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Digital Spaces, Material Traces : Investigating the Performance of Gender, Sexuality, and Embodiment on Internet Platforms that feature User-Generated Content

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As ever more social interaction and cultural production takes place in the networked digital spaces of the internet, it is crucial to develop an understanding of the ways in which gender and sexuality are articulated in these online practices. Through four comparative case studies, this dissertation demonstrates how various forms of user-generated content are employed in the digital performance of gender and sexuality. Far from being immaterial, disembodied, or cut off from the physical conditions of everyday life, it is argued that the internet exists of 'digitally material' spaces and artifacts that contain multiple traces of the embodied users who shape and inhabit them. As such, this dissertation offers a new way to make sense of how gender, sexuality, and embodiment are made to 'matter' on the internet.

DIGITAL SPACES, MATERIAL TRACES

Niels van Doorn

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Digital Spaces, Material Traces

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Digital Spaces, Material Traces

Investigating the Performance of Gender, Sexuality, and Embodiment on
Internet Platforms that feature User-Generated Content

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Chapter One

Introduction

Consider the following activities: introducing yourself to others; contacting friends; exchanging gifts; remembering an event; changing your appearance; arguing; competing for attention; desiring something or someone; flirting; having sex. For the most part, these activities are common aspects of everyday life. In addition to language and other forms of symbolic exchange, their efficacy depends on the material conditions from which they emerge and in which they take place. With the advent of every new media technology, these material conditions become subject to various transformations, which subsequently affect the way that people engage in everyday practices. But how does this work exactly? It is one thing to note these qualitative changes and another to empirically analyze and understand them. The following chapters of this dissertation will do just that, shedding light on the particular ways in which everyday practices, especially those pertaining to matters of gender, sexuality and embodiment, are achieved within the social and technological context of internet use.

This introductory chapter is organized around the following aims: 1) to introduce the subject matter and subsequent research question of the dissertation; 2) to discuss the main theoretical concepts in relation to the research approach and situate the dissertation within a broader research landscape; 3) to account for the design of the empirical case studies; and finally 4) to provide an overview of the dissertation's contents and structure. While ordered separately here for the sake of clarity, some of these aims will overlap and intersect with one another at various points during this chapter.

1.1 — *Orientation: introducing the subject matter*

This dissertation is concerned with gender, which continues to be one of the main nodes in the socio-cultural web that structures processes of identity formation. It also deals with two related nodes: sexuality and embodiment. Experiences of sexuality and the bodies to which they are intricately tied up are crucial to the way that people make sense of their everyday lives and

surroundings. Together, gender, sexuality and embodiment constitute pivotal vectors of identity, forging relationships between the various cultural, political, economic, and affective practices that shape our lifeworld. Next to the symbolic structure of the socio-cultural web in which identities are produced, this dissertation focuses on the material structure of another web: the world-wide web (WWW). Ever since its public availability in 1993, the WWW has proven to be the internet's most successful application and within a few years became a popular medium for information, entertainment, and communication purposes (Schaefer, 2008; Wyatt et al., 2000). More recently, technological and economic developments such as broadband internet connections and the arrival of so-called Web 2.0 have continued to attract large amounts of people to the internet. Weblogs, MySpace, YouTube and other popular 'Web 2.0' applications encourage the creation of online social networks and the distribution of user-generated content (UGC). On these platforms, users are enabled to share textual and graphical material, such as digital photos and videos, which can be incorporated into their communicational and representational practices.

One important consequence of this expansion of online 'participatory culture'¹ in contemporary postindustrial societies is that people's social and cultural practices are increasingly extending into the many digital environments of the internet. These 'virtual' spaces differ from physical spaces in the sense that they radically restructure the spatial-temporal conditions of social interaction and cultural production. As such, this interweaving of the symbolic web that provides everyday experiences with meaning and the material web constituting the interconnected sites and applications of the internet does not leave the nodes of gender, sexuality and embodiment unaffected. But exactly how are these nodes enacted in contemporary online practices? The goal of this dissertation is to critically examine the gendered, sexualized, and embodied dimensions of online cultural production and social life by asking the following research question:

How are gender, sexuality, and embodiment performed on internet platforms that feature user-generated content?

1.2 — Context: concepts, research approach and surrounding fields

Before I address the methodological considerations and case study designs, four concepts need to be theoretically situated: *gender, sexuality, embodiment, and performance*. In this dissertation, I adopt a social constructionist research approach that views knowledge, concepts, and practices as constructed through situated interactions. It thus represents an anti-essentialist perspective that understands reality as a dynamic process which needs to be continually

reproduced and interpreted by people in everyday life (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The theoretical and empirical emphasis on interaction and interpretation closely links this approach to the 'symbolic interactionism' of Herbert Blumer (1969) and the dramaturgical perspective of Erving Goffman (1959), for whom identities need to be 'performed' in social settings. In the same way, I conceive of gender, sexuality, and embodiment as phenomena that have to be repeatedly performed according to cultural norms in order to acquire meaning in a society or (sub)cultural environment. It is vital to acknowledge their connections: performances of gender, sexuality and embodiment are interrelated and mutually constitutive (Cameron and Kulick, 2003; Butler, 1993). How one experiences one's gender identity both influences and depends on one's sexual identifications, desires, and sense of embodiment. In addition, it is important to recognize the normative and discursive dimensions of gender performance, since these performances only become intelligible through the reiteration and citation of existing norms and ideals about gender. By referring to existing discursive norms regarding gender and sexuality, people are able to enact a 'masculine', 'feminine', or 'gay' identity in everyday interactions: 'doing' gender and sexuality becomes a 'performative' process that produces what it enunciates (Butler, 1990; 1993). However, this does not mean that gender and sexual norms are inert phenomena. Normative discourses can be cited differently, depending on the situated socio-material contexts in which they are taken up, enabling alternative ways of approaching gender, sexuality, and the body (Butler, 1993; Sedgwick, 1990).²

It is with respect to embodiment that my research perspective deviates from the more traditional exponents of social constructionism and symbolic interactionism. Where these approaches predominantly focus on the social, symbolic, or discursive aspects of identity performance, this dissertation also acknowledges the material dimension of these processes. This presents itself in two ways. First, it takes into account the materiality of the body, which, together with normatively structured cultural practices, delineates our experiences of embodiment and gender identity. While I strictly disavow any biologically essentialist view that postulates the existence of a 'natural', stable body from which pre-discursive experiences of gender and sexuality emanate, I consider gendered meaning to be produced within the continuous interplay between material bodies and the socio-cultural discourses and imaginaries that embed them (Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1994; 1995; Kirby, 1997; Weiss, 1999; Fausto-Sterling, 2000)³. Just because embodied practices are intertwined with visual and discursive resources does not render the material conditions of bodies less important. This also goes for the social interaction and cultural production that takes place on the internet, which has often been conceptualized as a

'disembodied' realm. As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, bodies are everything but 'lost in cyberspace' and continue to shape people's performances of gender identity. Second, this dissertation is sensitive to the materiality of the various new media technologies that are increasingly becoming an integral part of social interaction, cultural production, and processes of identity formation in contemporary Western societies (Jenkins, 2006a; Bakardjieva, 2005; Wajcman, 2004; Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002; Hayles, 1999). In relation to the internet, this urges an examination of the specific ways that users' performances of gender, sexuality, and embodiment are mediated by the digital technologies of different web applications and the types of content they facilitate and organize. Such an examination is carried out in the subsequent chapters.

Ultimately, then, I propose that gender, sexuality, and embodiment, as mutually constitutive vectors of identity formation, are performed within a triangular network of bodies, cultural discourses, and technologies. This dissertation empirically investigates the particular ways in which this process unfolds on four internet platforms featuring user-generated content. In doing so, it aims to generate valuable new knowledge about the gendered and sexual dimensions of online social and cultural practices, and to thereby contribute to the different research fields with which it intersects. Specifically, this project traverses the adjacent fields of computer-mediated communication (CMC) research (Thurlow et al., 2004; Herring, 1996a) and digital culture or 'cyberculture' studies (Gere, 2002; Bell, 2001; Trend, 2001), which both focus on the social, cultural, and communicational aspects of the internet. A sizeable number of studies in these fields have dealt with issues of gender, as will be discussed in chapter two. Nevertheless, CMC research has predominantly focused on (text-based) interpersonal communication, whereas the field of digital culture studies has often committed itself to historical and theoretical analyses, rather than situated empirical research. By conducting a comparative case study of four different internet platforms and attending to the mutual performance of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in both textual and graphical content, this dissertation will be able to enhance the existing knowledge of online cultural practices in these intersecting fields.

More generally, this project cuts through the broader field of new media studies (Munster, 2006; Liestøl et al., 2004; Lister et al.; 2003; Manovich, 2001; Bolter and Grusin, 1999) as well as the large corpus of research on gender and sexuality. In relation to the field of new media studies, which has produced detailed analyses of the material, cultural, and aesthetic specificities pertaining to the adoption of new media technologies in daily life, this dissertation adds new empirical research that elucidates how particular internet applications and the

forms of user-generated content they facilitate are integrated into everyday practices of interaction, communication, and identity formation. In addition, it emphasizes the role of gender and sexuality in these practices, which remains a relatively under-researched area in this developing field. Conversely, this dissertation contributes to the heterogeneous fields of gender and sexuality studies by taking into account the technologically mediated nature of many contemporary performances of gender and sexual identity. These research fields, in which the human body occupies such a pivotal position, would be fortified by a systematic study of how this body is mediated and constructed through web-based digital technologies, and how these practices affect matters of gender and sexuality. In this way, this dissertation bridges the gap between new media studies and gender research in order to produce hybrid, interdisciplinary forms of knowledge that take seriously the existing normative discourses on gender and sexuality, as well as the new ways in which these discourses are worked out in particular digital settings on the internet.

1.3 — *Practice: method(olog)ical considerations and case study design*

This section explains the composition of the comparative case study design by discussing the platforms that have been included in the analysis and clarifying the methodological and methodical decisions that have shaped the individual studies.

This dissertation presents a comparative case study comprised of four empirical studies that investigate four different platforms featuring user-generated content: Internet-Relay Chat (IRC); weblogs; MySpace; and YouPorn. The first case study examines the text-based synchronous conversations in two IRC ‘channels’⁴. Although this type of online interaction is usually not considered when discussing ‘user-generated content’, I argue that this omission is erroneous. Just like blog posts and uploaded photographs, the digital text of real-time online conversation is both ‘user-generated’ and qualifies as ‘content’. The fact that this content is ephemeral and produced ‘in real time’ should not impede its inclusion in a broad examination of UGC⁵. Furthermore, since text-based CMC predates graphical forms of UGC, it adds a material-historic dimension to the analysis by allowing for the comparative assessment of purely textual and multimodal environments in relation to the performance of gender, sexuality, and embodiment.

While IRC is still used on a worldwide scale,⁶ the other three platforms included in this dissertation have gained particularly more popular and critical attention since the inception of what has come to be known as Web 2.0. Indeed, the decision to include weblogs, MySpace, and YouPorn in the comparative analysis has been partially informed by the wide popular appeal of blogging,

social networking, and video-sharing, which grants these applications a measure of public and scientific relevance.⁷ I emphasize *partially* here, because the predominant reasons for their inclusion are the different ‘digital architectures’ of these platforms and the diverse forms of user-generated content they facilitate, organize, and combine. As will become clear in the following chapters, weblogs, MySpace, and YouPorn (in addition to IRC) each foster their own specific user practices as they materially delineate the ways in which users can communicate, distribute content, and perform their identities in relation to others. I have included MySpace instead of other social network sites such as Facebook or Orkut, since MySpace constituted the largest social network site at the time the study was carried out, ranking as the sixth most trafficked website worldwide (see chapter five). In addition, MySpace maintained a more open interface that allowed for the examination of large amounts of publicly accessible material, whereas Facebook only permitted the inspection of profiles which were part of one’s personal network.⁸ Finally, I have chosen YouPorn over its mainstream ‘big brother’ YouTube, because a video-sharing site that focuses on the distribution of pornographic visual material presents a highly interesting location for the investigation of the relationship between gender normativity, sexual representation, and new media use.

The user practices on the aforementioned platforms integrate textual and visual resources in order to make sense of online social processes that involve gendered representations, interactions, and affections. To analyze these processes of meaning construction and cultural production in online settings, it is necessary to adopt a qualitative methodological approach that is able to generate ‘deep knowledge’ about such situated and contingent phenomena (Markham, 2004; Mann and Stewart, 2000). Although certain basic aspects of identity performance on these platforms may be quantifiable during the analytical procedure, the intricacies of gender, sexuality, and embodiment cannot be disentangled and properly understood through quantitative methods alone. For this reason, the case studies make use of interpretive methods for the analysis of digital multimedia content, occasionally augmented by basic quantitative strategies for the ordering of the polymorphous material.

While the specific methods used in each case study vary, they all share an iterative approach regarding the collection and analysis of the research material. Through the innovative application of existing methods such as discourse analysis (chapter three) and visual analysis (chapter six) to online environments, or by combining textual and visual analysis in order to accommodate to a multimedia platform such as MySpace (chapter five), these case studies adopt a methodical process that accounts for the specific digital infrastructures that need to be dealt with. Such an approach recognizes the importance of flexible

methods in light of the plethora of situated user practices and sociotechnical artifacts that may be found in these digital spaces.

1.4 — Order: contents and structure of the dissertation

This dissertation collects five studies that have been conducted over the past four years: one review of the existing literature on the relationship between gender and the internet and four empirical case studies that collectively develop an answer to the main research question. In this section, I will provide an overview of the following chapters by discussing each study in relation to its content and location within this dissertation (see table one below).

Chapter two features a study of the literature on gender and the internet that has accumulated since the early 90s. Its main purpose is to introduce the reader to the key ideas and issues that have been developed in this particular research field, each relating to the concepts of gender and sexuality. While the review is in no way exhaustive, it provides one perspective on the way that the relationship between gender and the internet has been framed in academic discussions over the years. The central argument put forward in this chapter is that the research field can be roughly divided in three approaches: one that conceptualizes gender as an aspect of online identity construction, one that views gender as an issue pertaining to social and economic structures of new media use, and one that focuses on the mutual shaping of gender and digital technologies such as the internet. The three approaches are then assessed in light of their respective value and relevance for future studies that investigate new applications featuring user-generated content, collectively referred to as ‘Web 2.0’. In this way, chapter two provides a historical background to the four case studies that follow, locating them within a larger research landscape. (This chapter had been previously published in *The Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*: Van Doorn and Van Zoonen, 2008.)

Chapter three presents the first case study, conducted during the second half of 2005.⁹ It examines how inhabitants of two different IRC channels, one catering to ‘straight’ interactions and one populated by ‘gay’ patrons, discursively perform their embodied gender identities in relation to their sexual desires and identifications. Its main focus is on the textual invocation of material bodies in an environment that does not support graphical content. (This chapter has been previously published in *Feminist Media Studies*: Van Doorn, Wyatt, and Van Zoonen, 2008.)

The second case study, conducted during the first months of 2006, is discussed in chapter four. Here, the weblog features as the central application of interest. The study addresses the ways that Dutch and Flemish weblog authors use textual and visual resources to perform their online gender identity, in order

to establish how these modes of self-presentation relate to the existing research field of gender and CMC. Additionally, it is considered how these practices shape the gendered connotations of the weblog as a masculine technology. This study thus combines a focus on online identity formation with a research perspective that is sensitive to the mutual shaping of gender and technology. (This chapter has been previously published in the *European Journal of Women's Studies*: Van Doorn, Van Zoonen, and Wyatt, 2007.)

In chapter five the attention shifts to MySpace. The third case study, completed early 2008, investigates how a Dutch group of interconnected MySpace Friends engage in gendered and sexualized interactions by distributing various textual and visual artifacts (i.e. digital photographs) through the comment exchanges on their profiles. In this study, the connections between affective practices, diverse forms of transgression, and gender performance are given particular consideration. (This chapter has been accepted for publication in *New Media & Society*: Van Doorn, forthcoming.)

Chapter six presents the fourth and last case study, which was completed January 2009. Through the analysis of a sample of 'amateur porn' videos distributed on YouPorn, this study critically examines the proposition that new media technologies are opening up spaces for the sexual emancipation of previously marginalized and underrepresented groups, by allowing for different, more authentic, representations of gender and sexuality than is conventionally available in mainstream pornography. In this way, it ties together issues regarding sexual representation, participatory online culture, and the visual construction of the 'real' and 'authentic' in relation to gender, sexuality, and embodiment. (This chapter is under review at *Convergence* and has recently received a 'revise and resubmit' assessment.)

Finally, chapter seven concludes this dissertation by summarizing the preceding chapters and discussing the theoretical corollary that follows from a comparative assessment of the outcomes of the four empirical case studies. It rounds up the dissertation by evaluating its contributions to the different research fields it has intersected with and making recommendations for future research. Table 1 below provides an overview of the seven chapters:

Table 1: Overview of the chapters

Chapter	Content	Research site	Time period	Methods	Publication
1	Introduction		May '09		
2	Literature review	Academic literature on gender and the internet	Late '06-early '07	Literature analysis	Published
3	Case study 1	IRC	Late '05	Discourse analysis	Published
4	Case study 2	Weblogs	Early '06	Textual + visual interpretative analysis	Published
5	Case study 3	MySpace	Mid. '07-early '08	Textual + visual interpretative analysis	In press
6	Case study 4	YouPorn	Mid. '08-early '09	Visual interpretative analysis	Accepted
7	Conclusion		Feb.-April '09		

In addition to the seven main chapters, this dissertation includes five postscripts that accompany chapters two until six. The purpose of these postscripts is to reflect on both the content and context of the respective studies. Since this dissertation was four years in the making, both my theoretical ideas and methodical experience have developed over this period of time. It is thus inevitable that some aspects of the case studies have become subject to critical retrospective scrutiny. For this reason, the five postscripts will evaluate each case study by offering additional thoughts on their respective subject matter and attending to research-related issues and alternatives. Furthermore, I believe it is important to provide the reader with some supplementary information about how the individual studies came about, by discussing their trajectory and accounting for the research decisions that have been made. As such, the postscripts will function as a critical and reflective addendum to the five studies that have been carried out in the context of this dissertation, thereby adding a metatext that illuminates the conditions in which the chapters were conceived and includes a personal perspective on their collective developmental process. This emphasis on development and process suits the nature of this manuscript: I believe a dissertation should be a recursive trajectory that not only produces interesting findings but also results in a profound learning experience.

Notes

¹ Henry Jenkins (2006b) has introduced the term 'participatory culture' to describe the difference between traditional consumer culture, with its institutional boundaries between producers and

audiences, and active user participation in the production, alteration, and distribution of online media texts. These practices would enable a reshuffling of cultural power relations by allowing people to 'talk back' to corporate media conglomerates. However, others have questioned the extent to which users are actually gaining control over cultural production processes. Instead of treating Web 2.0 as an emancipatory phenomenon, these scholars argue that user participation on these new platforms does not necessarily reconfigure existing power structures and can even be understood to reinforce corporate hegemony on the internet, thus limiting users' actual agency (Van Dijck, 2009; Schaefer, 2008; Allen, 2008; Jarrett, 2008; Scholz, 2008). Although this discussion is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I will briefly return to these issues in chapter two.

² The same is true for other normative discourses, such as those pertaining to ethnicity or age. However, these dimensions of social and cultural life are beyond the scope of this dissertation, which focuses on gender, sexuality, and their mutual relationships to embodiment.

