

# **IRL (IN REAL LIFE): BREAKING DOWN THE BINARY BETWEEN ONLINE AND OFFLINE SOCIAL INTERACTION**

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*Abstract: IRL (In Real Life): Breaking Down The Binary Between Online And Offline Social Interaction* examines the framework of "real versus virtual" that is often applied to studies of online social activity. This framework is often employed as a default in new media research, influencing a number of areas including the ongoing debate among scholars about whether or not the word "community" can be justly applied to a virtual group. The difficulty lies in the fact that few researchers have examined the framework in a critical context, in particular in the context of our larger narrative of the history of mass media technologies. This research begins with a detailed discussion of the real/virtual binary as a theoretical construct, in order to see if the idea of a sharp separation between online and offline activity is supportable. Having broken down the binary construct, this work turns to a case study of an online community known as "the Bronze," which existed from 1997 to 2001. By utilizing interviews and archival information, the case study examines the ways in which Internet users combine online and offline social activity seamlessly, the ways Internet forums can become integrated into daily activity rather than exist as exotic oases away from normal routines, and concludes with examples of the community organizing to deal with unwanted behavior, and also with a discussion of what the risk of deception in an online space means for the legitimacy of online social interaction.