They missed communication with their friends and teachers, laughter and everyday conversations. Despite the tendency of individuals in crisis to focus on "one day at a time" with the uncertainty created by the crisis, families and teachers must help children continue to see long-term goals, piece together their current situation and plan for the future. Children need a horizon to feel safe and plan the future. This requires communication that will create a school routine that allows predicting and thinking beyond the present moment and a sense of hope about the future.

## **V. Summary**

The basic assumption of this article was that communication in crisis is the key to success in coping with the crisis. The more the infrastructures, contents and communicational strategies development focus on how schools use technological communication means to build bridges with families and find out what are the parties' needs, the more help the teachers can get to develop strategies that support student distance learning. Researches show that communication is an important and significant parameter in establishing a stable routine, transferring positive messages, and providing emotional and technological support and social, scholastic and professional framework for all parties in the communicational process.

In crises when a school closing strategy is taken, the importance of supporting parents in monitoring their children's welfare along with providing technical support in coping with distance learning tools should be considered. Social values and emotional content should be combined in the communication process and the opportunities for conversation, ventilation, normalization, and resilience building in the online curriculum, should be increased. Stable and consistent communication that includes positive communication content that produces an inclusive atmosphere that promotes self-regulation should be established. Teachers and school staff should be guided and trained both on the technological aspect of operating alternative communication systems and the emotional aspect to support the students.

The recommendation is to map the unique characteristics of the school, its surrounding community, the teacher and staff needs, locate families with special needs, and integrate these findings in the process of building a communicational action plan. School's unique characteristics must be considered when adapting the communication process to action during a crisis so that the

latter will suit the accessibility to technology, the socio-economic status and education of the parents and students, the abilities and skills of the staff and how the crisis has specifically affected the school area.

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# **REFUGE AND INTEGRATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE TORAH. CONSIDERATIONS FROM AN ANCIENT PERSPECTIVE ON THE MODERN PHENOMENON OF IMMIGRATION**

**Luciana FRIEDMANN<sup>1</sup>**

**ABSTRACT.** Over the millennia, people have been forced, countless times, to leave their homeland and settle in other lands. As in the 21st century, the possible reasons were the same - the economic, political situation, discrimination, the difficulty of integrating or, simply, the fact that leaving was the only way out. The Jewish diaspora has known many stages, some recorded in the Bible - Torah - Old Testament. Others, such as the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, led to the peregrinations of the Jews in various corners of the world. The present work aimed to put into the perspective of ancient Jewish religious writings the way in which the idea of refuge is treated today.

The migration phenomenon is considered by some to be characteristic of the modern era, being regulated by national and international legislation. The way in which Judaism treated this subject - cities of refuge, moral obligation towards the one who asks for help, "Dina de malkuta dina" - the law according to which the law of the residence prevails over the religious law - represents an interesting model to follow, but also similar in certain aspects, with the current legislation.

The present work aimed to highlight some good practices, less known, which facilitated the integration in various societies in certain situations.

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I researched the way in which the treatment of refugees changed over time, considering, however, that Judaism continued to be faithful, until today, to some religious principles that, in fact, regulate basic interpersonal relations.

**Keywords:** Refugees, Torah, faith, Galut, exile, captivity, migration, Temple, Pikuah Nefesh, cities of refuge, Shabbat, wandering, Law of Return, allogene, "Dina de Malkuta dina", Jerusalem.

## Introduction

Throughout their unique history - in which archaeological evidence, Jewish theology as the precursor of all monotheistic religions and myth have always met - the Jews have developed some social rules that have guided them through the millennia. Linked by the nature of the covenant with Avraham to the Promised Land, Israel, the space to which they return arduously and quietly under the leadership of an original leader, Moshe (Moses), they managed to survive under numerous occupations and in various corners of the world, where the Galut<sup>2</sup> (Diaspora) wore them.

The word Galut has a triple meaning - "exile", "diaspora" and "captivity" - representing through a single lexical element all the facets of the Jewish pilgrimage.

Looking carefully at Jewish history, we can have a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of population migration today. The laws of living in the Diaspora, which the Jews put into practice, also serve as a model of best practices for dark or at least difficult times.

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<sup>2</sup> In Hebrew, Galut literally means exile. Galut or the classic Golus refers to the exile of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel.

With the modern migration phenomenon, we often observe a “clutch” between the local population and newcomers. The native population, with no differences compared to antiquity, feels threatened its traditional values, personal security, income, and the immigrants live the drama of the ostracized, isolated, deprived of the chance of real integration. Multi-national (see UN, European Union) and national legislations have regulated the rights of refugees, but often the legal basis and practice enter into a conflict, which is difficult to manage. Immigrant status does not implicitly mean that human rights will be violated, that the foreigner will be subjected to attacks or xenophobic manifestations, but the immigrant status is, in itself, a vulnerable one. On the other hand, the growth of the nationalist phenomenon in periods of economic decline leads to the polarization of societies and to the sharpening of the phenomenon of rejection of the “allogen” in many societies.

### **Exile and diaspora**

The first Hebrew exile was the Assyrian one, initially implemented by Tiglath Pileser III, in 733 BCE. The next exile was the Babylonian, when a large part of the population of Judea was deported to the Neo-Babylonian Empire, under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, in 597 BCE. and 586 BCE. The Hanukkah holiday, celebrated in December by Jews all over the world, commemorates the success of the Jews in freeing themselves from the domination of the Greco-Syrian Empire, during the 2nd century BCE. After three years of war, in which some Jews adopted the civilization of the Greek conquerors, the Great Temple was resacralized and the Maccabean fighters recaptured the place of worship.