³ The referenced authors offer a range of heterogeneous perspectives on the subject of bodies, body images and discourses, and by lumping them together here I realize that I risk presenting their work as somehow uniform or univocal. There are considerable differences between these theorists, but it is outside the scope of this chapter, and indeed this dissertation, to discuss them properly.

⁴ A 'channel' is the IRC equivalent of a chat room. For further elaboration, see chapter three.

⁵ As will become clear in chapters three and seven, the ephemeral quality of text-based synchronous CMC is ameliorated by the option to 'log' conversations on IRC.

⁶ See www.mirc.com and chapter three.

⁷ On May 11, 2009, MySpace ranked as the 10th most trafficked website internationally, whereas YouPorn ranked 48th, above CNN.com and popular blog site BlogSpot (Alexa Top 500 Global Sites: <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/global>).

⁸ This introduced some ethical issues, which are considered in chapter five.

⁹ This study was based on research conducted for my MSc thesis, completed in May 2005 (see postscript to chapter three).

Chapter Two

Theorizing Gender and the Internet: Past, Present, and Future

2.1 — Introduction

As early as 1993, well before the proliferation of the web, Susan Herring investigated differences between men and women in their use of language in asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as bulletin boards, newsgroups, and discussion lists. Barely 15 years later, research on gender and the internet has burgeoned. The online sphere, with its mixture of information, entertainment and communication modalities and its convergence of audiovisual technologies requires multidisciplinary theoretical and methodological lines of inquiry. Psychologists, for instance, often examine gender differences in the online behavior of women and men; anthropologists and sociologists regularly investigate how women build communities on the internet; feminist political scientists tend to look at the way women use it to mobilize for social and political causes; cultural studies scholars have a recurring interest in the virtual performance of gendered identities in, for instance, online games; and sociolinguists mostly discuss gendered language patterns in various online contexts. Given this plethora of approaches, any attempt to write about this subject is bound to be incomplete and partial. Nevertheless, we organize our account around what we see as the key conceptual contours of the social science literature in this area.

2.2 — Gender as identity

Differences

Gender differences online have been a central area of concern in studies of gender as identity. In her pioneering study, Herring (1993) identified two separate discourses online: a feminine discourse encompassing a more 'personal' style of communication, characterized by apologetic language use and the

prevention of tension; and a masculine discourse, typified as being more 'authoritative' and oriented towards action, and characterized by challenging and argumentative language use. When these two discourses met in a 'mixed gender' online environment, the masculine discourse dominated: men tended to introduce more subjects and ignored or ridiculed the input of female participants (Herring, 1993). These results led Herring to conclude on several occasions that the internet perpetuates everyday linguistic inequalities between men and women (Herring, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1999; Herring et al., 1995). Similar research, like a study of newsgroups by Savicki et al. (1996), concluded that newsgroups with predominantly male participants could be characterized as containing a large amount of fact-related exchange and impersonal speech, while female-dominated newsgroups featured conflict-avoiding speech and high levels of 'self-disclosure'. Jaffe et al. (1995) found that women tend to display textual patterns of social interdependence more than men do in real-name pseudonymous online conferences, while Kendall (1998) demonstrated that the interactions between 'male' and 'female' characters in MUDs (Multi User Dungeons – an early type of online fantasy game) were largely predicated on stereotypical gender relations, even though these dungeons provided what appeared on the surface to be anonymous and disembodied environments. Other research has shown how male dominance is violently reinforced online through the sexual harassment of women in different online contexts (Herring, 2002, 2001, 1999, for an overview see Li, 2005). These studies make clear how gender and sexual identities are mutually constitutive and how, for heterosexual men, the position of the former is strengthened by the oppressive explication of the latter through the use of sexually demeaning language targeted at women.

On the other hand, a detailed analysis by Nancy Baym (2000) of the participants in the online fan community of the US daytime soap *All My Children* reveals that it is not only the gender of participants that explains particular feminine communicative styles, but also the topic of conversation (in this case a soap) and the offline contexts of the participants. Baym's study suggests that gender cannot be considered the sole explanatory factor for 'gender differences' online - a result supported by a small number of others that have found reversed gender patterns. For example, in an experimental study by Jaffe et al. (1999) men abandoned dominant behavior and approached others in a socially aware and helpful way, while Witmer and Katzman (1997) found that women actually uttered more conflictual speech than men. Similarly, Can's (1999) investigation of the language styles in two feminist Usenet newsgroups, *Alt.feminism* and *Soc.feminism*, showed that exclusionary rhetorical techniques can also be found in online environments dominated by women.

Whether these 'difference' studies emphasize the reiteration or the reversal of stereotypical gender relations in CMC, they leave the 'male-female' dichotomy unchallenged because they focus on generalized types of 'male' and 'female' communicative behavior. They find evidence for the claim that the internet reconfirms and exaggerates traditional gender relations. Yet gender differences are not only a source of women's oppression, but are also seen by some scholars as a source of power. Influenced by Donna Haraway's 'cyborg' theory, the radical French feminism of Luce Irigaray, and Freudian psychoanalysis, British author Sadie Plant (1995, 1996, 1997) argues that the 'digital revolution' marks the decline of masculine hegemonic power structures, as the internet constitutes a nonlinear world that cannot be ordered or controlled. Plant's 'cyberfeminist' vision conceptualizes the web as a fractured and diffuse structure - one that is uniquely aligned with women's fluid identities and that deconstructs the traditionally patriarchal character of technology. According to Plant, women have a 'natural' affinity with new digital technologies because they allow them to explore a multitude of gender identities in a virtual environment where the relation between gender and the body is a contingent construction.

Although Plant's utopian view certainly serves as an encouraging theoretical source for young women who are increasingly immersing themselves in new technologies, it also has a rather peculiar way of combining conceptions of femininity as universally different from masculinity with a view of female identity as fragmented and diffuse. In an awkward effort to merge the two notions, Plant reconciles her version of biological essentialism with the technologically determinist claim that the internet constitutes the key to women's liberation because it allows female multiplicity to flourish. This tension leads Wajcman (2004) to oppose this position, suggesting that by claiming that internet technology is essentially feminine, Plant pre-empts the need for feminist political action.

Experimentation

In an effort to break out of this traditional gender binary and further investigate the liberating potential of 'cyberspace', another strand of research shifts the focus from gender differences to gender experimentation. In early research about 'gender bending' the absence of the body in text-based CMC played a central role. Due to the fact that cyberspace offers an environment in which gender can be disconnected from one's physical body, the possibilities for creating different gender identities were believed to be abundant. Studies by Reid (1993) and Danet (1996) examined the construction of gender at the moment in which

participants enter 'virtual space'. For example, Reid (1993) argued that IRC users construct their gender identities through the choice of their nickname. 'Nicks' may express masculinity, femininity or even gender ambiguity. 'MUDDers' are able to choose gendered, gender-neutral, or gender plural characters when they join. This provides them with an opportunity to actively create their gender (or lack thereof) in virtual space.

Perhaps the most influential examination of gender bending online is Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen*. Turkle contends that the internet has become "a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self" (Turkle, 1995: 180). In contrast with other studies, Turkle approaches this from a socio-psychological perspective, by investigating the participants' personal reasons for engaging in experimentation with gender and sexual identity, as well as the social context in which these performances take place. This approach places strong emphasis on the relation between online and offline selves. In Turkle's view, online experiments with gender and sexuality are useful tools for the rethinking not only of one's 'virtual' gender identity, but also of one's 'real life' gendered and sexualized self (Turkle, 1995). This last point is made especially clear in the book's chapter on 'cybersex', in which it is argued that cyberspace offers a risk-free environment where people can engage in the intimate relationships they desire but are afraid to initiate in the real world. The possibilities of online gender bending fit well with poststructuralist theories about identities as non-essential discursive performances which open up space for negotiation (Butler, 1990). In addition, these notions have helped the political struggles of feminists trying to escape the 'prison-house of gender'.

Yet, notwithstanding its theoretical and political popularity, several empirical studies have suggested that gender bending is uncommon or is most often conducted for fun or specific game-related advantages, rather than to break out of the gender dichotomy (e.g. Wright et al., 2000; Van Doorn et al., 2008). A further problem with these theories is that their focus on escaping the offline confines of gender causes them to ignore the impact of embodied everyday experience on online performances. Turkle herself believes that ultimately the gendered self is rooted in the physical, offline world, even though cyberspace provides us with profound experiences that can lead to 'personal transformation' and a reconfiguration of how we perceive our selves (Turkle, 1995).

This concern about the offline self is shared, for example, by Jodi O'Brien (1999), who also stresses the importance of embodied experience. O'Brien argues that "gender categories evoke a deeply entrenched cognitive-emotive script for who we can be and how we should relate to others", and these make it doubtful whether "cyberspace will be a realm in which physical markers such as sex, race,

age, body type and size will eventually lose salience as a basis for the evaluative categorization of self/others” (O'Brien, 1999: 77). Through a reliance on “classification schemes”, which cause one to make continual references to the body as connected to the self even though this body is not physically present, the body provides us with a common point of reference that structures our disembodied communication and gives it meaning (O'Brien, 1999). From this perspective, the internet could hardly be considered a site that facilitates the creation of totally fluid gender identities [see chapter three].

Despite their different perspectives, both the ‘difference’ and the ‘experimentation’ approaches focus on gender as identity: a discourse in which individuals engage and through which they assume agency while being simultaneously shaped and disciplined by it. The ‘difference’ studies distinguish between feminine and masculine language patterns and behaviors and conclude that the internet does not change traditional relations of dominance between women and men, femininity and masculinity. In these works gender is perceived as a foundational property, with its internal truth or logic located in the sexed body. It is what makes women and men who they are and it determines human interactions, even in an online context. In contrast, the ‘experimentation’ research implicitly perceives the internet as the determining force, since its facilitation of disembodied communication is said to enable individuals to break out of the traditional confines of socially constructed gender relations. Not only are both perspectives thus rather determinist (favoring either gender or technology as the deciding factor) they also tend to ignore social contexts and structures. One reason for this is that empirical studies on ‘gender as identity’ have mainly focused on the interpersonal online practices of CMC (chat, bulletin boards, online gaming and so on) while mostly discarding the socio-economic framework in which these practices take place. Although these studies have at times incorporated a notion of embodiment, this is rarely related to a focus on the actual lives of users in everyday social contexts - with the notable exception of Turkle's study. In other words, gender as a social structure that situates women and men in particular roles in society is usually ignored. We now turn to another field of research that has examined how the internet is incorporated in the negotiation of socio-political positions by women and men.

2.3 — Gender as Social Structure

Marketing 'the feminine' online

A number of feminist researchers have interrogated the internet's commercial spaces. Women online are now routinely addressed in their traditional role as consumers (Van Zoonen, 2002). Market research is producing ever more studies about the online differences between women and men in order to find ways to promote women's online consumption (e.g. Parasuraman and Zinkhan, 2002; Rodgers and Harris, 2003; Van Slyke et al 2002).

Feminist scholars have looked upon these developments with suspicion. Leslie Regan Shade (2002), for instance, warns against the increasing tension "between e-commerce applications directed towards women as consumers and the usage of the internet as a locus for citizen-oriented activities" (Shade, 2002: 10). According to Shade, digital capitalism's rising interest in women as a viable consumer market has decreased the number of online spaces where women can engage in non-profit cultural or political practices, while corporate websites that aim to profit from women's supposed needs and interests have proliferated (Shade, 2002). Similarly, Gustafson (2002) explores the 'feminization' of community online through the interrogation of three popular commercial women's sites (iVillage, Oxygen, and Women.com). Gustafson suggests that "while women are a growing internet population, they are being discursively constructed on the internet as community-seekers and as consumers - traditionally feminine roles" (Gustafson, 2002: 169). Consalvo (2002) also suggests that community and consumption have been coded as 'feminine' traits in metaphors used in popular discourse about women and the internet. And while women are now equal to men in their online consumption, they remain far behind when it comes to the production and design of the web and other information technologies (Whitehouse, 2006; Wajcman, 2004).

Internet pornography: from the abject to the everyday?

While women are increasingly targeted as consumers in many of the web's commercial spaces, the single largest commercial enterprise on the internet is still mainly directed at a male audience. The porn industry was one of the first to take its business online and since then has expanded exponentially in size and profit, simultaneously figuring as a further catalyst for the technological innovation that facilitated its growth and pervasiveness (Lane, 2000; Cronin & Davenport, 2001; McCreadie Lillie, 2004). According to McCreadie Lillie, there are four general perspectives from which 'cyberporn' has been addressed. First, behavioral-psychological studies have examined uses and addictions, and have

established an agenda for research that describes a range of 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' online behaviors, while providing possible remedies for 'compulsive' uses of online porn. Second, the 'effects' tradition of empirical media research has mainly concerned itself with the exposure of children to cyberporn. This has usually recommended policies on increased parental guidance and surveillance or filtering software. The third perspective adopts a political economy approach, studying the many facets of the online porn industry and its development in a broader social context, while the fourth focuses on how different social groups use cyberporn in their everyday lives and is mainly indebted to the traditions of cultural studies and CMC research. Feminist analyses of online pornography were initially structured around the polarizing debates between radical 'anti-porn' feminists and liberal 'free speech' or 'pro sex' feminists, which took place during the 80s and 90s, mainly in the United States. The most well-known anti-porn feminists of this time, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, have argued that pornography functions as a system for male domination, where male power is established through the violent degradation of women. Thus, the goal for feminist activists is to dismantle this system of domination (Dworkin, 1981). In contrast, next to the rather obvious free speech arguments that have been raised, 'pro sex' feminists have applauded pornography for undermining and subverting our culture's repressive attitude to sexuality in general, and female sexuality in particular. What these debates make clear is how discourse about pornography is inextricably linked to conceptions of gender, sexuality and power (Allen, 2001).

Yet for all the theoretical and ideological discussions concerning pornography in general, there is remarkably little feminist scholarship on online sex. The few studies that do exist generally align themselves with the 'established' areas of media research. Feminists working within the 'media effects' and 'political economy' traditions have tended to center on the hazards of internet pornography for women and children (e.g. Adam, 2002; Burke et al., 2002; Hughes, 2004, 2000), while those with a cultural studies background have focused their attention on online cultures and how they may be redefining the standard gendered codes of porn and sexual practices (Waskul, 2004; Kibby, 2000; Kibby and Costello, 2001).

This last area of feminist scholarship has been gaining currency over the past few years, with studies extending the scope of analysis by paying specific attention to the situated and everyday contexts of internet porn consumption. For instance, Lillie has argued for a need for 'porn reception' studies that investigate "the truths of the architecture of knowledge and technologies of sexuality, which pornography as a participant in the construction of the subject's

desire and sexual identity works within” (McCreadie Lillie, 2004: 53). An important location for these kinds of studies would be what McCreadie Lillie terms “the moral economy of the networked home” (McCreadie Lillie, 2004: 58).

New communication technologies have played a crucial role in the production, distribution and consumption of pornography, both as visually explicit material and in terms of the accompanying discourses of gender, sex and sexuality (Paasonen, 2006, 2007; Attwood, 2002; Cronin & Davenport, 2001; O’Toole, 1999). To a large extent, the internet can be credited for spreading a “diversity of pornographies” (Attwood, 2002) in today’s media environment, contributing to the omnipotence, normalization and increased acceptance of sexualized imagery in mainstream cultural production [see chapter six]. In fact, this trend is slowly positioning women as another viable consumer market for pornographic content, however unlikely this might seem (Cronin & Davenport, 2001; McNair, 2002; Schauer, 2005). It is in such environments, both on- and offline, that sexuality and gender are performed and negotiated, and this makes them a primary target for further feminist research.

Web of empowerment

Despite the previously mentioned efforts to commercialize the concept of ‘community’, it has also played an instrumental role in a variety of feminist activities to empower women in their everyday on- and offline lives. Many women’s groups and feminist activists have approached the internet as an international platform for such diverse goals as creating support networks, challenging sexual harassment, discussing feminist politics, creating spaces for sexual self-expression, and rallying against social injustices. In this sense, community is strongly attached to a commitment to social change, and resists commercial appropriation by market actors.

Feminist scholars have devoted considerable attention to these social movements, documenting the everyday efforts of women to exercise their rights as citizens in an online environment. Aside from offering a critical look at the efforts by multimedia conglomerates to ‘feminize’ the internet in order to exploit women’s consumer potential, Shade (2002) also provides an overview of how women have used the same internet for feminist communication and activism. She describes, for instance, how mailing lists were one of the earliest and most successful tools for building international women’s networks, creating hundreds of online discussion groups covering a multitude of topics related to feminism and women’s everyday lives. More specifically, Shade illustrates how the internet was used to organize and coordinate the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, and how it enabled Zapatista women to wage a social ‘net

war' against the Mexican government and inform and educate the Western world about their cause. In a similar vein, Kensinger (2003) presents a critical perspective on how the internet was used for promoting social activism and solidarity with women in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime and the subsequent war in the region.

Aside from investigating how the internet can be used for organizing feminist social activism in various 'offline' contexts, scholars have also paid attention to women's and girls' online strategies for cultural criticism and self-expression. The so-called 'cybergrrls' movement has been the subject of extensive academic enquiry. Of particular interest is how techno-savvy young women negotiate and deconstruct the consumerist messages encoded in their everyday pop cultural environment (Driscoll, 1999; Kroløkke, 2003; Yervasi, 1996). However, according to some critics, a focus on this kind of 'postfeminist' cultural renegotiation neglects basic gender inequalities concerning internet access and work-related issues (Wilding, 1998).

As some scholars have pointed out, an important area where women have been working to empower themselves is in the internet sex industry, where they have become increasingly visible as active consumers and producers of pornographic content (Podlas, 2000, Cronin & Davenport, 2001; Attwood, 2002; Smith, 2007). Through this process of emancipation, women are gradually redefining the idea of pornography as an exclusively masculine domain in which women are treated as passive sex objects, in favour of a realm in which they enjoy porn on their own terms and in which they are in control of their sexual practices. This is not only taking place on a symbolic level, for instance through the resignification of 'female sexuality' in live webcam shows or in pornographic stories produced and published by women, but also on a material level, with more female entrepreneurs starting their own online business and making profits from pornographic productions (Podlas, 2000; Ray, 2007). Thus, while the porn industry has so far remained a predominantly masculine environment, and sexist representations of women are unlikely to decrease in the future, the internet is for some a tool for women's sexual and economic freedom.

These studies all share a concern with women's agency in relation to the internet, whether it is through the creation of networks for political activism, producing female-friendly pornography, or the feminist reappropriation of digital capitalism's consumer culture. While some see this agency as eroding due to the increasing dominance of male corporate presence online, others emphasize women taking matters into their own hands, effectively using the net to engage in various forms of socio-political action. More generally, internet research that

approaches gender as a social structure is effectively concerned with the material-semiotic relation between gender and power at a macro level. Meanwhile, the internet itself often functions as an unbiased, ahistorical and gender-neutral technological instrument that can be used by and against women in the struggle for material and symbolic power. At the same time, gender also appears to be a stable entity in the majority of these studies, principally aligned along the man-woman binary and seemingly untouched by the technology that facilitates these feminist practices. Thus, the biological essentialism and technological determinism witnessed in the 'gender as identity' approach tends to resurface here once again in the context of the 'gender as social structure' debates (Wajcman, 2004).

2.4 — Situated practices and spaces

In response to these shortcomings, some feminist research on gender and the internet has started to shift its emphasis from the 'identity vs. social structure' dichotomy to the manifold interactions between gender and internet technology, paying special attention to their situated offline/online articulations. Some authors in the field of science and technology studies (STS) have argued that because the experience of our selves is so thoroughly mediated through our everyday interactions with technological artifacts, we cannot meaningfully study gender without taking into account its intricate relationship with technology (Akrich, 1995). Influenced by this notion, feminist scholars have approached gender as something that is both shaping and shaped by technology. This 'mutual shaping' approach generally looks at the intersections of gender and technology on three different, yet interrelated, levels: structural, symbolic, and identity related (Harding 1986; Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993). Mutual shaping research investigates how these three dimensions of gender are articulated within the web's techno-social spaces, which are themselves gendered in the process. According to this approach, these spaces are not only shaped by their use, but also through the design and production of their technological infrastructure (Wajcman, 2004, 2007). These practices are dependent on many different socio-technical factors, like the interplay of commercial and institutional interests. Technological change, then, is never the linear result of 'techno-logical' decision-making, but the outcome of a contingent process.

Research that follows this approach ideally takes into account the whole techno-cultural circuit including the design, development, marketing, consumption, and domestication of specific technologies (e.g. Cockburn, 1992). However, in practice STS scholars mostly conduct detailed case studies that focus on specific elements of this circuit. We will now briefly discuss three such

studies, two from a Dutch perspective and one situated in the Norwegian context.

Els Rommes (2002) examines how implicit presumptions about gender roles among the design team worked to exclude and alienate women as users and designers of Amsterdam's *Digital City* - one of the first Dutch experiments with the internet in 1994. Adopting a 'gender script' approach, she demonstrates how the desire of the predominantly male design team to experiment with state-of-the-art technology made it hard for less tech-savvy users to participate in the Digital City. Rommes calls this a typical example of the 'I-methodology' found among ICT developers, or taking one's own preferences and capacities as the starting point for designing technology. Since most ICT workers are male, user scenarios implicit in ICT production are thoroughly gendered. The masculine gender scripts that informed the design and development of the Amsterdam Digital City produced a pioneering online space that received international acclaim but it did not attract a diverse group of users. Ultimately, Rommes suggests, the masculine gender scripts implemented in the Digital City's techno-social fabric contained a set of normative assumptions that favored high-tech male users, while alienating other, especially female, users. Only those who already owned a computer with an internet connection, or who had sufficient financial and social capital to purchase one, could get access to the Digital City. Since ownership of a computer and internet access were, and still are, unequally distributed along gender lines in Dutch society, this favored male users (Rommes, 2002). Further, Rommes shows that while women did have access to a computer in their home, they often did not use it because they viewed the device as something that belonged to their male partner.

While Rommes' study centers its attention on the design/development side of the mutual shaping process, other mutual shaping studies focus on how the gendered meanings of the internet arise in the context of usage, and how usage interacts with everyday constructions of gender. Van Zoonen (2002) examines how internet technology is domesticated within everyday practices in Dutch households. Contrary to common claims that the internet constitutes an essentially masculine or feminine environment, gendered meanings of the internet arise, especially at the moment of domestication. Through in-depth interviews with young couples she demonstrates how the 'social', 'symbolic', and 'individual' dimensions of gender interact with the everyday negotiations of technology use among heterosexual partners living together. Four types of negotiations among the partners emerged from the interviews, constituting 'traditional', 'deliberative', 'reversed', and 'individualized' use cultures. While male usage primarily determines these types, the interviews show that this does

not automatically result in the construction of a masculine domain in the household, but instead opens up space for shared and feminine appropriations. For instance, a 'deliberative' use culture involves explaining the negotiation of domestic computer use in collective terms and is instrumental in constructing a sense of togetherness among the partners: a shared techno-social domain (Van Zoonen, 2002). Technology is effectively gendered through the process of domestication as masculine- and feminine-coded practices mutually add meaning to the artifact. At the same time, the computer and the internet present the members of a household with a techno-social environment in which their gender roles can be renegotiated. This can occur when the computer is identified with work-related tasks, as is shown in some of the study's interviews. In these cases, work or studies are more valued than surfing or gaming and thus get prioritized. In effect, this priority turns out to be male-biased in the context of Dutch households, where men are still the main 'provider'. As a consequence the domestication of the computer in the household leads, in these cases, to a reiteration of traditional gender roles.

While Van Zoonen's study focuses on the gendered domestication of technology in the home, Lægren (2004) examines internet cafés as 'gendered techno-social spaces'. Influenced by the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour (2005), she considers technologies, spaces and gender as mutually constructed in situated processes that involve material and symbolic articulations, as well as both human and non-human actors. Following Latour, technological artifacts are seen as 'actants', which are able to acquire agency in the production of space by means of how they are integrated in actor networks. By extending the concept of agency from human to non-human actors, Lægren opens up new possibilities for the analysis of gendered spaces and technologies. Through the inspection of the relation between the two, and by considering both as agents producing meaning alongside human actors, she is able to analyse the material-semiotic processes in which technology and spaces are reciprocally gendered in a physical realm. Instead of creating a space where the masculine connotation of ICT can be deconstructed through the material and symbolic presence of feminine use cultures, internet cafés favor one culture over the other (usually the masculine culture). This leads Lægren to conclude that the internet café, with its female visitors largely invisible, remains 'just another boys' room'. While mutual shaping research usually takes into account the multiple dimensions in which gender interacts with technology, this study draws our attention to the interrelations of gender, space and internet culture on a symbolic level. This is effective in showing how offline spaces acquire meaning as a gendered realm, an

area that is generally overlooked in traditional research on gender and the internet.

As the three examples above show, mutual shaping theory necessitates a case study approach to examining gender and the internet, in which the manifold dimensions that make up particular gendered practices can be studied in detail. The phenomenon of I-methodology (Akrich, 1995) in the design phase has been taken up as a useful concept in diverse case studies, such as the gendered design of digital games (Kerr, 2002), smart-building projects (Aune et al., 2002) or gendered ICT use in the workplace (Sefyrin, 2005). Also, the concept of gendered domestication has been well developed in theoretical terms (e.g. Cockburn and Fürst-Dilić, 1994) and has been applied in several studies of old and new media use (Haddon, 2006).

2.5 — New web, new questions, new outcomes?

Having discussed the main areas of research on gender and the internet, the question for the future is to what extent the existing approaches can function as adequate theoretical and methodological tools for the investigation of new developments such as the emerging era of Web 2.0, typified by an increasing number of users producing and sharing digital content.

According to many, Web 2.0, with its non-hierarchical modes of content production and dissemination, has replaced the top-down structure of the so-called Web 1.0. As part of this Web 2.0 buzz, *Time* magazine named ‘You’ their Person of the Year in 2006: a tribute to the “common people who transformed the way we socialize, gather information, and do business on the internet” via rapidly-growing web applications and platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube (Grossman, 2006). While we should not lose sight of the fact that user-generated content of all kinds has long been a feature of internet culture, it is worth exploring the implications of Web 2.0 for gendered online practices.

Given the fact that these new web applications have only recently become the focus of gender-informed research, any attempt to predict outcomes is necessarily precarious. Nevertheless, we can theorize how the previously discussed approaches might be able to provide new and interesting insights in the field of gender and internet research. How are the existing approaches able to come to terms with the present internet landscape, dominated by applications that facilitate both novel and existing forms of user-generated content?

Dealing first with the ‘gender as identity’ approach, it is most likely that studies investigating gender differences in internet use will continue to find these differences in the way that men and women design their weblogs, provide

information on their MySpace profiles, or contribute to a discussion about a video posted on YouTube. These gender differences find their origins in the embodied everyday experiences of internet users and are thus unlikely to be easily altered by any specific ICT application. For this reason, we contend that this kind of 'difference' research runs the risk of continuously reinventing the wheel.

Turning to 'experimentation' research, it does not seem plausible that future studies will find much evidence of gender experimentation that transcends or disrupts binary gender discourse. Contemporary internet applications incorporate new and improved visualization technologies which constitute both a response to and a perpetuation of our preoccupation with the exhibition of everyday embodied 'reality'. Whereas some scholars believed the 'virtual' realm of 'cyberspace' to be an alternative to the reality of everyday life, a space where users could engage in disembodied communication and gender bending, Web 2.0 has definitively collapsed this dichotomy. People all around the world are uploading an increasing number of photographs and home-made videos onto the web, transporting the 'real' and 'authentic' into online spaces. One of the realms in which this phenomenon is evident is the 'reality porn' niche, which has expanded significantly over the past few years (Barcan, 2002; Ray, 2007) [see chapter six]. In response to YouTube's policy of not allowing nudity, websites such PornoTube and RedTube are now providing a platform where users can upload pornographic video material (either actually home-made or purporting to be) to which other users can respond by leaving comments. Most of these videos focus on the everyday reality of people engaged in sexual practices. Consequently, this dynamic has strongly reaffirmed the 'real body' on the screen, which can now be visually linked to its 'physical origin'. It thus seems unlikely that Web 2.0 will cater to much gender experimentation, with continuous visual scrutiny making users extremely aware of their bodies and those of their peers.

Away from the mainstream, however, the general increase in internet access in the Western world, coupled with considerably lower thresholds for creating personalized content online, do certainly open up possibilities for marginalized gender and sexual identities to be exposed to a larger audience. The visualization technologies that may reaffirm gender and bodily norms in a mainstream context could also be used by queer and transgender people to deconstruct traditional images of gender, embodiment and sexuality, in addition to simply increasing their visibility. This could cause a grassroots disruption of what counts as 'the real body' [see chapter six]. Thus, contemporary research on gender as identity should further examine how gender, sexuality and embodiment are experienced and performed through visualization technologies

such as the webcam and internet video software. A relevant question would be how this 'body-technology' constellation is affecting our conceptions of embodied gender and the ways it can be mediated online.

When considering the 'gender as social structure' approach it is clear that this perspective will remain valuable. As previously noted, multinational corporations have collectively jumped on the Web 2.0 bandwagon and have bought into the current hype around user-generated content. Surely this will have repercussions for how present and future Web 2.0 applications can be experienced and used, as their design is now under increasing corporate control and marketing divisions are eager to benefit from the possibilities of new personalized advertisement techniques. This raises the issue of the increased prevalence of pervasive marketing schemes directed at specific groups of female users, in addition to a more general concern about privacy issues. On the other hand, the previously mentioned low thresholds for participation and production that characterize Web 2.0 could have positive effects on the level of women's participation in political activism and opinion formation online. As research in this novel area is still in its infancy, future studies need to investigate the dimensions of women's political efficacy in these new social spaces. However, even if the number of politically active women grows over the next few years, it seems unlikely that the gendered inequalities identified by Herring and others will dissolve solely through an increase in women online.

Further questions in this area revolve around the extent to which users actually have control over the content they are encouraged to produce and how this may be delimited by corporate design strategies. To what extent do these new user communities allow for women to engage in politically radical activities, when the cultural environment of websites like MySpace and YouTube seems to be predominantly concerned with the consumption of entertainment and lifestyles? How 'political' can a book discussion on Amazon.com be? Does the type of interaction taking place on the most popular Web 2.0 sites require a reinterpretation of what it means to be 'politically active'? These are by no means new questions, but it is vital to reformulate them in the different contexts of a constantly transforming landscape in which economic, cultural and political interests will continue to shape the way that people use the internet.

Mutual shaping research on the relation between gender and the various techno-social spaces of Web 2.0 will prove to be an important tool for showing how situated practices of gendered users are related to their everyday lives and concerns, with the internet constituting an extension of everyday practices rather than a disruptive alternative to it. Future studies should continue to focus on the occurrence of the I-methodology in the design of current websites featuring

user-generated content, as well as examining whether and how traditional gender patterns are reinstated in the domestication of popular Web 2.0 applications. In our own research on the gendered constitution of blogs, for instance, we argued that they are on the one hand extensions of the traditionally feminine practice of diary writing, while they on the other hand redefine this practice as a 'technological' skill, enabling men to contribute as 'bloggers' [see chapter four]. This case study shows the mutual shaping process of gender and technology, with repercussions for the traditional relationship between women and technology, as well as between men and affective self-expression. Nevertheless, we also observed male and female bloggers making gender stereotypical choices of blogging content, mode of address, lay out and hyperlinks in order to create clear masculine and feminine spaces (Van Doorn et al., 2007). The mutual shaping of gender and web 2.0 is, and will continue to be, a fragmented process contingent upon a multitude of situated practices featuring a constant interpellation between particular groups of users and the technologies with which they interact.

2.6 — Conclusion

We started this chapter by acknowledging that the different academic disciplines each have their own perspectives on the articulation of gender in relation to the internet. We identified two initial approaches: 'gender as identity' and 'gender as a social structure'. The internet has been shown to both confirm existing differences between women and men and to enable transgressions of the stereotypical codes of femininity and masculinity. Research has also demonstrated how internet marketing exploits women's social positions by addressing them merely as consumers, while other studies have shown how many women use the net to engage in activism and feminist networking. Whichever of these contradictory possibilities occur depends very much on particular practices of design, development, use and users that take place around internet applications. We therefore discussed the mutual shaping approach, which assumes that gender and technology mutually influence each other, with neither gender nor technology as the determining force. Gender and technology are considered 'actants' in a network of users and producers whose continuous negotiations and contestations propose specific articulations of gender and technological artefacts. Studies of gender and the internet conducted from such a perspective have identified influential processes such as the I-methodology in the development of internet applications – in which designers and developers (mostly men) adopt their own preferences and capacities as the standard for creating new technological applications – and the domestication process, which

refers to the way the internet is integrated in the everyday gendered lives of domestic users.

We concluded by anticipating some research questions that the three approaches could produce when applied to the current social spaces of Web 2.0, and argued that the 'gender as identity' studies should focus on the performance and experience of embodied identity as the nexus of gendered techno-social practices; that the 'gender as social structure' studies will find an increasingly interesting research field that demands an emphasis on the tension between user agency and commercial interest; and that the mutual shaping studies will enable a more thorough understanding of the situated and diverse articulations of gender and technology in the context of Web 2.0 applications that facilitate user-generated content. Rather than causing a schism in the established research tradition on gender and the internet, the social and technological features of Web 2.0 are more likely to evoke questions similar to those asked before. Yet these will require a reformulation commensurable with the current socio-technical environment and its foundation in today's political economy.

2.7 — Guide to further reading

While this chapter has presented the reader with an overview of the past, present, and possible future of research on gender and the internet, it is by no means an exhaustive account. Shade's (2002) feminist analysis of the opportunities and threats that women face when engaging with the internet serves as a solid introduction to the socio-political aspects of women's internet use. Consalvo and Paasonen (2002) also focus on the politics of women's everyday interactions with the web, but broaden the scope of their book through the additional investigation of more 'cultural' issues such as identity construction, embodiment, and discourse. More generally, Poster (2001), Bell (2001), and Trend (2001) all provide insightful analyses on gender identity and the internet from a critical cultural studies perspective, while Schaap (2002) and Campbell (2004) offer two of the most interesting and detailed case studies in this area of research.

For those looking for an elaborate discussion of the relationship between science and technology studies and feminist analysis, Judy Wajcman's *TechnoFeminism* (2004) is an indispensable work, as is the collection of Norwegian case studies edited by Lie (2004). Though it might now be considered somewhat dated, Cockburn and Ormrod's (1993) classic book is sure to remain of interest to anyone curious about the multidimensional relations of gender and technology. Turning to technology's connection to sex and sexuality, O'Toole's *Pornocopia* (1999) offers a vivid account of how porn is consumed and the technological innovations that foster its consumption. Likewise, Waskul (2004)

presents a collection of essays which will prove to be of great use to those with an interest in the political and cultural dimensions of sexual practices in the online environment. These are just a few suggestions for further reading, which will help the reader navigate a path through the growing landscape of gender and internet research.

Postscript to chapter two: Reviewing the literature review

In this first postscript, I want to do two things: 1) attend to the context in which the literature study presented in chapter two was conceived, and 2) address the study's relationship to the empirical case studies that are presented in the following chapters. Since the purpose of this section is to critically reflect on my own work, I will primarily focus on the way in which this relationship could have been strengthened.

After returning from a long summer holiday at the end of September 2006, the reality of life back in Amsterdam quite immediately struck me: I was unemployed (for an account of the circumstances that led to this situation, see postscript to chapter five). My depleted bank account necessitated a quick resolution, so I registered with a temp agency and accepted a number of administrative functions at different financial institutions. Yet I also kept in touch with Liesbet van Zoonen, who was then heading the Communication Science department at the University of Amsterdam and had previously functioned as my supervisor during my time as a junior researcher at ASCoR (see postscripts to chapters three, four, and five). At the start of November 2006, Liesbet invited me to co-author a book chapter on the existing scholarship about gender and the internet, which was commissioned by Routledge and would become part of their *Handbook of Internet Politics*. I, of course, agreed and for the next months I spent my spare time researching the enormous corpus of literature and writing new drafts of the review. The first six months were not quite so productive, given the fact that I could only spend evenings and weekends on the manuscript, in addition to my day job. However, I had in the meantime also developed and submitted a proposal for a PhD position at ASCoR, which was accepted in May 2007 (see postscript to chapter five). From then on, I could devote considerably more time to my research and writing as a fulltime PhD student, and by the end of August the final manuscript was sent to the editors. The chapter was eventually published a year later, in August 2008.

As stated in chapter one, the main purpose of the review chapter is to introduce the reader to the key ideas and issues that have been developed in the existing research landscape on gender and the internet up until the advent of 'Web 2.0'. In this way, it provides a historical backdrop to the four case studies that investigate gender performances in user-generated content. Initially, the review concentrated heavily on studies located in the field CMC research, but as my analysis of the literature progressed its focus expanded to other areas such as studies on internet porn and work that approached the relation between gender and the internet from an STS or political-economy perspective. While this expansion extended the scope of

the review by including a large variety of gendered internet practices, there is one area of research that retrospectively should have received a more thorough treatment. In order to align itself more directly to the subsequent case studies, the review would have been strengthened by a discussion of scholarship dealing with the relationship between bodies, embodiment, and new media technologies such as the internet. I am particularly thinking of the work by authors such as Balsamo (1996), Hayles (1999), Wegenstein (2006), White (2006), and Munster (2006), in which the material interconnections between physical and digital forms of embodiment play a central role¹. Although not all of these works explicitly deal with gendered or sexualized bodies, their attention to the digital mediation of embodied practices would have provided a more solid background to the recommendations for future research made at the end of the review, which pointed to the importance of studying performances of embodiment in the specific techno-social environments of Web 2.0. Likewise, such a discussion would have figured as an apposite prelude to the next chapters in this dissertation, which follow up on some of these recommendations.

Notes

¹ In the final chapter of this dissertation I do engage with some of these authors.