A Jewish diaspora existed several centuries before the fall of the Second Great Temple in Jerusalem. Before the first half of the first century of

the current era, in addition to the numerous Jewish communities in Judea, Syria and Babylon<sup>3</sup>, there were also some in the Roman provinces of Egypt, Crete and Cyrene.

Between the years 66 a.e. and 70 BCE Intense liberation struggles were fought in the Romanian Province of Judea, which culminated, however, in the destruction of the Second Temple on a fateful day for the Jews, that of Tisha B' Av (the 9th day of the month of Av<sup>4</sup>) . In 132 CE, Bar Kohba<sup>5</sup> led a revolt against the Roman emperor Hadrian to save Jerusalem, renamed by the occupiers as Aelia Capitolina, a revolt that was defeated on the same day of Tisha B' Av. As a consequence, Jews were forbidden access to Jerusalem and, from this time, we can consider the great Jewish diaspora until 1948, when they returned by right, by decision of the United Nations, to Israel.

It is said that “a handful” of Jews (probably several thousand) always remained in the land of present-day Israel. The vast majority started, however, on a pilgrimage among persecution and slaughter, but also with periods of cultural flourishing and peaceful living, throughout the world.

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<sup>3</sup> **Babylon** (from the Semitic Bab ilani - Gate of the Gods) is one of the most important cities of the ancient world, the capital of the Babylonian Empire.<sup>[1]</sup> Important economic, political and cultural center in the II-I millennia BC. Capital of the state with the same name, it flourished under Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar II.

<sup>4</sup> **Av** (אָב, Standard Hebrew: **Av**, Tiberian Hebrew: 'Āḇ; from the Akkadian language: *abu*) is the eleventh month of the ecclesiastical year and the fifth month of the civil year in the Hebrew calendar. The name is of Babylonian origin and appeared in the Talmud around the 3rd century. This is the only month whose name does not appear in the Bible. It is a 30-day summer month.

<sup>5</sup> Shimon Bar Kohba or Simon Ben Kosiba (in Aramaic and Hebrew שמעון בר כוכבא) was a Jewish leader, known especially for the Revolt of Bar Kohba, an insurgent movement from the year 132, the culminating point in the Wars of the Jews against the occupation of the Roman Empire. The revolt being temporarily victorious, he laid the foundations of a new independent Jewish state entity, which he led with the title of Nāšī' (leader: נָשִׂי'). The state of the Israeli rebels was short-lived, because in 135 it was reconquered by the Romans.

Numerous researchers from different eras have dedicated thousands of pages to how the Jewish tribes spread throughout the world. The myth of the lost and found tribes<sup>6</sup>, for example, persists even today, and the Ethiopian, Chinese, Indian Jews are clear proof that the Jewish religion has come very far and managed to survive in the strangest and most unfavorable conditions.

During the Middle Ages, due to migration, Jews split into two groups that still define Jewish identity today. Ashkenazis from northern and eastern Europe and Sephardim from the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa and the Middle East. These two branches share numerous events that took place somewhat symmetrically, such as the expulsion from England (1290), the expulsion from Spain (1492), the expulsion from the Arab countries (1948-1973).

Those with Spanish origins, the Sephardic Jews, have managed to keep their Ladino language, the specific way of chanting the prayers, the characteristic decorations of the places of worship, the traditions different from the Ashkenazi ones.

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<sup>6</sup> The tribes are the traditional divisions of the ancient Jewish people (Gen. 29:32-35, 30:1-20). According to the Bible, the twelve tribes of Israel are the descendants of Jacob's sons, generically called "Israel" after the name Jacob received from God. In the Bible and the Koran, Jacob-Israel was the third patriarch of the Jewish people with whom God made a covenant, and the ancestor of the tribes of Israel, which were named after his descendants. The children mentioned in Genesis are Reuben (Genesis 29:32), Simeon (Genesis 29:33), Levi (Genesis 29:34), Judah (Genesis 29:35), Dan (Genesis 30:5), Naphtali (Genesis 30: 7), Gad (Genesis 30:10), Asher (Genesis 30:12), Issachar (Genesis 30:17), Zebulun (Genesis 30:19), Joseph (Genesis 30:23) and Benjamin (Genesis 35:18) . In addition to these, Jacob adopted two children of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh and had at least one daughter, Dina.

## A moral guide or Life is sacred

I presented this arduous route through history to succinctly show the basis of the coexistence practiced by the Jews in relation to the majority/conqueror/occupier, but also to each country of exile.

We must highlight an obvious fact from the beginning, namely that these methods, although full of loyalty and self-sacrifice, had no chance of saving or protecting the Jews entirely. They represented and represent a moral guide, argued through one of the basic principles of Judaism, that life is holy. To save a man means to know the whole of humanity, states the Talmud, and the laws of "Pikuah Nefesh"<sup>7</sup> tell us that any commandment, the Shabbat<sup>8</sup> for example, can be broken to save a life.

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<sup>7</sup> *Pikuach nefesh is the principle in Jewish law according to which the preservation of human life prevails over virtually every other religious rule. When a particular person's life is in danger, almost every mitzvah lo ta'aseh in the Torah becomes inapplicable.*

<sup>8</sup> Sometimes also considered as the Sign of God is the weekly day of rest instituted by the Jewish religion, which falls on the seventh day of the week, Saturday. The words Saturday and Sabbath in Romanian, like the corresponding term in many other languages, come from the Hebrew word Shabat. In Jewish tradition, the Sabbath begins on Friday evening, some time after sunset. [1] These last hours of Friday evening are called Leil Shabat (Shabbat night). Shabbat ends shortly after the appearance of three stars in the sky on Saturday evening, followed by the hours of Motzaey Shabat (Sabbath Exit). The commandment to keep the Sabbath is one of the central commandments of the Torah - the Law or Teaching of Moses) - and one of the prescriptions of the Decalogue, and it consists of abstaining from various works during the Sabbath. The days of the week in the Hebrew calendar are named according to their numerical order: the first day (Sunday), the second day (Monday), ... the sixth day (Friday), and the word Shabbat is the only exception to this rule, meaning in Hebrew "he rested".[2]

On Shabbat, observant Orthodox Jews abstain from any activity that is considered work by the Halacha religious code.