Chapter Three

A Body of Text: Revisiting Textual Performances of Gender and Sexuality on the Internet

3.1 — Introduction

Over the past decade, research on internet culture has displayed an increased interest in the concept of embodiment, particularly in relation to the performance of (gender) identities (Bell, 2001). Whereas early debates about gender identity and CMC (computer-mediated communication) focused on either the liberating potential of a textual, disembodied space (Bruckman, 1992, 1993; Reid, 1993, 1994; Danet, 1996), or the discursive reiteration of traditional gender norms (Herring, 1993, 1995, 1996; Herring et al., 1995; Jaffe et al, 1995; Savicki, 1996), more recent studies have directed their attention towards the embodied everyday experiences of internet users (for an overview, see Van Doorn & Van Zoonen, 2008). The most recent incitement of this academic interest has been the proliferation of the 'Web 2.0', with its emphasis on user-generated content and social networking. Websites such as MySpace, FaceBook, and Youtube (to name the most popular ones) have turned the sharing of personal narratives and the construction of communities into a multi-billion dollar industry. However, this 'revolution' in digital culture could not have taken place without the social software that has shaped the infrastructure of today's web. These technologies have gradually transformed online culture into a visual experience, making it possible for users to include images, webcams and video material on their weblogs or MySpace profiles. These developments have transported the ordinary 'real' lives of millions of internet users onto the web, foregrounding their physically situated existence. At the same time, the internet itself has become evermore integrated into people's daily practices, making it less a separate sphere than an extension of everyday life.

While research on these phenomena is certainly indispensable for our understanding of contemporary culture in relation to new media, and more specifically the relation between gender and internet use, we feel that a general

focus on the internet's graphical spaces tends to ignore the fact that text-based interaction still constitutes a large part of online social life. Second Life might have attracted a lot of buzz, but many text-based formats for social interaction have remained popular, such as public chat rooms (i.e. Yahoo Chat) or private forms of online communication (MSN Instant Messenger, Gmail). This study revisits the textual element of online interaction by looking at an 'old favorite' of CMC research: IRC (internet relay chat), one of the internet's first social spaces. We examine how bodies, which have become increasingly visible in contemporary internet culture, play a role in the text-based environment of IRC, and analyze how this shapes the discursive performances of gender and sexuality. Are conventional notions of embodiment reinstated in a social space without visually represented bodies, or does this textual setting attract people who are interested in escaping the omnipresence of the corporeal in mainstream (web) culture? How does the exhibition of everyday life in relation to gender take shape on IRC?

In order to answer these questions, we first reassess the work of Michelle Rodino (1997) and Jodi O'Brien (1996, 1999), two authors whose perspectives have been important in shaping the understanding of gender performance in relation to text-based communication. Based on this discussion we specify the research questions in more detail.

3.2 — Gender and embodiment online

In her article on the performance of gender on IRC, Rodino (1997) claims that studies providing evidence for or against women's inequality online inevitably support the reification of men and women as two distinct groups. She states:

Research that considers the relationship between gender and power in language necessarily confronts binary gender, because looking at this relationship means looking at "men" and "women". The binary is always already constructed when one considers women's oppression in CMC, because women's oppression has been described in relation to male domination. (Rodino, 1997)

The fact that the position of women is continually described in relation to the position of men has reified the binary gender system, which functions as a normative mechanism that categorizes individuals as either male or female and subsequently decides which identities are both culturally legible and legitimate. In Rodino's view, studies that examine gender identity and CMC would be fortified by incorporating a 'performative' view of gender. She uses Butler's conception of performativity as the discursive constitution of regulatory notions and their effects, whereby the repeated citation of gendered norms effectively

creates a subject who appears to precede the process of gendering (Butler, 1993). However, Rodino infuses Butler's interpretation of performativity with Goffman's notion of interactional gender performance, in which subjects are granted a more pronounced sense of agency. In Goffman's view, people are 'doing' gender, rather than being mainly an effect of its regulatory regime (Brickell, 2005).

Although the notion of embodiment is implicitly present in Rodino's critique, it is never clearly brought forward. While stressing that the performance of gender is not linked to a 'biological sex', her main criticism of theorists like Reid (1993) is that they too easily neglect the role of the body. This still leaves the relation between bodies and CMC uncomfortably underdetermined. A more elaborate discussion of the corporeal and its status in relation to online interactions is provided by authors such as Jenny Sundén (2003) and Jodi O'Brien (1999). For O'Brien the significance of the body is deeply rooted in modern epistemology:

The political authenticity of the modern self is grounded in the assumption that personhood is located in the physical body, which, in turn, is located in a state of nature as a single, classifiable object. (...) The female/male dichotomy is the main line of classification, not only of bodies, but, by extension of the logic of a single, embodied self, the central distinction of "self". Based on what are generally taken to be naturally occurring distinctions in physical sex attributes, it is assumed that gender is the most natural, immutable aspect of "self". (O'Brien, 1999: 78)

Achieving a convincing gender performance in practice requires 'interactional acknowledgement' (O'Brien, 1999). This means that people rely on others to have knowledge about the 'gender script' through which they are performing their identity, since this is the only way in which their interactions can be meaningful.

It is the reliance on what O'Brien calls 'classification schemes' that causes people to make continual references to their bodies as connected to their 'self', even though these bodies are not physically present in the realm where communication is taking place. In this sense, 'sexed' bodies provide people with a common point of reference, a kind of 'physical truth' that structures and classifies the textual communication and gives it meaning (Nakamura, 2002). Conventional gender norms are thus transported online through the classification schemes people rely on both off- and online. As the amount of visual material on the internet is ever growing, this physical truth gets more and more pervasive, reaffirming the binary gender-body connection in online discourse.

Like Rodino, O'Brien believes that it is not the internet itself that facilitates a possible shift in the way people perform gender and perceive its relation to the body, as if the internet is some kind of 'thing'. Instead, this shift could be initiated by the coming together of individuals who have already had experiences with 'gender bending' in their everyday lives. O'Brien uses the example of the 'queer': 'those for whom the conventional connections between desire/body/mind/self do not fit' (O'Brien, 1996: 63). She continues:

The "alternative" experiences that are enacted in "alternative" or queer spaces are based on realities of the flesh: real, embodied experiences and/or fantasies cultivated through exposure to multisensory stimuli. The online relations that reflect these altered forms are generally enacted in spaces where there is a mutual suspension of the belief that "reality" is connected with one's gendered body. (O'Brien, 1996: 64-65)

However, the conclusion that a 'critical mass of queer bodies online' will consequently provide a challenge to the traditional view of gender and the sexed body might turn out to be premature. O'Brien concludes:

Although access to "alternative" gender communities has increased through online communication, for real change to occur there will need to be considerable interaction between those who carry altered gender expectations and those who maintain traditional representations of both fact/fiction and male/female. (O'Brien, 1996: 66)

The work by Rodino and O'Brien evokes the following research questions:

1. *Which discursive practices of embodiment exist on IRC and how do they articulate gender?*
2. *How does the performance of gender and embodiment on IRC differ between 'straight' and 'non-straight' participants and is there interaction between them?*

3.3 — Method

Our study focuses on IRC: a form of text-based, synchronous CMC. It is one of the larger chat services on the Internet, which can be accessed via an IRC client that can be downloaded from its website (www.mirc.com). Once this client is installed, it is possible to log on to one of the IRC servers and select a 'channel', which is the IRC equivalent of a chat room. Conversations that take place in the public part of the channel are visible to everyone who is logged on, but there is also the option of engaging in private conversations through PM (personal messaging). Before engaging in conversation, participants are asked to select a nickname that matches their 'virtual self' (www.mirc.com/irc.html). They then

have access to thousands of channels featuring a plethora of topics and interests. While some of these channels are quite permanent, others come and go. Since IRC is a purely text-based form of CMC, it forms a suitable site for the investigation of the performance of gender and sexuality in a realm where bodies are neither physically nor visually present.

Participants' interactions on two different IRC channels were observed and 'logged'¹ on a daily basis over a five-week period (January 5 – February 9, 2005). During this period, the average amount of time that was spent logged on to both channels accumulated to approximately five hours per day. The two IRC channels are #Cyberbar, a channel that hosts predominantly 'straight' male/female gender performances, and #Queer, a channel mostly visited by participants who articulate 'gay male' gender identities. These two channels were selected for comparison in order to investigate the notion that avowedly queer online spaces might provide for alternative performances of gender identity and sexualized embodiment, thus offering a potential challenge to traditional 'straight' gender roles (O'Brien, 1996).

Taking into account both ethical and practical considerations, we decided to ask for the participants' consent *after* data collection was complete (Mann & Stewart, 2000). The reason for not seeking consent prior to data collection is because that by doing so we would have introduced ourselves as researchers, thus possibly influencing the outcomes of the interactions we wanted to observe. The intention was to 'lurk' (observe while entering no text) in the two selected channels so that we could examine the public conversations without being part of them. If participants had been aware of the presence of researchers, our conjecture is that they would not have conversed as freely as they did without this awareness.

It turned out to be a rather difficult task to obtain consent from all participants. This was mainly due to the fact that some of the participants were no longer present in the channels when we returned to gain their consent. Also, many of the participants who were still active in #Cyberbar and #Queer did not seem very interested in our research. We tried to gain consent on three separate occasions, by posting an explanation of our research and an accompanying request for consent on both channels. While some participants gave their consent, a larger number never replied to our request. No participants explicitly refused to provide us with their consent. Because there were no refusals, and since all of the observed conversations did actually take place in public channels, we decided to use the data. In order to provide some level of privacy to participants, the names of the two IRC channels have been altered. However, we have continued to use the participants' nicknames as these constitute an

important part of our analysis and nicknames themselves function as pseudonyms for participant' real names.

After multiple preliminary observations, in which the complete data set was read and assessed, usable data was selected. We considered data to be 'usable' when it contained interactions that somehow referred to gender, sexuality and/or embodiment. For example, in the left column of Table 1, three participants in #Cyberbar discuss hair growth on their bodies and ways of grooming it. The right column illustrates how we analyzed and interpreted this conversation.

Table 1: Discussing body hair in #Cyberbar

<p><SpawnX> i got stubble <SpawnX> ive been to lazy to shave <LushPuppy> where? <SpawnX> and my face <niceguy420> i dont even have that <LushPuppy> ah <SpawnX> and ya there to pete <niceguy420> when i start to get stubble on my head <LushPuppy> hey I didn't say anything? <niceguy420> i take my mach 3 turbo and shve <SpawnX> but last time i cut my balls with the electric clippers <LushPuppy> could have been on the top of your head? <SpawnX> man they bleed</p>	<p>SpawnX reveals to the other participants that he has been too lazy to shave and thus has "got stubble". LushPuppy questions the location of this 'stubble', while niceguy420 claims he doesn't "even have that" because he always shaves his head with his razor. Then SpawnX discloses that he recently cut his "balls", which caused them to bleed.</p> <p>In this conversation, a version of masculinity is discursively constructed by referring to a bodily practice (shaving) in relation to one's 'real' male body: the discussion of hair and testicles articulates the physical foundation of their 'manhood'. While the shaving of one's testicles does not fit the traditional norm of masculinity, the foregrounding of these primary markers of the 'male sex' conjures up an image of the male body that fits into the conventions of a binary gender system.</p>
--	--

Of course our interpretation in the right hand column of Table 1 is only one possible reading of the text. Empirical data, like the excerpt presented above, never yield single, straightforward meanings, and "it is only through the interpretative framework of the researcher that understandings of the 'empirical' come about" (Ang, 1996: 46). While we recognize the importance of our own interpretative framework, we have tried to read the conversations in a way that does justice to the particular situations in which they came about. This means we have opted for an interpretation that takes into account the context of an interaction, which structures and delimits the possible meanings of the text under investigation. In practice, this demanded that we interpret the specific utterances of the participants in relation to the larger discussions of which they are a part. In turn, we could only make sense of these larger discussions through

the interpretation of the specific utterances that together create meaning. All three authors applied this 'hermeneutic circle' in their interpretations of the data to enable a shared understanding of the texts. We are aware that different, more intricate or radical readings might be possible, especially if the researcher adopts a framework based on poststructuralist or queer theory, but we doubt whether many of the participants who read/write these conversations share similar academic frameworks. Instead of purposefully reading against the grain, we feel it is more interesting to locate the 'dominant' meaning that was shared by the participants engaged in particular interactions.

After selecting the usable data, they were transferred from the log files into Word documents. These documents, a total of 267 pages, were then filed chronologically. An interpretative discourse analysis was conducted on this data.² The first part of the analysis introduces some of the socio-cultural issues within the discursive environment of the two channels: the articulation of physically located bodies; the use of nicknames; the occurrence of 'cross-over'; and the matter of homogeneity in #Queer. The second part demonstrates how these issues relate to the use of certain 'interpretative repertoires' within the discourse of #Cyberbar and #Queer (Wetherell and Potter, 1988, 1990).

3.4 — Results: Socio-cultural issues in #Cyberbar and #Queer

The articulation of physically located bodies

Our analysis shows that participants often refer to the physical location of their 'real life' selves as they introduce themselves to others in the channel. In turn, these participants expected others to also disclose this sort of information during these introductory conversations. In almost all instances these expectations were met, as it turned out that the physical location of a 'real body' features as a common point of reference in many interactions that took place in the channels. In addition, the notion of a geographical location gives rise to the discursive invocation of other aspects of the 'real' body behind the screen, as the following excerpts show:

```
<badwolf> hello  
<koainy> hi  
<badwolf> where are u right now?  
<koainy> in front of the computer  
<koainy> why?  
<badwolf> i mean location country city  
<badwolf> just asking  
<koainy> malaysia  
<koainy> and u?
```

<badwolf> romania
<koainy> ok
<koainy> very far away
<badwolf> what are u boy girl?
<koainy> frm the nick, u guess!
<badwolf> i am not a good quesser
<koainy> f

(#Cyberbar, January 5)

<adritelles> I am from Brazil
<CyberDawg^> Brazil
<adritelles> yes
<adritelles> Where are you from?
<CyberDawg^> Texas
<adritelles> boy or girl?
<CyberDawg^> boy
<adritelles> Kimo? How old are you?
<LadyRaven> 72, adritelles
<CyberDawg^> I'm 37
<adritelles> I'm 35

(#Cyberbar, January 18-19)

As can be gathered from these examples, the disclosure of one's physical location quickly leads to questions about one's sex and, in the latter case, age. These inquiries that revolve around the 'a/s/l' (age, sex and location) of physical bodies can be seen as an example of how participants use 'classification schemes' (O'Brien, 1999) to reduce the uncertainty in their online interactions, using the physical location of 'real life' bodies as a common point of reference.

The excerpts above pointed to the discursive invocation of 'real', physical bodies. However, participants were also exchanging links to webcams and trading photographs to surpass the textual realm and provide the visual proof of their 'real life' embodied selves. Whether it was being used as a way for regulars to keep up with each other's altered looks, or to gain attention from possible love/lust interests, the various visual representations of the participants' physical bodies proved to be a vital point of reference during many textual interactions in both channels. The following excerpt, in which some regulars in #Queer discuss the use of pictures in relation to disclosing corporeal features, serves as a good example:

<Buck> he is at work right now
<Healer1> making porn
<Buck> lol nah he is too shy for that
<Healer1> no one is too shy
<Buck> he wont even let me take a pic to show u guys :
<Buck> :\n/><Buck> oh he aint shy in bed lol [laugh out loud]

<InHawaii> good for him.
<Healer1> LOL Buck smart boy
<veryh0t> that bad?
<Healer1> can I have the first pic
<Buck> sure .. actually i HAVE a pic but its not scanned. my sister took it for me
<Buck> i need to go to a copy shop 2morrow
<Healer1> a naked one buck
<Buck> nah i know he wont go for that
<veryh0t> candid camera
<Buck> he got pissed off a month ago when i pointed the cam at him for serverguy
(#Queer, January 12-13)

As this excerpt shows, the practice of referring to pictures and webcams as a way to reveal someone's 'real self' (in this case Buck's offline partner) is incorporated into the textual interactions, which demonstrates how the participants are accustomed to the visual technologies available to them. The assumption, here, is that you can only be who you say you are to the extent that you can visually back it up, making corporeal proof a requirement for 'interactional acknowledgement' (O'Brien, 1999). Thus, in some instances, text-based communication and visual technologies are integrated in the performance of embodied gender and sexuality on IRC.

The use of nicknames

Nicknames play a crucial part in performing an identity in both channels, as they can be used to display information that contributes to the performance of one's age, sex, location and body type (amongst others). The next excerpt serves as a good example:

<AzureCat> <== Not a gal despite the name
<SpawnX> well there might be some here
<SpawnX> lol
<kat-kat> hi!!!!
<AzureCat> Guess I should have picked a more manly name
<_HyPNOS_> <== hemaphrodite
<AzureCat> Like DEATHCAT
* kat-kat has left #Cyberbar
<AzureCat> or something
<AzureCat> lol
<SpawnX> lol
<SpawnX> bad
<_HyPNOS_> AzureCat no..real manly name is AnotherBeerBitch
<AzureCat> Yeah
(#Cyberbar, January 11-12)

Apparently, AzureCat notices the gender ambiguity surrounding his nickname, so he feels it necessary to explicitly articulate his alleged gender: 'not a gal', but a guy. He goes on to suggest a 'more manly' nickname, namely DEATHCAT. This conjures up a rather morbid imagery of masculinity as destructive power over life, which is apparently found to be so over-the-top that it evokes laughter ('lol') in the channel. Meanwhile, HyPNOS seems to suggest (s)he is a hermaphrodite, but when this statement appears to be ignored (s)he returns with another suggestion for a 'real manly' nickname: 'AnotherBeerBitch'. This strategy produces the idea of nicknames that are masculine *as opposed to* feminine. A nickname seems to be considered more masculine when it addresses the opposite sex in a derogatory way, thereby establishing the male dominance of the participant who uses it. At the same time, any suggestion of identification outside of the male-female dichotomy is ignored. Thus, it appears that the nicknames in this example are subjected to the logic of a binary gender system that only allows for either a male or female subject position.

'Cross-over'

Recalling O'Brien's notion about the need for "considerable interaction between those who carry altered gender expectations and those who maintain traditional representations of both fact/fiction and male/female" (O'Brien, 1999: 66), we looked at the occurrence of 'cross-over': the interaction between 'straight' and 'non-straight' participants in both channels. First, our analysis shows that #Queer is predominantly populated by participants who construct a gay male identity, while #Cyberbar mostly features participants who perform heterosexual male and female identities. Second, although the amount of participants 'crossing-over' is marginal, its most prominent manifestation takes place in the form of 'gay bashing'. In the online version of 'gay bashing', self-proclaimed 'straight' people enter #Queer (and most likely other channels) in order to display their disdain for the 'object' and to subsequently articulate their heterosexual identity through these negative expressions. Some examples of homophobia in #Queer include:

<Realist-01> This channel is profane!! The only purpose for sex is reproduction! Homosexuality is without purpose and therefore must be eliminated! (#Queer, Jan. 8/9)

<Negative0> Heh, fags :-)
<fade> :(
* fade is scared
<Negative0> O_o
<fade> aha heres a chick

<fade> or no
 <Negative0> Where ?
 <fade> its some guy pretending to be one
 <fade> :(
 <fade> i wanna lovebang a girl
 <DecK19> well done
 <fade> with big GREAT titties!
 <fade> mmmmmm tits
 <Negative0> And sweet ass
 <Negative0> Pussy :>
 <Greekllove> is this a gay channel?i wonder
 <fade> oh yeah
 <fade> PUSSEH (#Queer, January 8-9)

Whereas ‘Realist-01’, the homophobe in the first excerpt, directs his/her disgust solely towards the gay inhabitants of #Queer, the duo of ‘Negative0’ and ‘fade’ in the second excerpt tries to upset the #Queer population by explicitly expressing their own heterosexual, misogynistic lust for the female body. ‘Negative0’ and ‘fade’, who had previously performed male gender identities prior to this excerpt, engage in a conversation in which they presume to look for girls. They subsequently show their disappointment when they ‘find out’ that there are only ‘men’ in the channel and continue to make offensive remarks about women. Yet however these participants go about it, what remains the same is their homophobic construction of a discursive opposition between ‘gay’ and ‘straight’, treating ‘straight’ as the norm and ‘gay’ as the abject. It is through this very opposition that their heteronormative discourse is reinforced.

Homogeneity in #Queer

Finally, it is important to return to a notion that emerged in the discussion about interaction between ‘straight’ and ‘non-straight’ participants. It has already been mentioned that #Queer is predominantly populated by participants who perform a gay male identity, which means that only a small segment of queer identity is articulated in this channel.³ While lesbian, transvestite, and transsexual identities have been prominent within queer culture and theory, they are rarely performed in #Queer. As far as they do occur in this channel, the regulars treat them as outsiders who must have mistakenly entered ‘their domain’. The following examples serve as illustrations:

<xdressed> anyone wanna cyber with hot punk crossdress bitch?
 <xdressed> whats a good channel to go on?
 <VoyAger4u> xdressed, what kind of fun do you want?
 <xdressed> any to be honest
 <VoyAger4u> hehe

<VoyAger4u> then just try some
<VoyAger4u> see what suits you the most
<xdressed> mmmmm can't find any shemale rooms or crossdresser rooms
<VoyAger4u> how do you search?
<xdressed> search button
<VoyAger4u> okie (#Queer, January 8-9)

<veryh0t> guys in drag please dont message me
<Alecxx> does this happne to you a lot veryh0t?
<veryh0t> does what happen to me a lot alexcc??
<Alecxx> guys in drag hitting on you
<veryh0t> i wouldnt know, it was a warning (#Queer, January 18-19)

In the first excerpt, 'xdressed' enters #Queer looking for other cross-dressers, but to no avail. (S)he is politely asked to try somewhere else. This excerpt shows that although there are requests for transvestite or transsexual interactions, they are redirected to some space other than #Queer. The fact remains that most of the participants in #Queer are performing homosexual male identities and are not interested in interactions with participants who articulate an alternative gender. This kind of 'gay male normativity' can even lead to apprehensive behavior, as demonstrated by 'veryh0t' in the second excerpt.

3.5 — Results part two: Interpretative repertoires and the perseverance of the body

As discussed above, the body plays an instrumental role within the discursive interactions in both channels. Whether it is through the articulation of physically located bodies, the adoption of gendered nicknames, the violent practice of gay bashing, or the reinforcement of a 'gay male norm', the notion of embodiment constitutes a red thread throughout the channels' discourse. Accordingly, when focusing on the construction of specific 'interpretative repertoires' in the participants' discursive exchanges, our analysis resulted in the identification of three such repertoires that involved an invocation of embodiment: the 'real life body' repertoire; the 'phallic' repertoire; and the 'physical motion' repertoire.⁴

The 'real life body' repertoire

One of the ways in which embodiment comes into play is through the invocation of 'real life' bodies. During numerous conversations, the participants articulate a body behind the screen to 'add weight' to the identities they are trying to construct. The conversation in the first excerpt focuses on the modification of the 'real body' behind the screen and the discursive signifying practices that give

this modification meaning. The conversation starts when niceguy420 is asked whether he had his ear pierced:

<TheLuvBunnys> bro u got yer ear pierced?
<niceguy420> now i do
<niceguy420> i got both pierced
<TheLuvBunnys> ackkkkkk
<TheLuvBunnys> but u aint gay lol
<niceguy420> i know
<TripleNut> Always the left.
<TripleNut> Always.
<TripleNut> Right is gay.
<TheLuvBunnys> yup
<niceguy420> my friend has em both pierced
<TripleNut> So never the right.
<TripleNut> Never.
<TheLuvBunnys> me whacks TripleNut
<niceguy420> and he gets more women than i used to
<TheLuvBunnys> roflmao
<TheLuvBunnys> now wait a minute
<TheLuvBunnys> how the hell ya gonna get more wimmin with 2 ears pierced pfft lol
<niceguy420> cause
<niceguy420> in washinton state
<niceguy420> gays wear tight pants and see through net shirts
<TheLuvBunnys> ewww
<TripleNut> Yuck

(#Cyberbar, February 6-7)

After niceguy420 reveals he has both ears pierced, TheLuvBunnys react with shock and need affirmation of his heterosexual identity. TripleNut then emphasizes that the piercing should 'always' be in the left ear, since the 'right is gay'. He subsequently repeats that it thus should never be the on the right side, suggesting a fear of and/or an animosity towards gay people. In an attempt to reaffirm the masculine heterosexual intention behind getting both of his ears pierced, niceguy420 states that his friend has both ears pierced as well and 'gets more women' than he used to. TheLuvBunnys are seemingly amused by this statement, as can be gathered from the abbreviation 'roflmao' (rolling on the floor laughing my ass off). In answer to TheLuvBunnys question about 'how the hell' he is going to get more women with two ears pierced, niceguy420 explains that where he comes from 'gays wear tight pants and see through net shirts'. This is received with disgusted outcries such as 'ewww' and 'yuck'.

This example clearly shows how a supposed modification of the 'real body' behind the screen can function as a discursive signifier, the symbolic value of which leads certain participants to discursively establish a schism between the

‘normal’ (in this case the heterosexual) and the abnormal, or abject (in this case the homosexual).

In the next excerpt, a different version of the previously explained abbreviation ‘roflmao’ proves to be the catalyst in a conversation about buttocks:

```
<pdavid> i need to get blasted
<BlAsT3d> lmfao... not today! ;)
<pdavid> ojk whats the f does the f mean in there
<VoyAger4u> f = friends
<VoyAger4u> f = fabulous
<BlAsT3d> *grin*
<VoyAger4u> f = feminine gay
<BlAsT3d> yeah... fabulous... ;-) for my wonderful ass
<BlAsT3d> lol
* VoyAger4u pings BlAsT3d in one of his fabulous buttocks :-)) and marks it ' approved by
VoyAger4u' :-))
<Crazednut> lol
<BlAsT3d> Woot!!
<BlAsT3d> ;)
<pdavid> heard mine is a ten
<VoyAger4u> woot indeed :-))
<pdavid> never really see much of it
<VoyAger4u> show me, pdavid :-))
```

(#Queer, February 3-4)

As stated above, ‘lmao’ means ‘laughing my ass off’. But the addition of an ‘f’ by BlAsT3d causes some confusion in the channel. After some guesses about the possible meaning of the ‘f’, BlAsT3d jokingly affirms VoyAger4u’s conjecture by stating that it indeed stands for ‘fabulous’, in reference to his ‘wonderful ass’. VoyAger4u then simulates ‘pinging’ (a virtual pinching) BlAsT3d’s ‘fabulous buttocks’ and marks it ‘approved by VoyAger4u’. Not wanting to be left out, pdavid mentions that his behind is valued at a ‘ten’, to which VoyAger4u mischievously asks for some visual proof. In this excerpt, the references to the participants’ real life buttocks function as a way of expressing their desire for ‘real’ physical male bodies, and to consecutively perform their identity as gay men. Whereas the discussion in the previous example explicitly positioned male bodies in a heterosexual matrix, it here becomes an object of both pride and homosexual lust, which challenges the traditional conceptions of masculine identity. However, while these participants discursively deviate from the norm (i.e. traditional male heterosexuality), the male-female gender binary remains intact.

The 'phallic' repertoire

A certain amount of the discourse in both channels focused on the 'male' genitals, in particular on the penis. Based on this outcome, a 'phallic' repertoire could be identified, which is closely related to the 'real life body' repertoire. The main difference between the two is that the 'phallic' repertoire focuses solely on this particular body part and its symbolic power as gendered signifier. In the first excerpt, two participants are engaged in a mock fight in which they try to outdo each other in more ways than one:

* Amoot beats off Kipper with a pair of chopsticks
<Kipper> my stick is bigger than your stick ;P
<Amoot> i've got two sticks :p
<blade_uk> now now
<Kipper> hehheh
<Amoot> twice the fun
<blade_uk> lets not go there
* Amoot giggles
<Amoot> and one question
<Kipper> hockey stick you dirty minded git blade_uk ;)
<blade_uk> me
<Amoot> yeah, my 5ft pole
<Amoot> hmm how long is the hockey stick?
<blade_uk> you wish
<Amootsgirl> lol
<Kipper> mine is 5.5 foot
<Amoot> darn, you do have a bigger stick than me
<Amoot> mines only 5ft even
<Amootsgirl> lol as tall as me babe im 5 ft even lol
<Amoot> yup, you've seen my big stick between my legs babe
<Amoot> i sent ya photos remember? (#Cyberbar, January 12-13)

What first appears to be an innocent chopstick fight rapidly becomes a tongue-in-cheek competition about who has the biggest 'hockey stick'. This showdown can be read as a scene of macho bravado, where self-proclaimed male participants brag about the size of their 'real life' penises (represented here through the 'hockey stick' image). Even if there was any doubt concerning the subject matter, Amoot bluntly puts an end to this when he refers to the 'big stick' between 'his' legs. What this example illustrates, then, is how participants use metaphors to refer to the size of their 'real life' male genitals, discursively constructing a masculine dominance that is derived from the symbolic power of the 'phallus'. This also explains the use of the 'hockey stick' metaphor: since the participants' physical genitals stand in stark contrast to the mythical power of

the symbolic 'phallus', they are discursively substituted by a much larger piece of 'equipment' with a phallic shape.

Just like in #Cyberbar, the conversations in #Queer focused on the male genitals of the participants, but in this channel the use of a traditional 'phallic' metaphor is replaced by a homo-erotic discourse that evokes sexual desire rather than authority and admiration. The following excerpt shows some participants engaged in a fairly raunchy conversation about making a cast of their penis:

<Buck> me and the new hubby were at a motel when we were dating and they had xxx movies and commercials.. one of them was the kit to make a replica of ur own dick
<Healer1> Hey buck you can bid on one on ebay LOL
<Buck> lol probably
<Healer1> they have the two inch and 24 inch sizes left
<Buck> 2 inches would only piss me off
* Luiggi18 has joined #Queer
<Healer1> it wouldnt even tickle me
<InHawaii> I'd love to make a replieca of some of my friends, life size, and have them sitting around the place.
<Buck> hehe
<Healer1> or you sitting around the place on them LOL
<veryh0t> thats sick
<veryh0t> thats even better
<InHawaii> LOL
<Buck> ur nasty (keep talking)
<InHawaii> that could be fun too. (#Queer, January 12-13)

As discussed above, the conversation in this example focuses on producing a replica of a 'real life' penis as an object of homosexual desire, rather than the masculine power signified by the phallus in heteronormative discourse. This can be understood as follows: participants who perform a masculine gender identity in #Cyberbar have to make use of the symbolic power of the phallus to construct their identity as a dominant male *in opposition to* the participants who articulate female identities, whose identification with the symbolic phallus is denied in heteronormative discourse. In addition, the relationship between these participants who construct masculine identities is one of competition, since this performance requires them to position themselves as authoritarian and victorious. In contrast, the majority of the participants in #Queer are performing gay male identities, in which the phallus is not only the source of symbolic power, but also a physical object to be sexually desired. As this latter position is traditionally reserved for heterosexual women, this 'queered' discourse breaks with traditional gender roles in relation to their presupposed heterosexuality. In

addition, these performances ‘stretch’ the traditional conception of masculinity by inserting it into a homo-erotic discourse.

The ‘Physical motion’ repertoire

The ‘physical motion’ repertoire, like the previous two repertoires, also functions to foreground the body in an otherwise disembodied realm. But whereas in the previous two repertoires the ‘real’ physical body (or the symbolic power derived therefrom) is invoked, it is the suggestion of physical motion in a virtual space (i.e. the IRC channel) that forms the discursive centre of this repertoire.

In the most revealing example, we come across Aragorn, a participant who has previously articulated a masculine identity. ‘He’ has just received the head of a Barbie doll from SpawnX, and is now flirting with LadyRaven:

```
* Aragorn^ tongues LadyRaven
<niceguy420> woa
<LadyRaven> lol
<niceguy420> grab a room would ya
<Pluckster> lol niceguy
<SpawnX> took long enough to quit with the head
<LadyRaven> where's Kalasin when I need her >:D
<niceguy420> unless i get to join in
<niceguy420> j/k
<Pluckster> lol
* Aragorn^ gives LadyRaven head. THE head. the barbie head
<Aragorn^> lol
<LadyRaven> LOL
<niceguy420> aragon gave LR head
```

(#Cyberbar, January 5)

Aragorn’s suggestion of physical intimacy with LadyRaven evokes amused ‘outrage’ from the other regulars in the channel, as illustrated by niceguy420’s comment ‘grab a room would ya’. Aragorn then takes it a step further by simulating giving LadyRaven ‘head’, suggesting the performance of oral sex. He immediately revokes his act by stating he meant the Barbie head, but his intentions are obvious to the rest of the room. Following the participants’ interpretation of this scene, it makes most sense to read this interaction as an attempt by a participant to express his masculine heterosexuality by making sexual insinuations to a participant who performs a feminine identity. These insinuations are discursively enacted by simulating the physical act of oral sex, in order to add credibility to his advances and, in turn, his online gender identity.

3.6 — Conclusion

The most important conclusion of this study is that the interactions in both #Cyberbar and #Queer contain various discursive performances of embodiment that, in general, have reinforced the norms of a binary gender system through the reiteration of a ‘natural’ connection between gender and sexed bodies. However, while the male-female dichotomy remains unchallenged in both channels, a number of participants in #Queer articulated alternative interpretations of masculinity, which did destabilize the traditional heteronormative standards concerning ‘male behavior’.

O’Brien’s suggestion that the establishment of online queer spaces could transgress conventional performances of gender and embodiment seems thereby only partly corroborated. Yet as discussed above, #Queer proved to almost exclusively host participants who performed a gay male identity, instead of representing a larger variety of queer performances.⁵ The majority of the participants in #Queer presented themselves as ‘male’ and closely related this identification to a physical body. While homosexuality certainly poses a challenge to the heteronormative matrix that forms the foundation of our binary gender system (through its reinforcement of a desire for the ‘opposite’ sex), the object of desire in #Queer was still the traditional male body, providing little reason to seek out alternatives beyond the male-female dichotomy. Even though the participants in #Queer did expand conventional notions of masculinity, they simultaneously created their own ‘gay male norm’ that did not allow for performances which transgressed its boundaries.

This supports O’Brien’s view that the ‘alternative experiences’ enacted in online environments are based on ‘real life’ experiences. People who have not experienced what it is like to continuously ‘live’ an alternative gender on a day-to-day basis can hardly be expected to perform an online identity that challenges something as pervasive as our binary gender system. In this way, we also concur with O’Brien’s stance that it is not the internet itself that facilitates a discursive space capable of reconceptualizing gender. The internet, or in this case IRC, is indeed not an autonomous ‘thing’, but is made up of people who bring their everyday experiences to a realm where their actions mutually create a shared, temporal reality. It is important to keep in mind, then, that this ‘reality’ consists of discourses that originate from an embodied understanding of how our world works and who/what/how we can be to make our lives as livable as possible. In Lisa Nakamura’s words:

In order to think rigorously, humanely, and imaginatively about virtuality and the “posthuman”, it is absolutely necessary to ground critique in the lived realities of the human, in

all the particularities and specificity. The nuanced realities of virtuality –racial, gendered, othered– live in the body, and though science is producing and encouraging different readings and revisions of the body, it is premature to throw it away just yet, particularly since so much postcolonial, political and feminist critique stems from it.” (Nakamura, 2002: 7)

Contemporary technoculture contains a paradox: on the one hand it cherishes a fetish for the transcendence of the material, striving for and depending on an increasingly faster and more efficient exchange of information in the most compressed, least space-consuming way possible. In this sense, we are still chasing the cyberpunk dreams that are now often considered hyperbolic and naïve. We still want to think and talk beyond our corporeal capabilities. Yet on the other hand another fetish is cherished, up to the point that it tends to become an obsession. The massive surge of people engaged in blogging, social networking, photo sharing, and ‘vodcasting’ has exhibited an intense fascination with the mundane, everyday experiences of people exposing their embodied selves to those willing to watch. This preoccupation with real life/live body images on the computer screen firmly reassures us that the material body is still present, albeit in a technologically mediated way.

Within this paradoxical technoculture, textual internet communication occupies a peculiar position. In a sense it still contains the aspiration to ‘leave the body behind’, but at the same time it is continually haunted by the ‘specter of embodiment’ that enforces its law and governs our discourse. In the context of gender, this specter continues to enforce a discourse that links gender to a dichotomously sexed body, whether visible or not.

Notes

¹ ‘Logging’ is the act of storing all of the data from an IRC channel into a ‘log file’.

² Obviously, this analysis focused solely on the public part of the two channels.

³ This is something that was discovered after a large part of the data had already been analyzed. It then became apparent that #Queer largely consisted of participants who performed a gay male gender identity.

⁴ A ‘Pop-Cultural’ repertoire was also identified but since it had no relation to the notion of embodiment we decided not to discuss it here. For a complete discussion of all four repertoires, see Author (2005)

⁵ If #Queer had indeed hosted a broader array of queer performances, it is very plausible that the results would have been different and that alternative repertoires might have been identified.

Postscript to Chapter Three: Reflections on the IRC Study

As mentioned in chapter one, the original research for this study was carried out as part of my MSc thesis, which was supervised by Sally Wyatt and completed in May 2005. As such, it was my first experience with conducting extensive qualitative research in an online environment. Soon after starting the analysis in the last quarter of 2004, I found out that a conventional discourse analysis (DA), in the methodological vein of a discursive psychology approach (spearheaded by scholars such as Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter), did not entirely fit the kinds of textual material that I found in the IRC channels. In contrast to the traditional objects of DA (such as written publications and textual reproductions of interviews and conversations), these text-based interactions were both content *and* context, signs *and* agents in a digital environment made up wholly of text. Other than interview transcripts of face-to-face communication, this textual material was not merely a representation or a 'textual reduction' of the 'real thing', but constituted cooperative and dialogic performances that did more than just copy pre-existing encounters or conversations: they *were* the 'real thing' (see chapter seven). In addition, they were also very messy, multiplicitous, and discontinuous, which made the analysis a delicate endeavor.

Yet at the time I could not think of any viable alternative methods to analyze these textual online performances and I now believe this had two reasons. First, many of the more interesting studies done on social interaction in text-based online environments were either not explicit about how they exactly analyzed their material, or were not empirical studies to begin with. Studies that did include information about their analytical methods were often just examining behavioral differences between men and women, which I found to be too limiting on both a theoretical and empirical level. Of course, it has to be noted that my knowledge of the research landscape at the time was not exhaustive (neither is it now), which led to the preclusion of some very interesting work, such as John Campbell's (2004) wonderful study on gay male sexuality and embodiment on IRC. Second, although there were many textbooks on qualitative research methods in online environments, none of them seemed to help me deal with the specificities of the material I was encountering. A lot of the books and chapters devoted to online research addressed the new ethical issues that it evoked and the various ways that *researchers* could use the internet as a tool to conduct existing forms of qualitative research, such as online interviewing or participant observation. What I was interested in, on the other hand, was how *participants on IRC* were using its facilities and affordances as tools to perform their embodied gender and sexual

identities. No textbook that passed my desk could really help me to figure out a proper analytical method suited for such a project. So I eventually decided to stick to the methods I knew and make the necessary adjustments as my analysis proceeded. This iterative approach and flexible interpretation of the DA method allowed me to deal with matters that were specific to the sociotechnical environment of IRC and figure out a way to integrate these matters into my analysis.