Observant **Conservative** Jews follow Halacha's prohibitions on Shabbat with somewhat less strictness, and those called **Reform** or **Liberal** give priority to the ethical significance of Shabbat and can individually decide how to abstain from activities.

## The return

The Law of Return (hok ha-shvut) was passed on July 5, 1950 and gives the right to all those who have a Jewish grandparent and their partners to settle in Israel. The law, amended in 1970, extended the right to make aliyah<sup>9</sup> to certain non-Jews, converts, for example, or to the extended family of one who had already emigrated.

In the Jewish Law very few recur so often and consistently as the following statement: "When a stranger dwells in your land, do not treat him with malice. The foreigner among you must be to you as one of your inhabitants, you must love him as you, for you too were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:33-34).

In the Torah<sup>10</sup>, in various forms, this concern for the stranger is repeated 36 times.

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<sup>9</sup> Aliyah is the immigration of Jews from the Diaspora to the Land of Israel (Eretz Israel in Hebrew). It is also known as Shivat Tzion (Return to Zion) or Re-Gathering from the Diaspora (Kibutz galuyot) and has as its historical prototype the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile in the second half of the 6th century BCE. It is also defined as "the act of going up" – that is, going to Jerusalem. "Making Aliya", by moving to the Land of Israel, considered the hearth of ancient Judaism and the Jewish people, is one of the basic principles of Zionism. The opposite action, emigration from Israel, is referred to today in Hebrew as yerida ("descent").<sup>[1]</sup> The Law of Return of the State of Israel gives Jews and their descendants automatic rights to Israeli residency and citizenship.

<sup>10</sup> The term **Torah** (Hebrew: תּוֹרָה, trans. "Education", "Learning" or "Law") can have a number of meanings. This term usually designates the first five books of Moses (which constitute the *Pentateuch*) of the 24 books of the Tanakh, and is usually annotated with rabbinical commentaries (*perushim*). This term can also mean the continuation of the stories from the Book of Genesis to the end of the tanakh (*Malachi*), and it can also refer to the totality of Jewish religious texts, derived either from biblical texts or, later, from rabbinic writings.<sup>[1]</sup> A common factor in all these definitions is that the Torah describes the genesis of the Jewish people: their calling by God, accounts of their trials and tribulations, and their covenant with God, which involves following a way of life that adheres to a defined set of religious morals and obligations and of civil laws (*halakha*).

At the confluence of the two eras, in the Hebrew world there were two schools of thought, two great rabbinic houses, that of Hillel<sup>11</sup> and that of Shammai<sup>12</sup>. The resolution of various halachic<sup>13</sup> themes, the application of the commandments of the Torah, was often defined by the disputes between the two sages, but also between their followers. In the Talmud it is mentioned that a young man wants to know how the essence of Judaism could be understood, standing on one leg. Hillel's answer has remained over the millennia because he summarizes entire tomes, lectures, explanations "What you don't like, don't do to your fellow man", Rabbi Hillel states simply, and no one could deny that the fate of our world would be profound different, if this were the basic principle of human relations.

Although very distant in time, for the Jews Israel was never a foreign country. It was present in daily prayers, even though the state form was non-existent until 1948, being the realm to which the Jews had no doubt they would return at some point. The Holocaust, which meant the killing of six

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<sup>11</sup> Religious leader and scholar associated with the development of the Mishnah and Talmud and founder of the House of Hillel, the School of Tannaim. He is popularly known as the author of two sayings: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And being only for me, what am I? And if not now, when?" and the ethical expression of reciprocity, or the "golden rule": "What you do not like, do not do to your fellow man." This is the entire Torah.

<sup>12</sup> Shammai (died 30 AD) was a contemporary of Hillel and, like him, a major figure in the Mishnah. Shammai and Hillel are the most famous pair of sages in Talmudic history. They constantly disagree on Halacha and hardly ever mention one without the other (notable exception: Pirke Avot).

<sup>13</sup> Halachá in Sephardic and modern Hebrew pronunciation, transliterated Halócho according to the traditional Ashkenazi pronunciation - is a corpus of Jewish religious laws, including biblical law (law) (613 commandments), Talmudic and Rabbinic law, as well as traditions and customs pertaining to Judaism. Classical Judaism makes no distinction in its laws between religious and non-religious life. Therefore, Halaha is not only a guide to religious practices and beliefs, but touches many aspects of everyday life. The term Halahá is often translated as "Jewish Law". The word is derived from the Hebrew verb "halah" = "to walk".

million Jews, i.e. a third of the total number of Jews in the world at that time (including 1,500,000 children), was a painful experience that they went through before they could settle down new on the land of the ancestors.

### **Spaces of refuge and laws to protect life**

Jewish law, going back to biblical times, established “cities of refuge” for those who were exiled. (Deuteronomy 19:3) These spaces had to be very clearly marked and delimited. They referred mainly and in the first instance to those who committed accidental, unintentional crimes. The cities of refuge isolated them, but saved their lives from the anger of the relatives of the murdered. Over time, the meaning of these cities, difficult to imagine nowadays, became more extensive.

Another basic principle, important for the refugee status, refers to the fact that, including at the risk of his own death, a person cannot turn in/denounce a refugee unless he has committed a proven crime.

Throughout the last millennium, between XII and c. In the 19th century, many Jewish communities practiced a policy called Herem Haishub, which caused controversy within them as well. That policy limited the migration of foreigners, including Jews, depending on the economic absorption power of the newcomers. This resembled the immigration policies in place in modern times in many states. However, the refugees did not fall under the scope of this law, they could settle in the localities as much as was necessary to save their lives. They could also perform economic activities, but only to the extent of ensuring subsistence.

**‘Dina de Malkhuta Dina’ - “the law of the place (of the land, civil law) is the law”** that probably represents the most important principle by which the Jews were guided in the Diaspora, but also in Israel, at certain

times. This law, which appears in the Shulhan Aruh 25 times, is similar to how the topic of conflict of interest is dealt with in other legislative norms.

Its essence is that obedience to the civil law of the country where a person is located has the value of a Jewish religious commandment. However, this obligation is valid under the conditions in which the government in that country is one recognized from the Jewish perspective, a non-discriminatory government, which applies the same laws to Jews and non-Jews.

The origin of this law is found in the Letter of Jeremiah to the exiles from Babylon and which stipulates: "Follow the peace of the city where I have exiled you and pray to God for it, because only having peace there, you will have peace." Shalom, peace, is seen as a fundamental desire for life itself throughout the Torah.

The concept of 'Dina de Malkhuta Dina' appears four times in the Babylonian Talmud and represents the meeting point between Jewish religious regulations and civil law.

### **A way of survival, but also of immutable justice**

Throughout the millennia, through the numerous exiles they went through, the Jews had to find a way of survival, but also of regulated, immutable justice, to be able to make decisions based on constant values. According to Maimonides<sup>14</sup>, any government can impose the taxes it wants

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<sup>14</sup> Moses ben Maimon, commonly known as Maimonides (b. 30 March 1135, Córdoba - d. 13 December 1204, Fustat, today Cairo) was a Jewish philosopher, physician and theologian of the Middle Ages, born in Spain (Andalusia) and settled in Egypt. He is also known by the Hebrew name Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (or acronym: RaMBaM), and in Arabic as Abu Imran Musa ibn 'Ubayd Allah Maimun al Qurtubi al Israili. Maimonides is considered the most important sage of Judaism in the medieval period of history. His main work,

on the lands of its citizens, and they must obey, otherwise they can be confiscated.

The halachic law of inheritance is different from the way inheritance is passed on in most countries, including Israeli civil law. For this reason, those from religious families sometimes make wills that reproduce exactly the way of dividing the inheritance according to the Torah because otherwise they cannot appeal, based on the 'Dina de Malkhuta Dina', to the stipulations in the religious writings.

Jewish religious courts are obliged to respect state law, thus resolving a potential ideological conflict.

The existence of the Jews was greatly facilitated by the existence of this wise law, which decreed that Life and Peace are the essential values of continuity. On the other hand, 'Dina de Malkhuta Dina' assured the governments that even those who faithfully follow the law of religious writings will submit, by the very authority of their faith, to the laws of the state.

## Conclusions

Following the above, we can affirm that the Torah represents a valid source of inspiration for modern law in the field of regulating the rights and obligations of immigrants. Even if - or precisely because - it is a source from antiquity, it refers to interpersonal relations with a spirit of balance that can still serve us today in the way of managing crises.

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*The Guide for the Perplexed* <sup>[3]</sup>, published in Arabic (ca. 1190), in which he proposes an allegorical formula for the interpretation of the holy texts, to cancel the contradictions between the teaching of God revealed in the Torah, the knowledge offered by the natural sciences and philosophy, exerted an influence on religious and philosophical debates in Judaism and Christianity well into the 18th century.

Judaism's respect for life is supreme and saving a life, as the Talmud says, means "saving the entire Universe." Each person represents a personal universe, a conglomerate of hopes, secrets, faith, knowledge, etc.

Another fundamental value of the millennial Jewish experience is Shalom - Peace. Understanding between people is a desirable thing that sometimes requires effort, strategic effort, effort of expression and social interaction. The Torah shows us that it is worth making any sacrifices to achieve this desired. It is no coincidence that Jerusalem, Yerushalaim, means "City of Peace".

The Torah gives clear rights to the convert - who becomes equal, in all respects, to the born Jew - and the immigrant. It is required that the one who chooses to come among the Jewish people should have a behavior of understanding and help, just as the Jews wanted, even if they did not often succeed, to be received among other nations.

**„Dina de Malkhuta Dina”** is the fundamental principle whereby the law of the state, the law of the land, prevails over the religious law. This principle is assumed by the Jews as a religious foundation of loyalty to the countries in which they became immigrants.

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# ETHICALLY PORTRAYING CHILDREN IN THE MEDIA. A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE OVER 22 EUROPEAN PRESS COUNCILS' CODES OF ETHICS

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**ABSTRACT.** The study analyses the journalistic codes of ethics proposed by the press councils' members of the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe (AIPCE) that set the foundation for the media representation and treatment of minors in their respective countries. The current research conducted by performing a textual analysis of the above-mentioned documents casts a comparative perspective over the definition of the child and young adult, as provided by these codes of practice, as well as over two of the most common instances in which media portray children, namely as criminals/delinquents and as victims of criminal activity.

**Keywords:** child, minor, crime, victim, media ethics.

## 1. Who can be considered a child according to the ethical codes?

Twenty out of twenty-two investigated journalistic ethics codes include explicit provisions regarding the recommended treatment of minors. However, the majority of these ethical codes do not offer journalists a

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definition of who is considered “a child” under their provisions, leaving room for personal interpretations regarding the capacity to consent to contribute to the final media product, either by accepting to be interviewed or even just mentioned or portrayed in the media. Several problems therefore arise. On the one hand, as members of society, children have the right to be seen and their voices to be heard, reflecting their perception of reality and events. The sensitivity and vulnerability of particular ages and developmental stages, however, can be exploited by the media in a manner that could be potentially harmful both to the child and its future self. On the other hand, as “especially emotional” witnesses of events and vulnerable actors (either as victims or as offenders), children offer a unique perspective that belongs to the general representation of current developments in society.