Before I give an example of such matters, I want to be explicit about the fact that many of these sociotechnical specificities only began to dawn on me at a later stage (some of them I have come to terms with only recently, while I am sure some others still remain obscured from my grasp). Sure enough, at the start of my research I was experiencing many difficulties in making sense of what was actually taking place in these channels. It was one thing to read other scholars' reports on text-based CMC and a whole other thing to wrestle with the digital material myself. Often times I knew or felt these textual conversations to be 'different' from what one would ordinarily associate with 'text', but it took me quite some time to figure these differences out and devise a theoretical framework that connected these texts to their broader context, as well as their immediately situated surroundings. It is important to note here that both my supervisors (Liesbet van Zoonen and Sally Wyatt, later my PhD promotors) and the reviewers of *Feminist Media Studies* have provided me with considerable help during this process of turning my thesis into a publishable journal article. Although the road to publication was long and winding (it was published in the FMS issue of December 2008, three years after finishing the initial draft), I do believe it eventually became a much better piece for it.

I want to end this postscript by returning to some of the sociotechnical specificities of IRC, some of which I have addressed in the article and others that, in hindsight, could have been dealt with more explicitly in order to fully appreciate the extent in which the technology of IRC is intertwined with the social interactions and performances that simultaneously *produce* and *take place in* its digital spaces. As stated above, the text-based interactions were both content *and* context, signs *and* agents that produced a shared social space. In the article, I assessed how participants use their textual incarnations to simulate movement, such as 'rolling on the floor laughing', 'pinging' (virtual pinching) someone, or giving another participant 'head'. Here, text is not just used to refer to physical aspects of 'offline' bodies, as mere representation, but is also an embodied and dynamic agent in its own right: the text becomes part of the movement and *is* what moves as it is entered into the channel, thus combining the virtual aspect of online movement with the materiality of the digital signs that simulate it (for further elaboration, see chapter seven). In other words, while

the article raises an awareness of embodied movement in digital, text-based space and analyzes the precise ways in which this movement is simulated, it retrospectively would have benefited from a more thorough understanding of how the technological affordances of IRC structure this kind of movement and make it possible to begin with. This would have also been beneficial to advancing a new way of thinking about the particular modes in which gender, sexuality, and embodiment are configured in these textual interactions (see chapter seven).

Given the article's focus on embodiment, it is remarkable how little attention is spent on materiality and practices of materialization on IRC. Looking back now, this is what I consider its main weak spot. My thinking about the material aspects of IRC (and other digital environments) has since been stimulated by Don Slater's study of the ways in which participants on IRC materialize and 'objectify' their textual exchanges in an effort to make things 'real' and create/sustain an ethical order (Slater, 2002). My own study found similar practices, but instead of discussing them in terms of materiality they have been predominantly addressed through the notion of textual embodiment. Still, I feel that it would have been more productive to tie the embodied practices in the channels to a broader examination of the material properties of IRC as an internet application. For instance, I would have liked to pay more explicit attention to the 'digital infrastructure' of the IRC channels and the way its material conditions delineate and delimit the gendered (inter)actions of the participants. Additionally, it would have been interesting to put more emphasis on the ways that participants not only materially embody themselves through textual interactions, but simultaneously materialize others by requesting and guessing their 'age/sex/location'. This dialogic practice was also visible in relation to the simulation of movement, which often required the involvement of other participants who were thereby included in an interactive and dynamic form of digitally embodied movement. Thus, where the article primarily stressed the discursive dimension of what O'Brien (1999) has called 'interactional acknowledgement', I now feel that the study would have been fortified by the recognition that this social mechanism is also accompanied by a set of specific material conditions. It follows that the interpretative repertoires that have been identified are not merely discursive, as in traditional DA accounts, but also incorporate material elements in order to become more fully 'performative' (see chapter seven).

Chapter Four

Writing From Experience: Presentations of Gender Identity on Weblogs¹

4.1 — Introduction

The past few years have seen an enormous increase in the prominence of weblogs, illustrated not only by the increasing number of 'blogs' on the Internet but also by growing media attention for this phenomenon. Much of this attention is fueled by the realization that certain weblog authors have been gaining influence over public opinion concerning certain socio-political issues². But it is not just this small group of prominent intellectuals who are engaging in the act of 'blogging', hundreds of thousands of others have joined them and created their own weblogs to express themselves and share their ideas with the world. In this way, weblogs are offering a new forum for the 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1959), through a technology that incorporates various media into one 'arena' (Miller, 1995).

If this 'new forum' is also capable of instigating new ways in which this 'self' can be presented, weblogs could potentially offer new perspectives on the relation between the Internet and the expression of identity. In addition, the question arises whether weblogs are able to challenge certain assumptions about the relationship between gender identity and computer-mediated communication (CMC). This study examines how weblog authors present their online gender identity, through the analysis of a sample of Dutch and Flemish weblogs. We first briefly examine how the relationship between gender identity and CMC has been theorized over the past 20 years, and how recent studies of weblogs might fit into these theories. The subsequent analysis shows how these weblog authors present their gender identity through narratives of 'everyday life' that remain closely tied to the binary gender system. However, their performance of masculinity and femininity is more diffuse and heterogeneous than some theories would assume.

4.2 — Gender Identity and CMC: The Research Landscape

Looking at the research on the relationship between gender identity and CMC that has accumulated over the past 20 years, three general strands of research can be identified. One group of studies focuses on the online representation of the 'real life' self, which is considered to be located offline. Here, the emphasis is on the 'inextricable' relation between the 'real' person behind the keyboard and the online persona that forms its representation in cyberspace. In Goffman's terms, the person behind the keyboard can be seen as a 'performer' who acts out a 'character'; the online persona (Goffman, 1959). While the character is considered 'a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented', Goffman believes that the 'attributes of the individual *qua* performer are not merely a depicted effect of particular performances; they are psycho-biological in nature' (Goffman, 1959: 223-4, italics in original).

Similarly, studies that emphasize the representational aspect of the relation between online and offline gender identity see the persona that is performed in cyberspace as rooted in a unified, embodied self that is located in the physical world. These studies have focused on diverse applications, including Bulletin Boards, Usenet groups, IRC, and homepages on the World Wide Web (for an overview of some of these studies, see Döring, 2002). The emphasis has often been on the differences or similarities between men and women's Internet use. In a study about the presentation of self on Web-based homepages, Miller and Mather (1998) found that:

Men's pages were shorter, that there was more variety in length and self-reference in women's pages, and that women made more reference to the reader and seemed to be showing more awareness of those who could be viewing their pages than men did. (Miller and Mather, 1998, cited in Miller and Arnold, 2000: 335)

As stated above, studies like those of Miller and Mather emphasize the conception of the 'real' gendered self as located in the physical offline world. When there is a discrepancy between this 'real' offline self and the 'virtual' identity presented online, the performance of this identity is often considered a deception. This is made clear in Donath's discussion of identity deception on Usenet newsgroups, which are considered to be hazardous to the online community and its interpersonal relationships based on trust (Donath, 1998). Identity deception is a recurring theme in the work of Turkle, who has studied the way individuals 'play' with their gender identity in online locales such as MUDs (Multi User Dungeons). Paying special attention to 'gender swapping', Turkle views the online performance of 'pretending' to be of the 'other sex' as a

way for individuals to experiment with different identities to eventually learn more about their 'real' self – which is, again, located offline (Turkle, 1995).

Other studies have treated the possibilities for creating different online identities with greater enthusiasm. The idea of 'being who- or whatever you want to be' in cyberspace, without being constrained by one's 'real life', physical body is welcomed by theorists who focus on the construction of alternative gender identities in an online environment. Research that emphasizes the 'online construction of gender' sees the Internet as facilitating the creation of 'disembodied' identities whose gender is 'disarticulated from biological sex', allowing for the unbridled creation of fluid identities that transgress the binary gender system (O'Brien, 1999; Rodino, 1997).

In her study on Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Reid (1993) contends that gender's common equation with sex becomes problematic when 'gender reassignment can be effected by a few touches at a keyboard' (Reid, 1993: 64). Similarly, studies by Danet (1996) and Bruckman (1993) have respectively argued how the use of 'nicknames' (on IRC) and 'characters' (on MUDs) can be used to indicate one's gender (or lack thereof) in the 'disembodied realm' of cyberspace.

In another strand of research, Wajcman (2004) addresses the 'mutual shaping' process of gender and technology, arguing that 'technology is both a source and a consequence of gender relations.' (Wajcman, 2004: 7; see also Van Zoonen, 1992). This insight is grounded in feminist science and technology studies (STS), which builds on the premise that culture and technology are mutually constitutive, claiming that 'just as gender produces and is produced by culture, so technologies reflect, structure and produce gender relations' (Terry and Calvert, 1997, cited in Kennedy, 2005: 472).

In a recent study, Herring et al. (2004) discuss how a relatively new communication technology such as the 'weblog' is discursively constructed by the media as adult and masculine, excluding women and teens from the discourse on weblogs and marginalizing their activities as 'bloggers'. Traditional stereotypes about masculinity and femininity are combined with the mass media's disproportionate attention for a 'masculine' form of 'blogging' (the 'filterblog'³), resulting in a biased discourse that co-produces the weblog as a gendered technology. This study is characterized by its emphasis on the mutual shaping process of gender and CMC. However, since the research on weblogs is still in its infancy (Herring et al., 2004), it remains to be seen how weblogs fit into the existing research landscape about the relationship between gender and CMC. Having so far focused on various aspects of the relation between gender identity and CMC (i.e. representation, construction, and mutual shaping), it is

now time to examine what exactly constitutes a ‘weblog’ and how it can be conceptualized in relation to gender identity.

4.3 — Gender Identity and Weblogs

Weblogs emerged in the late 1990s as a ‘separately recognized category of web page mainly when specialized tools that help users create such sites were developed’ (Ó Baoill, 2004: 2). They take advantage of the unique features of the Internet and are characterised by the following features: web page with small chunks of hypertext (known as ‘posts’), date-stamped entries, ordered reverse-chronologically, and (sometimes) hyperlinks and readers’ commentary⁴. Weblogs offer their users the possibility to combine various media into one format, increasing the ‘bandwidth’ of the communication. Weblog authors are able to use different technological features (images, audio and video) to express themselves, providing a rich environment for ‘the presentation of self’.

Next to the weblog’s technical format, another frequently discussed aspect of weblogs is the creation of community through the act of ‘blogging’ and the installation of a list of links known as a ‘blogroll’ (Ó Baoill, 2004). When people engage in the act of blogging, they add ‘posts’ to their weblog, allowing their audience to read these new entries and provide feedback. This fosters a reciprocal relationship in which people often add others’ weblogs to their own ‘blogroll’, creating a network of weblogs, often referred to as the ‘blogosphere’ (Ó Baoill, 2004; Packwood, 2004; Lampa, 2004; Schaap, 2004).

The ‘blogosphere’, like most social communities, is not homogeneous. Divisions between different kinds of weblogs can be made using various criteria, but the most common is between ‘linklogs’, ‘lifelogs’ and ‘photologs’ (Schaap, 2004). Like the ‘filterblog’ mentioned by Herring et al., the ‘linklog’ consists primarily of hyperlinks to important events, ‘noteworthy’ news items and other weblogs or websites. Little to no attention is given to personal information, because of the formal character of the linklog and the fact that there are often multiple authors. In contrast, the ‘lifelog’ is a very personal weblog, typically created by one author who shares all kinds of personal information with his/her audience on a regular basis. Unlike the authors of linklogs lifelog authors have a closer relationship with their audiences, often expecting some reciprocity. This is the kind of weblog that gives the blogosphere the sense of community and identity for which it is known. Finally, the ‘photolog’ is a ‘photo only’ weblog, usually created by individuals interested in photography who want to share their photos. Like linklogs, most photologs lack any personal information about the author.

For this study, the lifelog is the most interesting, since the authors of this type of weblog are engaged in presenting their identity through the personal information they disclose as they write about their daily lives. In this sense, keeping a weblog shows similarities to the act of 'diary writing', with the weblog author as diarist (van Dijck, 2005; McNeil, 2003; Sorapure, 2003). Both Herring et al. (2004) and Sorapure (2003) mention the fact that most lifelogs are kept by women. This is in accordance with what Hogan calls the 'particular congeniality of diary writing as a preferred form of autobiography for many women' (Hogan, 1991, cited in Sorapure, 2003: 20). Thus we are confronted with a remarkable intersection between the traditionally feminine act of diary writing and the traditionally masculine environment of ICT. From a mutual shaping perspective, the feminine use of the weblog can be seen as 'emasculating' an historically masculine technology, thereby 're-gendering' the weblog.

In a different study on weblogs, Huffaker and Calvert (2005) examine the ways teenage 'bloggers' present and express themselves. They conclude that 'the online presentations of teenagers demonstrate that blogs are an extension of the real-world, rather than a place where people like to pretend.' (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005: 24-5). They found that both male and female teenagers reveal a similarly large amount of personal information on their weblogs and that males used more emoticons to express themselves than females did, employed 'a more active and resolute style of language' and were more likely to present themselves as gay (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005: 1). While they carefully avoid locating these gender differences in biological sex, they nevertheless contend that these teenagers are engaged in 'the very serious business of creating a stable cohesive set of images about who they are.' (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005: 30). This recalls studies that focus on the representation of a unified self that may 'explore' and 'play' with different identities online, but whose 'real' identity is considered to be located in the offline, physical world (Turkle, 1995). Teenagers, here, are seen as 'on their way' to attaining that 'cohesive set of images' that will allow them to find their 'true identity'.

Our aim is to investigate how weblog authors present their gender identity on their weblogs, in order to examine how these modes of presentation fit into the present research landscape about gender identity and CMC. To summarize, our research questions are:

1: *How do weblog authors present their gender identity on their weblogs?*

2: *How does the presentation of gender identity on weblogs fit into the existing research landscape about the relationship between gender identity and CMC?*

4.4 — Method

To study the presentation of gender identity on Dutch and Flemish⁵ weblogs, approximately 500 weblogs were reviewed for personal information. These weblogs were accessed through three weblog portals, each of which featured an alphabetically ordered list of Dutch and Flemish ‘blogs’.⁶ From this list, every tenth weblog was chosen and searched for personal information. When this sequence was finalized, every eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth weblog was searched in the same manner.

On this basis, 97 weblogs including personal information – either on the main page or ‘one mouse click away’ – were selected. The final sample included 100 different weblog authors whose personal information was examined and categorized into the following ‘representational domains’⁷: sex, age, education, occupation, relationship status, nationality, location, language, presence of pets, hobbies/interests, inclusion of photographs, sexual preferences and reason for blogging.

A basic descriptive analysis was conducted based on this personal information. Frequencies were run for all variables (‘domains’) except ‘age’ – the only non-nominal variable. Crosstabs were produced for the variable ‘sex’ with every other variable except ‘age’. An ‘independent samples T-test’ was run for the variable ‘age’.

The second part of the study features a qualitative analysis of the entries posted by four of the 100 weblog authors. These authors were selected based on the descriptive analysis, which suggested a profile of the ‘typical blogger’: Dutch, heterosexual, urban, man or woman, aged 29, college-level education, employed, and writes in Dutch. Two bloggers fitting this profile were selected for more detailed analysis and two people were selected because they deviated from this profile in significant ways.

For each of these four authors, the last ten entries on his/her weblog were subjected to a content analysis, working back from 15 November 2005. This was done in order to examine how these people present their gender identity beyond the display of their basic personal information. Consequently, our discussion excludes any information that did not pertain to the online performance of gender identity. The content analysis focused on the use of images, the use of hyperlinks, choice of topics and language use, including the use of emoticons. These four aspects function as different dimensions in which the presentation of gender identity can occur. In addition to focusing on the discursive performance of gender identity, we emphasize the possibilities of performing gender through technical features like the display of images and the inclusion of hyperlinks. Each aspect was analyzed to examine how it contributed to the bloggers’ presentation

of gender identity. Thus, we looked at the images used and how this choice contributed to the presentation of gender. We also examined whether the bloggers made use of hyperlinks to web destinations with a particular masculine or feminine connotation. In addition, the choice of topics was analyzed for gender cues. Finally, language use was checked to evaluate their writing style. Traditionally, formal or business-like language has been associated with masculine behavior, while informal, personalized language has been linked to femininity (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1992).

The following section provides the results of the study, first presenting a descriptive analysis based on the bloggers' personal information and then analysis of examples from the two typical and two atypical bloggers regarding their implicit and explicit presentations of gender.

4.5 — Representing gender identity on Dutch and Flemish weblogs

We begin this section by giving an overview of the basic personal information that was displayed by the 100 Dutch/Flemish weblog authors. Of the 100 bloggers in the total sample, 43 were male and 57 were female; the average age was 29.9 for the men compared to 29.4 for the women. Twenty-nine bloggers disclosed information about their sexual preference (m=10, f=19), of whom 27 indicated themselves to be heterosexual (m=8, f=19). Forty-six people mentioned that they lived in an urban environment (m=24, f=22, with 40 people not disclosing their location). Of the 36 bloggers who disclosed information about their education, 17 mentioned they had completed (or were in the process of completing) a college-level education (m=9, f=8). Finally, of the 100 bloggers, 96 wrote in Dutch (m=39, f=57).

At first glance this suggests a profile of the 'typical blogger', as described above. However, this depiction of a 'typical' Dutch blogger masks a considerable amount of diversity within the total sample. As can be seen above, much information is missing. For instance, when only 36 bloggers disclose information about their education this means that 64 withheld this information. The exact reasons for such a decision remain uncertain, but it does suggest that educational status does not play an important role in the self-presentation of many Dutch and Flemish bloggers. Also, 71 bloggers refrained from giving information about their sexual preference. It is not clear whether this is indicative of an assumed heterosexuality among Dutch/Flemish bloggers, or whether it is another domain that these bloggers choose to omit from their 'presentation of self'. The majority of bloggers also chose to leave 'relationship status' and 'reason for blogging' undisclosed.

Male and female bloggers present themselves differently on Dutch/Flemish weblogs. Most notably, of the 74 bloggers that mention their hobbies or interests, seven women refer to having a 'domestic' hobby, while no men refer to such an interest.⁸ In contrast, nine men mention their affinity with ICT, whereas only one woman does so. This relates to the 'occupational' domain (66 valid answers), where 12 men refer to their occupation within ICT, compared to only two women ICT professionals. Eight men present themselves as 'students', compared to only four women. Regarding occupation, 37 men and 29 women choose to present this information. Keeping in mind the division between men and women in the total sample (m=43, f=57), it is clear that 'occupation' is an important representational domain for these male bloggers.

Of the 25 bloggers who mention owning a pet, only two are male. The men seem to want to avoid presenting themselves within a domestic context, while the women feel less apprehensive in doing so.

Only 29 people provide a reason for their blogging: 15 want to share their experiences and interests, while 10 feel that writing has become a hobby. Only four (all women) mention blogging as an emotional release. In contrast, more men say they have a weblog to share their experiences and interests with others (m=9, f=6). These results suggest that the men in this sample are careful not to represent themselves as too 'emotional', but instead choose to contextualize their blogging in a more formal way, emphasizing sharing information and ideas. Like some of the women, some men might also feel that keeping a weblog provides them with an outlet that they cannot find in their daily offline lives, but they decline to state this because of gender-stereotypical expectations. Finally, the four bloggers who do not write in Dutch are men, two of whom state that they keep a weblog to share their experiences. Perhaps they feel that writing in English provides them with a larger and more international readership.