By performing the textual analysis of the ethical codes proposed by the press councils members of the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe (AIPCE), we find that only eight ethical codes, relevant for seven of the studied countries, refer to the age of the child as a criterion based on which the journalists should adjust their deontological approach. The ethical codes proposed by the press councils of Cyprus, North Macedonia, and the UK’s IPSO and Impress refer to the age of 16 as a limit for various types of conditional consent, media contributions, and media representations of the child.

Regarding the visual portrayal or interview of the minor, the above-mentioned codes strongly advise that children below the age of 16 should not be presented without the consent of a parent or responsible adult, as the Cypriot code for example does under a series of special provisions about media representation of children<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> The Code 1997 - 20 <http://cmec.com.cy/el/%CE%BF-%CE%BA%CF%8E%CE%B4%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%B1%CF%82/editors-code/#item-1122> (cmec.com.cy) consulted 24<sup>th</sup> Nov 2021

“Journalists do not normally interview or photograph children under the age of 16 in relation to matters relating to their situation or well-being, without the consent of their parent or other adults responsible for them. The media and its officers are obliged to comply with the provisions of the United Nations International Convention on the Children.”

or UK’s IPSO, under clause 6 on children:

“Children under 16 must not be interviewed or photographed on issues involving their own or another child’s welfare unless a custodial parent or similarly responsible adult consents. Children under 16 must not be paid for material involving their welfare, nor parents or guardians for material about their children or wards, unless it is clearly in the child's interest.”<sup>3</sup>, as well as the North Macedonian does under the clause that stipulates that “The journalist must not interview or photograph children under 16 years of age without agreement from the parents or legal guardians, unless that is in accordance to the children rights.”<sup>4</sup>

A matter of clear consensus is the fact that children below the age of 16 who either witnessed or were themselves victims of sexual abuse should not be identified or portrayed by the media; the Cypriot code<sup>5</sup> for example stipulates that:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/2032/ecop-2021-ipso-version-pdf.pdf> consulted 24<sup>th</sup> Nov 2021

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.semm.mk/en/documents/useful-resorces/kodeks/398-code-of-the-ethics-of-journalists-of-macedonia> consulted 24<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2021

<sup>5</sup>The Code 1997 – 20 <http://cmec.com.cy/el/%CE%BF-%CE%BA%CF%8E%CE%B4%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%B1%CF%82/editors-code/#item-1122> (cmec.com.cy) consulted 24<sup>th</sup> Nov 2021

“In particular, in the case of children, the following apply:

- (a) The identity of children under the age of 16, who are complainants, witnesses or accused in cases of committing sexual offences, is never disclosed.
- (b) No direct or indirect reference is made to the kinship or other relationship of the accused and the child, and
- (c) The term "incest" shall not be used, and the charge shall be described as a serious offence against children or adults or by another appropriate similar description.”

and UK IPSO’s code clarifying in a similar manner, under Clause 7 Children in sex cases<sup>6</sup> that

- “The press must not, even if legally free to do so, identify children under 16 who are victims or witnesses in cases involving sex offences. In any press report of a case involving a sexual offence against a child-
- i) The child must not be identified.
  - ii) The adult may be identified.
  - iii) The word "incest" must not be used where a child victim might be identified.
  - iv) Care must be taken that nothing in the report implies the relationship between the accused and the child.”

Similar provisions regarding children can be found when analyzing the ethical codes that use the age of 18 as a limit. The Press Code of Kosovo<sup>7</sup>, for example, stipulates that “1. Journalists will not interview or photograph children under the age of 18 on matters related to their family, themselves or

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/2032/ecop-2021-ipso-version-pdf.pdf> consulted 24<sup>th</sup> Nov 2021

<sup>7</sup> <http://presscouncil-ks.org/about-us/document-list/?lang=en>, consulted 25<sup>th</sup> Nov2021

their loved ones, without the consent of the parent or the adult responsible for the child", completely aligned with the Press and Online Media Code of BiH that stipulates under article 11 that "Journalists shall not interview or photograph children under the age of 18, regarding matters involving the child's family, in the absence of or without the consent of a parent or guardian"<sup>8</sup>. The same code recommends that journalists shouldn't identify children under the age of 18 when they are victims of crimes, nor should they identify children under 18 who are involved in criminal cases as witnesses, victims, or defendants. The German Press Code<sup>9</sup> concurs, stipulating under guideline 8.3 on children and young people that "In particular with regard to reporting on crimes and accidents, as a rule the identification of children and young people is inadmissible before completion of their 18th year", and a similar recommendation can equally be found within Azerbaijan's ethical code that stipulates that "If the crime was committed by teenagers or children (persons below 18 years of age), journalists should refrain from disseminating the names or pictures of the criminals."<sup>10</sup>

However, IPSO's Editors' Code of Practice<sup>11</sup> advises under its clause 9 regarding reporting of crime the fact that "particular regard should be paid to the potentially vulnerable position of children under the age of 18 who witness, or are victims of, crime. This should not restrict the right to report legal proceedings". The same code of practice further develops that media professionals should "avoid naming children under the age of 18 after arrest

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<sup>8</sup> <https://english.vzs.ba/index.php/press-council-in-bih/press-and-online-media-code-of-bih> consulted 25thNov 2021

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.presserat.de/en.html?file=files/presserat/dokumente/download/Press%20Code.pdf> consulted 25thNov 2021

<sup>10</sup> Code of professional ethics for journalists of Azerbaijan (presscouncil.az), consulted 25thNov 2021

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/2032/ecop-2021-ipso-version-pdf.pdf> consulted 24<sup>th</sup> Nov 2021

for a criminal offence but before they appear in a youth court unless they can show that the individual's name is already in the public domain, or that the individual (or, if they are under 16, a custodial parent or similarly responsible adult) has given their consent. This does not restrict the right to name juveniles who appear in a crown court, or whose anonymity is lifted." The nuanced approach is singular among the codes of practice, that generally concur that when reporting on investigations and criminal court proceedings against under-aged persons and on their appearance in court, journalists "should exercise especial restraint out of consideration for their future."<sup>12</sup>

The majority of the analyzed ethical codes however do not refer to any particular age or characteristic in order to identify who should be considered a child. A solution would be introducing to the ethical codes a correlation between the nationally relevant age of consent in situations in which the topic of the reporting pertains to sexual acts or offences, the relevant national age for criminal responsibility for media reports regarding criminal activity, and the nationally relevant age for limited or full contractual capacity when the subject of the media product might damage or impair personal development. All of the above-mentioned situations have determined persons with the legal capacity to express consent or dissent regarding media portrayal of the child and, presumably, are also equipped with the knowledge and experience to assess the potential harm caused by misrepresentation.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.presserat.de/en.html?file=files/presserat/dokumente/download/Press%20Code.pdf> *Guideline 13.3 Crimes committed by young persons* consulted 25th Nov 2021

## 2. The child as an offender

According to UNICEF<sup>13</sup> around 261.200 children are estimated to be in detention globally. Western Europe and Eastern Europe have similar rates of 41 to 40 percent respectively, with an approximate total of 18.100 detained children. The purposes of the punishment: deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation, retribution, and restitution cannot be however fully served by the period spent in detention. Rehabilitation of juvenile offenders remains one of the most important aspects that needs to be taken into account, especially when pondering upon the manner in which mass-media, that has the role to inform society and form opinions, presents a juvenile offender. Several ethical codes advise against identifying the accused or convicted child to facilitate reintegration.

Examples include Bosnia-Hertzegovina's Press and Online Media Code<sup>14</sup> which advises an identical treatment of minors in the media, regardless of whether they are witnesses, victims, or offenders, as well as the Code of Honor of the Austrian Press<sup>15</sup> advises journalists not to proliferate reports on misconducts or crimes committed by young people, with the aim of not making it more difficult or even prevent their possible reintegration into society. Therefore, in such cases, full attribution is not permitted. We

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<sup>13</sup> Estimating the number of children deprived of liberty in the administration of justice <https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-in-detention-report/> consulted on 29<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2021

<sup>14</sup> "Journalists must not, under any circumstances, identify children under the age of 18 who are involved in criminal cases as witnesses, victims or defendants", <https://english.vzs.ba/index.php/press-council-in-bih/press-and-online-media-code-of-bih> consulted on 24<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2021

<sup>15</sup> article 6.4 of the Code, [https://www.presserat.at/rte/upload/pdfs/grundsaeetze\\_fuer\\_die\\_publicistische\\_arbeit\\_ehrenkodex\\_fuer\\_die\\_oesterreichische\\_presse\\_idf\\_vom\\_07.03.2019.pdf](https://www.presserat.at/rte/upload/pdfs/grundsaeetze_fuer_die_publicistische_arbeit_ehrenkodex_fuer_die_oesterreichische_presse_idf_vom_07.03.2019.pdf) consulted on 24<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2021

must note here that public interest, as defined by the tenth article of the same code, doesn't represent an exception to the rule as formulated. Therefore, it is our opinion that a thoughtful balance must be struck between the desirability of facilitating reintegration in society at a later moment versus the public interest defined, in the sense of the Code of Honor for the Austrian Press, as being particularly present when it comes to solving serious crimes, protecting public safety or health, or preventing the public from being misled.

Similarly, the Code of professional ethics for journalists of Azerbaijan insists<sup>16</sup> on the fact that the correct deontological approach consists of the journalists respecting children's rights while demonstrating a special responsibility in communicating their views. Children should be interviewed with the consent of their parents or lawful guardians, bearing in mind that an ethical journalist doesn't take advantage of a child's innocence and trust. Journalists should protect the identity of children involved in or affected by tragedy or criminal activity. The Hungarian Code of Ethics<sup>17</sup> advises that the journalist should devote particular attention to the cases where the person concerned is not in a position to fully represent their interests efficiently, examples including children and young adults as well as residents of prisons or people with disabilities.

Reasoned concern for the future of the children involved in criminal activity and prosecuted can also be noticed when analyzing the provisions of the German Press Code<sup>18</sup> that prescribe under Guideline 13.3 Crimes committed by young persons that "when reporting on investigations and

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<sup>16</sup> <https://presscouncil.az/en/code-of-professional-ethics-for-journalists-in-azerbaijan> consulted on 21st of Nov 2021

<sup>17</sup> <http://korrektor.hu/etikai-kodex/> consulted 24<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2021

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.presserat.de/en.html?file=files/presserat/dokumente/download/Press%20Code.pdf> consulted 25<sup>th</sup> Nov 2021

criminal court proceedings against young persons and their appearance in court, the Press must exercise especial restraint out of consideration for their future.”.

Several codes of practice have separate sections dedicated to the media representation of children involved in judicial trials. In the Flemish Code of Practice, for example, under guideline 23 about the identification of minors in a juridical context, the public interest is the limit, and the only criterion based on which details might belong to the sphere of privacy might be shared with the audience<sup>19</sup>. Presumption of innocence must be upheld throughout the juridical context, and the outcome of the trials must be presented, especially if a previously recognizable accused has been released or exonerated. Flemish journalists are advised to constantly weigh the public interest in the reporting against the chances of reclassification and reintegration. The instances during which the journalist can justifiably choose to identify the child include the case of police or justice departments publishing identification efforts as part of a search effort or the cases when the reporting topic doesn't mention the case or the measures imposed by the juvenile court.