This analysis has shown how Dutch/Flemish bloggers present their identity through various 'representational domains', addressing some while omitting others. Initially, this suggested a profile of the 'typical blogger', but we have shown that our sample included a wide variety of people that do not easily fit into this generalization of a 'typical' Dutch/Flemish blogger. Still, this general profile formed a good starting point for selecting the four weblog authors whose entries are analyzed below, where we will see how these authors present their gender identity in ways that surpass the static display of basic information.

Carrie and Maarten were chosen because they largely fit the profile of a typical blogger. Carrie, a Dutch woman, aged 26, lives in Amsterdam. She has her 'HBO' diploma⁹ and now studies Dutch at university. She is also the editor of a magazine and works in a museum. Maarten, a Dutch man, aged 34, lives in the

east of the Netherlands. He completed his 'HBO' in order to become a teacher, but now works as an editor/reporter/commentator for various radio and TV stations (both regional and national). In addition, he helps to organize sporting events.

Ingrid and Jetty were selected because they deviated from the typical profile: neither lives in an urban environment; they do not mention their education; and they are unemployed. Both suffer from serious illness and Jetty is considerably older than the 'typical blogger'. Ingrid, a Dutch woman, aged 28, is married. They have several pets, but above all they would like to have a child. Ingrid is a Jantje Smith-fan¹⁰ who also enjoys making cards, watching TV, computing, and reading. Three years ago she found out she had fibromyalgy, a rheumatic disease. Jetty, a Dutch woman, aged 47, lives in the east of the Netherlands. She is married with three children. She does not mention her education or occupation, but instead mentions those of her children. She refers to her love of musicals and Boudewijn de Groot¹¹. She says she keeps a weblog to 'blow off steam' as in 2003 she found out she had breast cancer and needed a single mastectomy. Below is a blog entry by Ingrid:



Well.. Monday again.. The weekend already over.. Doesn't it always go quickly eh.. Chris is back at work again, he's got 7 days ahead of him. This week is a very busy week for cabdrivers, because this week it's Dance 2005 in DeSmelt in Assen once again. A big international dance competition, with competitors from all over the world. And Brink has been doing the transport for years. So the sleeves will have to be rolled up for the next few days..

It looks rather grey outside today, and also cold I think. Oh well all I have to do this afternoon is quickly run to the store, and take Doeschka for a short walk.. Other than that I am staying put inside. Soon I just have to put the dishwasher on the cleaning program, and when that's finished I can do the laundry.

Other than that there isn't much scheduled.

Ingrid opens her entry with a self-made image featuring an eroticized depiction of a woman. With her blouse open, the woman hides her face behind a black hat, signaling both sensuality and mystery. By choosing to include this particular image with her blog entry, Ingrid is explicitly linking herself to a representation of femininity as mysterious sensuality. She constructs her female embodied gender identity through this sexualized image.

In contrast to her explicit visual depiction of eroticized femininity, Ingrid's discursive performance connotes domesticity. She appears to be happy to stay indoors and take care of the home, while pitying her husband's busy work schedule. Her informal writing style suits the mundane topics she discusses, using the casual abbreviation "ff" (meaning "just" or "quickly") and ending her post with multiple exclamation marks. This entry juxtaposes two different versions of femininity to create a heterogeneous interpretation of female gender identity.

The next excerpt is a blog entry from Carrie, in which she writes about the death of a horse she used to own:

Pony girl

Years ago I saw once or twice, at the stables.

She asked me questions until my ears hurt and looked at me like I was a *celebrity*.

I didn't know what to do with her, I remember. All those questions. Dufa, my Dufa, had become her 'care-horse'.

Now, about seven years later she writes to me that she stayed with her until the end. She sends me pictures she took this summer, of a fresh, healthy horse that didn't yet seem to show any signs of ageing.

Nobody really seems to understand that you can cry for weeks because of the death of a pony.

I too don't understand how you can carry with you such a sense of mourning for a horse, while you don't shed a tear for some people.

At night I talk to her on MSN. For a little while I am once again unashamedly a pony girl. We tell each other stories about jumping trails, stubbornness, exercises to music.

It almost feels like I am wearing my cap again, and my knitted sweater with horses' heads.

Even though I can sometimes barely decipher her MSN language, on the other side there is a pony girl who understands me.

And that's just what I really needed.



Carrie's blog entry contains both an image and a hyperlink, but neither directly contributes to the presentation of her gender identity. However, they do illustrate the topic of her entry: the death of her beloved horse, Dufa. In this entry, Carrie explicitly presents her female gender identity, through the invocation of the term 'pony girl'. Horse riding is traditionally perceived as a feminine activity in the Netherlands. Carrie identifies herself as part of this group by expressing the connection she feels with another girl who is equally passionate about horses. Through this example of 'girl bonding', the reader gets a sense of what it means for Carrie to live out this particular female role and cope with the loss of an animal. Instead of a one-dimensional, stereotypical depiction of a 'pony girl', a more nuanced and in-depth representation is presented in Carrie's entry.

The following excerpt contains part of a blog entry by Jetty, who shares some very personal thoughts:

One day a week, sporting consists of swimming... Terribly frightening...
Not the swimming in itself, I can do that. No, it's more that for the first time since the mastectomy I am hoisting myself into a bathing suit. And that's scary...
Because if there's one occasion where you can see that I've only got one breast it's then. Fortunately there are 5 other breast cancer-women present so that makes a difference. Have to buy a bathing suit by the way. I have to think immediately about getting one that has room for a prosthesis or whether I just go without. I have been told that if you get one in which you can fit a prosthesis you then have fill it up with aquarium wadding. They don't absorb fluids and keep their form... yeah that's right, I have to think about things I previously didn't even know existed... Advice is always welcome.

Jetty discusses her first day of physiotherapy, following the mastectomy. By disclosing this intimate information about herself, Jetty explicitly presents her embodied gender identity. Although she does not make use of images or hyperlinks, she discursively performs an image of her 'modified' female body. By expressing her anxiety about showing her body in public, and sharing her thoughts concerning the use of prosthetics, Jetty shows what it is like to be a woman whose embodied experience of femininity is altered through a disease that mainly strikes women. In addition, she expresses a sense of comfort when talking about the other women in her group who have also had breast cancer. Revealing herself in the presence of these women is less awkward since they have had similar experiences.

We now turn to more implicit presentations of gender. On his weblog, Maarten often mediates between presentations of his 'private' and 'professional' self. Although he rarely gives information that explicitly mentions his gender identity, he nevertheless 'gives off' gendered signals. One way in which Maarten

implicitly presents his gender identity is through his use of 'Tip-Plugs'. For example, in this next entry, Maarten directs attention to a 'fantastic photo collection of airplanes':

Tip-Plug (162)



Tip-Plug of October 27 2005: [Airliners.net](#) with a fantastic photo collection of airplanes!

Maarten uses a hyperlink, what he calls a 'Tip Plug', to express his interest in airplanes, adding one of the collection's pictures to illustrate the object of his excitement, signified by the exclamation mark. By linking to an online photo collection, Maarten implicitly presents his male gender identity, as aviation is traditionally a masculine social territory. That he does not elaborate on his interest can be read as an indication that there exists an unspoken assumption of a 'natural' connection between men and technology, in this case aviation. Maarten also writes short diary entries:

Show must go on feeling...

It still gave me a bit of a "show must go on feeling" yesterday. First an emotional goodbye to Uncle Herman and then off to work "as usual". It was hard on me. The ceremony and the cremation were emotional and I had a really tough time. But there wasn't much time to cope, I had to get back to work. And what does some news about Arjan Robben or the presentation of the TVM ice-skating team still do to you then... Or Champions' League football...

Oh well, everything continues. The show must go on. Still it's odd...

Maarten's display of emotional involvement suggests a presentation that is at odds with the typical portrayal of masculinity as tough and composed. Yet the emphasis on his loyalty to his work signifies a professionalism that is stereotypically connected to masculine identity. Maarten thus discursively

presents his gender identity in a way that is more ambiguous than when he used the aviation link.

The following example, again from Ingrid, also demonstrates that gender can be implicitly presented in the writing of the blogger:

Chris has started very early this morning. ...

I don't have plans myself, yeah I'm going to rewire the phone line into our bedroom, the telephone is still in the spare room now, but I really want to have a phone by the bed, and do you know, the @home installation package includes a nice little phone.. So that problem's solved. Just have to drill a hole in the wall tomorrow so the wire can go through, but that's no problem, and the wire is already equipped with plugs, so it's quite simple really.. I think.. hehehe..

Earlier, we saw how Ingrid discursively presented herself as a housewife who stays at home while her husband goes out to work, performing female gender identity as domesticated and mundane. In this entry, her performance proves to be more complex than previously expected. While she starts off by claiming she doesn't have plans herself, she goes on to present herself as a technically proficient person (albeit in a somewhat hesitant manner), which is a trait traditionally related to masculinity.¹² These examples illustrate how bloggers can present different interpretations of their gender identity on the same weblog, showing that weblogs are able to facilitate multiple and diffuse gender presentations.

4.6 — Conclusion

This study examined how weblog authors present their gender identity in order to see how this fits into the existing research landscape about gender identity and CMC. Even though the descriptive analysis of the bloggers' personal information initially suggested a 'typical blogger', our sample included a wide range of people. Of the 100 weblog authors in our sample 57 were female, providing support for Herring et al's (2004) claim that the media's portrayal of blogging as a male activity is inaccurate.

The Dutch/Flemish bloggers in this study present their gender identity in relation to their offline lives, using images, hyperlinks, or discursive invocations to their everyday experiences and the people they share them with. Although they do not seem to 'play' with their gender identity, instead choosing to present their identity through rather mundane domains such as hobbies or educational status, these bloggers are constantly performing their gender as they post new entries. While weblogs facilitate a mode of gender presentation that remains closely related to the binary gender system that structures people's daily lives, they also offer a 'rich' environment (through the various technological features

that weblogs are able to combine), resulting in multiple heterogeneous performances of gender. In practice, these bloggers present themselves as 'men' and 'women', but this presentation is achieved through various performances of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', incorporating both discursive and visual means to create an image of a gendered self whose embodied identity is shaped offline.

These results mainly fit into the strand of research that focuses on the representational aspect of the relation between online and offline gender identity. We found that the presentations of gender identity on weblogs remain closely related to the idea of a 'real life' self and the everyday experiences that form it. However, the results have also shown that these male and female bloggers express their identity in multiple and diffuse ways, performing different forms of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. This complicates the understanding of the relation between gender and CMC within this strand of research, which often emphasizes the representation of a 'fixed' offline gender identity, by showing that weblogs facilitate the expression of multiple gendered performances by a single weblog author.

Recalling Herring's discussion of the media's construction of weblogs as masculine, marginalizing women's activities as bloggers, our study suggests that lifelogs offer an important forum for *both* men and women to present their gender identities in multiple ways. The traditionally 'feminine' act of diary writing, present in the majority of these lifelogs, is adopted by both men and women, challenging the traditional understanding of technology and the Internet as masculine territories. Instead of creating another masculine sphere, the weblog is introducing diary writing to a group of men looking to express themselves online. This practice could open up space for an expansion of 'feminine' discourse on the Web. These results largely concur with insights from studies that adopt a mutual shaping perspective: the act of diary writing on weblogs can be seen as blurring the gendered connotations of the weblog as an ICT, thereby showing that the use of a technology is pivotal in shaping its gender.

Finally, this study is not able to offer support for previous research that has emphasized the online construction of 'alternative' gender identities. Weblog authors tend to present themselves in almost exclusively 'real life' categories, such as hobbies, family, work and place of residence. The everyday self and its physical surroundings are foregrounded on these weblogs, leaving no room for the construction of gender identities that bear no relationship to the authors' offline lives.

Notes

¹ We are grateful for the financial support of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), grant number: NWO-MES 014-43-701, titled 'Gender Bending on the Internet'.

² For example, the Dutch blog 'GeenStijl.nl' encouraged their readers to vote for the late André Hazes' widow (Hazes was a popular Dutch singer) as the most important Dutch person of 2005. She won, mainly because of the enormous response by the GeenStijl.nl readership. Another example is that of the 'Iraqi Blogger', who published his daily experiences of the Iraq war.

³ A 'filterblog' provides hyperlinks to information about world events, online happenings, and other 'newsworthy' occasions. These are mostly produced by adult males (Herring et al., 2004).

⁴ These features are derived from a list made by Hourihan, one of the original developers of Blogger, a tool for developing and maintaining weblogs (Ó Baoill, 2004).

⁵ The Netherlands and Flanders in Belgium both belong to the Dutch language area.

⁶ The three portals used were <http://Weblogs.zoekpagina.net>;

<http://Weblog-ABCD.pagina.net>; and <http://Weblog-EFGHIJKL.pagina.nl>

⁷ These 'representational domains' were developed after our preliminary analysis of the personal information on the weblogs, when it became clear that the authors presented themselves by referring to personal attributes that could be grouped into these 'domains'. They were then used as categories in order to structure our descriptive analysis.

⁸ A 'domestic' hobby/interest can be characterized as one relating to the 'domestic sphere', i.e. playing with children/siblings, taking care of a pet, watching television, and even 'sleeping in'.

⁹ HBO is a Dutch form of higher education offering vocational training.

¹⁰ Jantje Smith is a young, popular Dutch pop artist, who mainly sings in Dutch.

¹¹ Boudewijn de Groot is a popular Dutch folk singer, famous for his protest songs in the 1960s and '70s.

¹² For one of the few discussions of the ambiguous relationship between gender identity and the ability to do household wiring, see Cassidy and Wyatt (2001).

Postscript to chapter four: Revisiting the weblog study

Right after transforming my MSc thesis on text-based gender performance on IRC into a journal article during the last four months of 2005 (see postscript to chapter three), I started a new study on Dutch and Flemish weblogs at the beginning of 2006. Both of these first two case studies were carried out as part of my contribution to the *Gender Bending on the Internet* project at ASCoR, where I was working as a junior researcher from September 2005 until April 2006. Following my research on IRC, it was my second experience with online qualitative research and first study as a post-graduate. Blogging had been an explosively growing phenomenon for a few years, the popularity of which had only recently begun to take hold of the academic community. Although new and interesting studies were appearing on a regular basis, not many scholars were taking the gendered dimensions of these blogging practices much further than an examination of the differences between male and female user practices. We (Liesbet van Zoonen, Sally Wyatt and I) therefore decided to investigate the particular ways that Dutch and Flemish bloggers use weblog technologies to present their online gender identity. The study was accepted by the *European Journal of Women's Studies* at the end of 2006 and was published in May 2007.

In this postscript, I would like to take the opportunity to reflect on three issues that, in hindsight, could have been worked out more extensively and/or in a more precise fashion. The first issue pertains to the article's inconsistent use of terminology.

While the study primarily adopts the early Goffmanian concept of 'self-presentation' in order to conceptualize the gendered practices that take place on the weblogs, the related term of 'performance' is also used throughout the text. In addition, the terms 'representation', 'construction', and 'expression' make their appearance on several occasions. This inconsistency can mainly be attributed to my reiteration of Goffman's (1959) interchanging use of the terms 'self-presentation' and 'performance', as well as the fact that the study at the time did not employ a clear conceptual focus on performance as a crucial locus of identity construction (the article was written before I officially started my PhD project, in which gender performance assumes a central position). Looking back now, I feel that this term would have been a more appropriate concept in the context of this study and should thus have taken precedence over 'self-presentation'. Although Goffman uses both 'self-presentation' and 'performance' to elucidate the dramaturgical and interactional character of identity, the latter term bears a more pronounced sense of the constructed nature and 'productive capacities' of this social practice.¹ In contrast, the term 'self-

presentation' assumes a somewhat stable identity (the 'self') that can more or less directly be presented to others.

This brings me to the second issue I would like to address. During this study, I was first introduced to 'mutual shaping' theories and the field of science and technology studies in which they were conceived, which led me to include this perspective in my analysis of the weblogs. Although this approach proved to be useful for my understanding of the way in which gendered user practices shape an ICT such as the weblog, I did not completely follow through to consider how this particular weblog technology shapes the constitution of gender in an online environment. In other words, my analysis only focused on one of the two directions in a process of mutual shaping. The study would thus have been fortified by a more thorough analysis of how gender identities are constructed through the specific technological affordances of weblogs. This involves a distinct appreciation of the weblog as both a medium and technical artifact, which is inextricably linked to the online performance of gender. This performance then becomes more than a matter of 'presentation' or 'representation', like a straightforward doubling of the 'real' self that resides 'offline', and can instead be understood as a process of 're-presenting' a gendered identity that is highly contingent upon the medium that transports and thereby transforms it into a digital realm (for a further discussion, see chapter seven). While these matters are already tentatively discussed in the article, such as in the concluding remarks about how the technological features of the weblog offer a 'rich' environment for the heterogeneous performance of gender, a more pronounced articulation of these features and their role in the reconfiguration of embodied gender would have assisted in a better understanding of the relationship between everyday user practices and the technologies they employ. At the time, however, I was more concerned with dispelling the 'online disembodiment' myth and addressing the possibilities for the nuanced representation of everyday life than exploring the sociotechnical complexity and performativity of these possibilities.

Finally, I would like to touch upon a third issue that deserves some brief attention here. In this study, I have focused on the gendered performances of individual weblog authors, thereby excluding the online environment in which they operate. This environment manifests itself virtually in an 'imagined audience' to whom the various blog posts are addressed (in addition to their self-referential function) and materially in the form of the connections to other weblogs, which are articulated in a 'blogroll' (see chapter four). In addition, visitors can leave comments in response to blog posts, increasing the sense of community and interaction between weblogs. Although the weblogs included in the study were also connected to a larger 'blogosphere', the level of feedback and reciprocal communication on

these blogs was very low, which consequently resulted in the decision to limit the analysis to the authors' blog posts. It was not until my next case study on MySpace that the relation between gender performances and their digital network environment was investigated in detail (see chapter five). Still, I believe that an examination of the communal and interactive dimensions of these blogging practices would have been a valuable addition to the existing study. Such an examination could have formed an empirical extension of Van Dijck's (2005) cultural analysis of weblogs. While I already made use of her observations on the relationship between blogging and diary writing, I feel that a fuller engagement with her work would have enhanced the study by expanding its purview to include matters of shared experience and the production of digital memories. These issues are now more thoroughly addressed in the concluding chapter.

Notes

¹ Whereas Goffman, in his early work, still perceived the attributes of the performer to be 'psycho-biological in nature' (see chapter four), later work on performance (e.g. Phelan, 1993; Butler, 1990) developed a more far-reaching understanding of the constructed nature and productive qualities of performance in relation to the performer.