The British Editor's Code of Practice<sup>20</sup> as well advises, under its section dedicated to crime reporting, that editors should “avoid naming children under the age of 18 after arrest for a criminal offense but before they appear in a youth court unless they can show that the individual's name is already in the public domain, or that the individual (or, if they are under 16, a custodial parent or similarly responsible adult) has given their consent.

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<sup>19</sup> “The journalist must respect the right to privacy and must not probe further than public interest requires.” <https://www.rvdj.be/sites/default/files/pdf/code-of-practice.pdf> consulted on 25th of Nov 2021

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/2032/ecop-2021-ipso-version-pdf.pdf> consulted 21st of Nov 2021

This does not restrict the right to name juveniles who appear in a crown court, or whose anonymity is lifted.”. Although the approach seems to be more permissive, allowing even for the identification of minors under specific circumstances, upon consulting the clauses about the public interest, we note the fact that “An exceptional public interest would need to be demonstrated to over-ride the normally paramount interests of children under 16.”, the threshold for revealing the identity and various details regarding the crime and the child offender being higher than the reading of the clause would initially imply.

Sex offenders receive separate attention from the British Editor’s Code of Practice, as well as from the Cypriot Code<sup>21</sup> which insists that the identity of children under the age of 16, who are accused in cases of committing sexual offenses, is never disclosed. Reference to the kinship or other relationship between the accused and the child shouldn’t be made directly or indirectly. The British Editor’s Code of Practice<sup>22</sup> approach to the subject, almost identical to the Cypriot one, stipulates under the seventh clause about children in sex cases that in any press report of a case involving a sexual offense against a child, good ethical and deontological standards prohibit the identification of the child, allow for potential identification of the adult, strongly advise censoring the usage of the word "incest" if it would lead to a child victim might be identified. Special care regarding details that might disclose the relationship between the accused and the child should be exercised.

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<sup>21</sup> The Code 1997 - 20 <http://cmec.com.cy/el/%CE%BF-%CE%BA%CF%8E%CE%B4%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%B1%CF%82/editors-code/#item-1122> (cmec.com.cy) consulted 24<sup>th</sup> Nov 2021

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/2032/ecop-2021-ipso-version-pdf.pdf> consulted 21<sup>st</sup> of Nov 2021

Guidelines elaborated for the Serbian Journalist's Code of Ethics<sup>23</sup> warn journalists that occasionally, public office employees working in child protection might be unaware of how media function and their broader impact. Consequently, journalists shouldn't abuse their good intentions or ignorance and should censor information received that might involve the disclosure of the identity of juveniles. Therefore, information obtained from doctors, social workers, teachers, and so on, directly or indirectly referring to children's identity, must not be published.

Visual identification and other visual representations of the crime, the victim(s), or the offender should be avoided. The Federation of Associations of Journalists of Spain underlines in its Code that the right to privacy and own image, as well as the presumption of innocence, must be upheld when the subject of the reporting is under-aged. The code explicitly advises<sup>24</sup> journalists to refrain from interviewing, photographing, or recording minors on topics related to criminal activities or framed in the field of privacy.

The Press Council of Kosovo advises<sup>25</sup>, under the sixth section of the ethical code dedicated to the protection of children and minors, that the print media should never publish the name, paternity/maternity, and surname, photographs, videos, or other images of children under the age of 18 who are involved in violence and criminal offenses, nor should it identify children under the age of 18 who are involved in criminal offenses, whether as witnesses or defendants. The eighth section of the same code dedicated to privacy and the protection of sources strongly forbids media from publishing photos or videos from the crime scene without covering the

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<sup>23</sup> <https://savetzastampu.rs/en/documents/kodeks-novinara-srbije/> consulted 21st of Nov 2021

<sup>24</sup> <https://fape.es/home/codigo-deontologico/> consulted 21st of Nov 2021

<sup>25</sup> <http://presscouncil-ks.org/about-us/document-list/?lang=en> consulted 21<sup>st</sup> Nov 2021

identity or body of the victims after the accident, incident, violence, or crime, equivalating the publication of such media products to an insult to the feelings of the victim's relatives and sensitive to the public.

A concurring perspective about identifying visual representation and its detrimental consequences we find within the provisions of the Code of Montenegrin Journalists<sup>26</sup> that advises journalists to respect the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children and to refrain from exposing children to media interference in their private and family life or personal correspondence or attacks on their honor and reputation. Consequently, journalists must show special consideration when reporting on minors suspected of involvement in illegal activities, upholding their right to presumption of innocence and avoiding sensationalist portrayals. The same set of guidelines warns that it is inadmissible to publish photographs of minors suspected of committing criminal offenses or to reveal their identity.

Although there seems to be a consensus regarding the fact that the child or young adult that has committed a crime should not be portrayed distortedly by the media, in order to facilitate his potentially full rehabilitation as a member of society, disparities continue to linger regarding whether "public interest" can be used as a valid argument in order to support a different ethical approach towards the topic. The cases that are transnational, determined by immigration, poverty, various political events, remain most vulnerable when facing different media ethics' perspectives in various countries. In is our belief that a unified approach of the press councils members of AIPCE would grant an enhanced protection to the rights of child offenders, regardless of the geography of their criminal activity.

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<sup>26</sup> [http://www.medijskisavjet.me/images/sampledata/dokumenti/Code\\_Of\\_Ethics.pdf](http://www.medijskisavjet.me/images/sampleddata/dokumenti/Code_Of_Ethics.pdf)  
consulted 21st of Nov 2021

### 3. The child as a victim

According to the Azerbaijani's Code of Professional Conduct<sup>27</sup> Principle 3 pertaining to Protection of honour and dignity, inviolability of personal life stipulates under paragraph 3.9 the fact that the journalist shall protect the identity of children involved in or affected by tragedy or criminal activity. Similarly, the Bosnia-Hertzevovina Press and Online Media Code <sup>28</sup> notes under Article 11 dedicated to the protection of children and minors the fact that Journalists shall not identify children under the age of 18 when they are victims of crimes. The Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian Media also states under clause 2.4<sup>29</sup> that the identities of children in distress or affected by crime should not be revealed in the situations in which doing so may harm them. The provisions are perfectly aligned with the perspective the code has over media's representation of crime and cruelty, clause 2.6.3 stating that caution must be exercised when revealing the identities of victims of crime and witnesses of crime, especially in cases of sexual violence, unless the victims themselves agree to be identified. Comparably, the Hungarian Code of Ethics<sup>30</sup> underlines that special care should be taken if the victim of an accident or a crime is a minor.

The Serbian Journalist's Code of Ethics<sup>31</sup> draws attention upon the fact that the journalist must ensure that a child is not endangered or placed

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<sup>27</sup> <https://presscouncil.az/en/code-of-professional-ethics-for-journalists-in-azerbaijan> consulted on 25th Nov 2021

<sup>28</sup> Press and Online Media Code of BiH (vzs.ba) consulted on 24th of Nov 2021

<sup>29</sup> *Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian Media* available at <https://mediaethics-bg.org/%d0%b5%d1%82%d0%b8%d1%87%d0%b5%d0%bd-%d0%ba%d0%be%d0%b4%d0%b5%d0%ba%d1%81-2/>, consulted on 24th of Nov 2021

<sup>30</sup> *Hungarian Code of Ethics*, <http://korrektor.hu/etikai-kodex/> consulted 24th of Nov 2021

<sup>31</sup> *Serbian Journalist's Code of Ethics*, <https://savetzastampu.rs/en/documents/kodeks-novinara-srbije/> consulted 21st of Nov 2021

at risk due to the publication of their name, photograph or recording with their image, house, the community in which they live or recognizable surroundings.

The Flemish Code of Practice <sup>32</sup> complemented by the guidelines, when compared to the majority of the European codes of practice has one of the most extensive sections dedicated to the situation of the child as a victim.. Under the guideline for article 22 with regards to the use of information and images taken from social media and personal websites, media workers are advised against identifying children under the age of 18 who are involved in criminal cases as witnesses, victims or defendants. Identification in juridical context (guideline 23) advises the journalist to be prudent when dealing with persons in a vulnerable situation, such as minors, victims of crime, disasters and accidents and those closest to them. According to the same guideline, underage victims, witnesses and other persons involved in a juridical context should, in principle, not be identified.

A preoccupation that correlates with the special treatment afforded to sex offenders extends over the category of under-aged victims of sex-offenders. The Code of Ethics of the Federation of Associations of Journalists of Spain<sup>33</sup> stipulates in this regard that “the naming of the victims of a crime shall be avoided, as well as the publication of material that may contribute to their identification, acting with special diligence in the case of crimes against sexual freedom.”, while UK’s Editor’s Code of Practice elaborated by the Independent Press Standards Organization<sup>34</sup> states, under the seventh section pertaining to Children in sex cases that mass-media must not, even if

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<sup>32</sup> code-of-practice.pdf (rvdj.be) consulted on 25<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2021

<sup>33</sup> Code of Ethics of the Federation of Associations of Journalists of Spain <https://fape.es/home/codigo-deontologico/> consulted 21st of Nov 2021

<sup>34</sup> *Editor’s Code of Practice*, Independent Press Standards Organization, *ecop-2021-ipso-version-pdf.pdf*, consulted 24th Nov 2021

legally free to do so, identify children under 16 who are victims or witnesses in cases involving sex offences. Therefore, the media products covering a case involving a sexual offence against a child shouldn't identify the minor nor the relationship between the accused and the child.

We can conclude that the vulnerable position of the child victim of a criminal offense is paid due consideration and offered a similar system of protection just as the one offered to the child offender. Elements of identification of a child are defined symmetrically. The emotions of both children and adults, as well as the possibility to revictimize are taken into account. Potential improvements of the ethical clauses could take into consideration an improved definition of the persons (parents, tutors, legal guardians) who could consent to the media representation and identification of the minor as a victim of criminal activity or sexual offenses, potentially correlated with the legal capacity to pursue compensation for the damages incurred in the name of the child.

The Serbian ethical clause dedicated to warning the journalists from exploiting the lack of experience of capacity to fully grasp the consequences of the mediatic portrayal expresses a reasonable concern about the capacity of adults to reach the best decisions for the minors, and it shouldn't be treated lightly but addressed by ethical codes.

Equally important for the development of the protection afforded to minors remains the keen interest towards the consequences the media products create by their continuous availability in the online environment. The Declaration of Principles of Professional Journalists in Catalonia that addresses in a separate section the "continued availability of documents online" raises awareness regarding "the indefinite continuance on the web of documents and audiovisual materials" and the fact that it could lead to undesirable or uncomfortable situations for the people affected, and therefore a reasonable course of action should be made available for the

concerned persons to be able to request the erasure of the data, especially in the case of minors victims of criminal offences or sexual assault. A separate deontological provisions regarding the right to be forgotten would, for sure, prove to be one of the most useful tools that the media can offer as a remedy to the future self-aware adult that has been portrayed during his childhood or adolescence in the media.

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