Chapter Five

The Ties That Bind: The Networked Performance of Gender, Sexuality, and Friendship on MySpace

5.1 — Introduction

Social network sites (SNSs) have been attracting an increasing amount of scholarly attention over the past few years. While the research field is still in its infancy, the body of literature is quickly growing, addressing a wide range of topics. Thus far, however, studies have largely neglected the gendered and sexual dimensions of SNS participation (one notable exception is Geidner, Flook, and Bell, 2007). This is remarkable, given the field's location within the broader tradition of digital culture research, which has produced many studies with a focus on the relationship between gender, sexuality, and the internet (for an extensive overview see 'Author', 2008). The present study attempts to fill this empirical gap, through an investigation of the networked performance of gender and sexuality on MySpace. Its two main research questions are:

- 1. How are gender and sexuality articulated in the comment exchanges between a group of networked profiles on MySpace?*
- 2. How do these exchanges produce a sense of cohesion within this particular network?*

Next to making an empirical contribution, an additional aim is to produce new theoretical insights about the articulation of gender and sexuality within the digital network structure of SNSs. I will specifically explore in how far Judith Butler's work on 'performativity' is useful as a theoretical tool when examining these networked performances. The particular network structure, along with the enormously popular appeal of sites such as MySpace and Facebook, make SNSs a highly relevant and interesting locale for the examination of gender and sexuality in relation to digital culture. Before discussing the theoretical

perspectives that guide this study and introducing the particular network that constitutes the object of the analysis, I will briefly provide an overview of some previous work on SNSs.

5.2 — Social network sites and identity performance

danah boyd, one of the most prolific scholars in the field, defines SNSs as ‘web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system’ (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Although this definition provides a general framework for understanding SNSs, there are considerable differences between these sites regarding technological architectures and affordances, supporting different practices, interests and cultures (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Whereas sites such as MySpace and Facebook were originally designed as SNSs, other Web 2.0 mainstays like Flickr and YouTube have added SNS features such as user profiles and the option to exchange comments.

In a conference paper on Friendster, boyd (2004) examined how users negotiate presentations of self in relation to their social environment, arguing that the two are inextricably related within Friendster’s architectural structure. Public displays of connection function as vital identity signals that allow people to navigate the networked social world (Donath, 2007; Donath & boyd, 2004). On these sites, the concept of ‘Friends’ is not necessarily identical to the common notion of being ‘friends’: a Friends network also offers a sense of context in the form of an interpretative framework, or an imagined audience, to guide users’ social behavior (boyd, 2006; 2008).

In their study on ‘networked identity performance’ on Friendster, boyd and Heer (2006) further explore the relation between identity and the online social network, examining how users simultaneously construct themselves and others on their profiles. They argue that the construction of a personal profile on a SNS is not an autonomous effort, but instead the result of continuous interactions with one’s online social environment. These conversational performances between SNS users change the profile ‘from being a static representation of self to a communicative body’ (boyd & Heer, 2006). In this view, a SNS profile becomes a user’s ‘digital body’, which is collectively ‘written into being’ (Sundén, 2003). This digital body, then, provides the social context for interactions in a space that lacks both a physical infrastructure and a visible audience. Instead of deriving social norms from other people’s embodied presence, users have to create and interpret the semiotic resources (i.e. text, images, videos) that make

up their profiles, which effectively constitute a digital infrastructure (boyd & Heer, 2006). These interactions dialogically produce a shared social reality through the distribution and interpretation of these artifacts. In other words, the meanings produced on the profiles are not the accomplishment of individual performances, but are instead an effect of the cultural negotiations that take place within a network. Users can add meaning to each other's profiles by adding comments including text, images, or video, transforming the shape of their networked 'digital bodies'. This study builds on these insights and infuses them with a focus on gender and sexuality.

In order to position the research questions within a broader theoretical framework, the following section addresses Judith Butler's work on gender performativity and its relation to social-scientific research.

5.3 — Performance, performativity and social interaction

Like much of the literature that approaches gender from a social constructionist viewpoint, this study is indebted to Judith Butler's theory of performativity. In turn, Butler's conception of performativity is partly derived from John Austin's work on performatives: linguistic utterances that perform actions, including calling into being the objects they name (Austin, 1962, Brickell, 2005). Thus, for Butler, performativity is 'the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed' (Butler, 1996: 112). In relation to gender, this means that gender categories are produced through the performative repetitions, or citations, of gendered norms (Butler, 1993). These citations are not elected freely or randomly, but are culturally constrained within discourse, which allows for certain performances of masculinity and femininity while prohibiting others. It is here that Butler departs from Austin, who saw performatives as speech acts that are *intentionally* used by purposeful subjects (Austin, 1962; see also McIlvenny, 2002; Brickell, 2005). For Butler, the status of the subject is much more troublesome:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms (...) This repetition is not performed *by* a subject: this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject (Butler, 1993: 95; emphasis in original).

This constitutes an important difference between the concepts of 'performance' and 'performativity'. In relation to gender, this means that whereas performance implies an active subject that can be thought to 'do' gender, performativity refers to a constitutive process by which one acquires a gendered subjectivity in the first place.

This problematization of subjective agency leads Brickell to suggest that Butler's conception of performativity needs a reformulation in a more explicitly sociological framework. In order to do so, he proposes a reintroduction of 'a reflexive, acting subject into this picture without returning to either biological or psychological essentialism' (Brickell, 2005: 29). In Brickell's view, the work of Erving Goffman offers just that. Instead of Butler's performatively constituted subject, Goffman's focus is on the 'performance of self'. This is never an ontologically stable self that exists outside of the social realm, but a self that is both socially constructed and imbued with agency (Brickell, 2005). For Goffman, social interaction takes a central place, as it is here that the performance of self occurs. These social interactions are governed by what Goffman calls 'frames', which affect the construction of definitions of particular situations and organize subjective experience (Goffman, 1974). As these frames preexist interactional situations and constrain the meanings that can be considered appropriate, individual subjects are not free to frame experience as they please (Brickell, 2005). In this sense, the Goffmanian self is governed by what Butler calls a discursive 'regulatory regime', which Goffman has coined 'felicity conditions' (Goffman, 1983). These frames and felicity conditions together govern interactions and thereby delineate the agency of subjects who partake in social situations.

Despite the overlaps in the way that the two authors conceptualize an anti-essentialist, socially determined subject, Brickell claims that Goffman's writing maintains a clear sense of subjective agency, which he sees as thoroughly problematic in Butler's account. Using Butler's terminology, Goffman's self is a 'prior self', not in the sense that it is pre-social or extra-linguistic, but in the sense that it precedes deeds: there is in fact a 'doer' behind the deed, even though these deeds are constrained by their social environment.

However, since Goffman does not properly address the relation between gender and sexuality, Brickell finds himself returning to Butler for a more thorough account of these interconnections. Butler argues that the binary gender system is naturalized by, and dependent on, the invocation of normative heterosexuality. Echoing both Rich's (1980) notion of 'compulsory heterosexuality' and Wittig's (1992) concept of 'heterosexual contract', Butler characterizes what she coins the 'heterosexual matrix' as 'a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (...) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality' (Butler, 1999: fn6, 194). It follows, then, that heterosexuality partly relies on the exclusion of homosexuality and other

non-straight sexual practices, which function as its 'Other', or its 'constitutive outside' (Butler, 1999). At the same time, Butler contends that certain practices of 'queer performativity' (Sedgwick, 1993) might unsettle the gender dichotomy and denaturalize heterosexual normativity. Since norms concerning gender and sexuality have to be continually cited and reiterated, this offers a space for the subversion of naturalized categories of identity, through parodic resignifications that unmask their constructedness (Butler, 1999). Still, Butler never clearly explains how these 'resignifications' might occur in practice. While she does mention general stylistic strategies such as parody, irony, and repetition, no concrete examples are given as to how these strategies could be achieved in daily interactions.

This lack of clarity concerning the practical implementation of the theory of performativity into the analysis of gender and sexuality in everyday social life is the focus of critique from a number of scholars in the field of discursive psychology. For instance, Speer and Potter (2002) criticize Butler's work for being 'abstract' and insensitive to the context-specific interactions in everyday life. Consequently, they feel she 'does not provide an analytical programme for studying discourse practices' (Speer & Potter, 2002: 158). Against Butler's 'intangible, largely hypothetical performatives' (idem: 158), they propose that discursive psychology focuses on 'talk as action' and the primacy of interactional co-construction of concrete social contexts. This makes possible an 'empirical, analytically grounded endeavor, which explicates and *validates* its claims using concrete examples taken from real life' (idem: 159, italics in original). In relation to gender, this allows for the analysis of how people 'do' gender in specific social contexts, and how they mutually position themselves and each other through discursive interactions.

This study adopts this mode of analysis and extends it to include other semiotic resources for online communication, such as digital photos and webcam images, in order to explore the full array of gendered and sexualized interactions in a MySpace network. In addition, it will examine to what extent Butler's work is capable of providing useful theoretical tools for the empirical analysis of online social interaction.

5.4 — A network of Dutch MySpace Friends

With over a hundred million accounts and ranking as the sixth most popular website on the internet worldwide in 2006, MySpace's popularity continues to grow by an estimated 1.5 million users each week (Coté & Pybus, 2007). Although initially attracting 20-something urbanites involved in the local L.A. music scene, the majority of current MySpace users are youth between 14 and 24

(boyd, 2006, Coté & Pybus, 2007).¹ The site has become an increasingly international platform for networked youth, leading The News Corporation² to initiate different national and regional MySpace versions in order to create more 'local' contexts for its users outside U.S. territory and to attract non-English speakers. In June 2007, MySpace opened an Amsterdam office after having initiated a 'beta' version of their site in Dutch, responding to the presence of over 500,000 active Dutch users.³ While Hyves is still the most popular SNS among Dutch users, with over two million active Dutch accounts, MySpace seems determined to take over the national market and has started an extensive marketing campaign.⁴

Within the expanding network of Dutch MySpace profiles, multiple 'micro-networks' of interconnected profiles are emerging. While every profile is to a certain degree linked to every other profile on MySpace, the defining feature of a micro-network is its relative cohesiveness, consisting of a group of MySpace Friends whose profiles are interconnected through the 'Friending' practices that establish their mutual relationship. In this sense, micro-networks constitute dynamic yet cohesive social assemblages within the larger network structure of MySpace. This study takes a Dutch micro-network as its research object. As mentioned, however, such networks consist of individual profiles, which served as gateways to the selection and subsequent analysis of a (micro-) network of MySpace Friends.

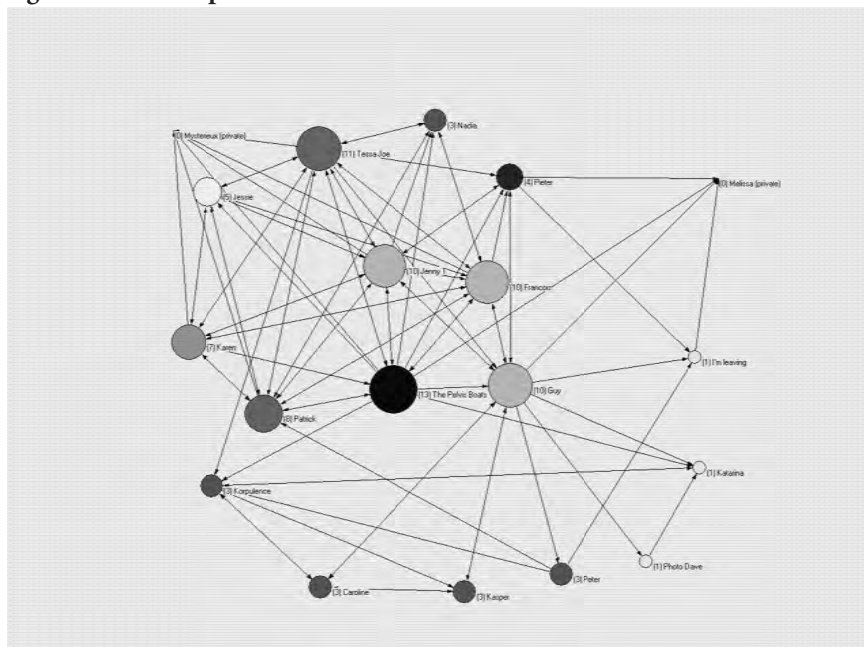
Data collection and analysis

The first step of the data collection process was to randomly gather 50 public profiles created by Dutch youth between 18 and 24, using MySpace's 'browse' function.⁵ While MySpace is said to find its main demographic in youth between 14 and 24 (see above), it is currently not possible to browse for people under 18 years of age.⁶ After selecting every fifth profile from the 'browse results' pages, the 50 profile URLs were archived and included in the initial sample.

Each of these profiles was subjected to a preliminary analysis of their 'Top Friends' network.⁷ An examination of the connections between the sample profiles and their listed Top Friends made it possible to gather insights about the Friendship relations and the cohesiveness of the social networks of which the profiles were part. When MySpace Friends add each other to their Top Friends list, this mutual display of preference and hierarchy constructs a public affirmation of online Friendship. As a result, this joint 'Friending' practice signifies a cohesive social network between Top Friends. Accordingly, profiles which did not have at least three Top Friends who reciprocated this gesture were excluded from the sample.

The Top Friends networks of the remaining 21 profiles were then further compared for 'social cohesiveness' by looking at the amount of Friendship links between the different profiles on the respective Top Friends lists. In addition, a preliminary analysis of the comment exchanges between the profiles was conducted to explore the level of social interaction within the networks. Finally, one of these networks was selected as the eventual research object, as it most closely resembled the cohesive social assemblage that represents a micro-network. A visual representation was produced to illustrate the network structure, see Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Visual representation of the network structure



As the illustration shows, the network exists of 19 nodes, which represent the interconnected profiles of 19 MySpace Friends. The size of the nodes corresponds to the amount of Top Friends that each profile links to within this particular network (which is also indicated by the number between brackets). The arrows indicate the direction of the Top Friends link: when the arrow points from Guy towards Peter, this means that Guy has included Peter in his Top Friends. When the arrow points both ways, this means that the two Friends have mutually included each other in their Top Friends. Alternatively, when there is

no visible connection between two nodes, this means that neither profile has included the other in their Top Friends list. Note, however, that these profiles can still be connected via 'regular' Friendship links not depicted in this illustration.⁸ Two profiles (Melissa and Mysterieux) are set to private, which hides their user information from non-friends (except for gender, age and location). Their Top Friends lists and comment sections could thus not be examined.

During a five-week period (November 26 through December 31, 2007) the comment exchanges that appeared on the 17 public profiles were copied and archived chronologically in Word documents. These comments formed the textual and visual material on which the interpretative content analysis was carried out.

Informed consent

Each member of the network received a message via MySpace which explained the study and its research goals. The members were then asked to participate by allowing their profile information to be included in the study. It was emphasized that complete anonymity would be guaranteed through the substitution of all profile names with pseudonyms, and the exclusion or alteration of any material that might reveal their identity. After this first attempt, four members agreed to participate while one declined. A follow up message produced another nine agreements. Eventually, a third reminder evoked four more agreements and one refusal, resulting in a total of 17 members who consented to the use of their profile information. Consequently, the profile and comment material of the two members who refused to participate are not included in the study. This does not, however, affect the network as it is visualized in the illustration: the Top Friends connections are still there, even though the data of the two profiles cannot be used.

5.5 — Results

Nineteen MySpace Friends: a brief introduction

The micro-network consisted of 19 interconnected Friends, of whom eight identified as male, 10 identified as female, and one had a music profile.⁹ The average age was 20.5 years, ranging from 17 to 25. Of the eight Friends who identified themselves as male, four listed themselves as 'gay', while the other four declined to include this information. Of the self-identified females, two Friends listed themselves as 'lesbian', three identified as 'straight', while the other five (including the two who set their profiles to private) did not display any information regarding their sexual preference. The majority of the Friends group

indicated that they reside in Amsterdam, while some lived elsewhere in Holland and two others were spending time abroad; see Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic overview of the Network

Name	Age	Gender	Sexual preference	Location
Guy	19	male	gay	Amsterdam
Karen	21	female	straight	Amsterdam
Patrick	21	male	-	Amsterdam
Tessa Joe	23	female	lesbian	Amsterdam
François	21	male	-	Amsterdam
Jenny T	19	female	lesbian	Madrid
Nadia	25	female	-	Amsterdam
Peter	24	male	-	Arnhem
Jessie	18	female	-	Amsterdam
Korpulence	19	male	gay	-
I'm Leaving	20	female	-	Groningen
Katarina	19	female	straight	Groningen
Kasper	17	male	gay	Groningen
Pieter	21	male	gay	Amsterdam
The Pelvis Boats	Band profile			Amsterdam
Photo Dave	21	male	-	Travelling around
Melissa	20	female	-	-
Mysterieux	23	female	-	Amsterdam
Caroline	18	female	straight	Groningen

The illustration clearly shows that the geographical distribution of the group members corresponds to the digital distribution of Top Friends links in the network: the Amsterdam residents form the network's centre, with a dense set of mutual Top Friends connections, while the non-Amsterdam Friends constitute the periphery of the network, which is not as tightly interwoven. The main exception is Jenny T, who resides in Madrid, but whose extensive links to the group of Amsterdam locals suggests that she was also living there before her move to Spain. This correspondence between physical location and position within the MySpace network indicates that these Friends have previously established their friendship relations in the physical world. This assumption was further confirmed when examining the interactions that took place on the Friends' profiles.

Comment conversations: four themes

The Friends in this MySpace network engage in interactions via the mutual exchange of comments on each other's profiles. As will be demonstrated in the

analysis below, these comment conversations occur in a variety of social contexts, which can be roughly structured around four different yet interrelated themes: popular culture; nightlife; narcotics; and sex. Although these themes often overlap, with ‘sex’ as an overarching theme, I will discuss them separately here for analytical purposes.

1. Popular culture

While many conversations between the Friends refer to elements of contemporary pop culture such as TV shows, movies, commercials, and music, these references are common among many groups of Western youth that grow up in a media-saturated environment. So, instead of looking at their engagement with the more universal facets of pop culture, I want to start by focusing on some examples of how these Friends interact within a context that is particularly Dutch. A traditional element of Dutch popular culture is the annual celebration of Sinterklaas on 5 December.¹⁰ A day prior to ‘Sinterklaas eve’, some of the Amsterdam locals (including ex-local Jenny T) anticipated this annual holiday by posting comments featuring ‘Sinterklaas poems’ on each other’s profile. These poems often contain a mix of non sequiturs, short narratives, and declarations of affection, which are often coupled with raunchy imagery.¹¹

Jenny T → Jessie

*Dear Jessie,
You know I worship you
I think you're tastier than a
peach pit
The best thing is you and me
on acid
Between you and me I have
the most ball possession
I love you during a car ride
(...)
Sometimes you have a white
spot on your unit
Kiss on your clit*

↓

Jessie → Jenny T

*Dear dear Jenny T,
You're over there in
Madrid, I think that's
stupid
My love life is empty
without you
Without our make-out
sessions in the alley*

(...)
*My mother is very
dumb
'I am in love with you'
and vice versa*

(...)
*HENK HENK
Your love is a gift*

↓
Jenny T → Patrick
*Dear Patrick van de S.
How's that abscess?
And do you still only
lust for female cops?
To me you are a female
ballet dancer*

(...)
*You are well behaved
and obey your
dominatrix,
For you Jenny T is a
princess
You two even made out
on a rocket launching
base
With make-up you look
like a go-go dancer
You're in love with Fez
from That 70s Show*

↓
Patrick → Jenny T
*Jenny,
My MySpace profile only shows comments
by you,
which shows how much I love you.
(...)
I am off now,
but not before I claimed that I love you with
all my soul.
Bye lovely Jenny, see you next year,
then you pleasantly live in Amsterdam and
totally have it made!*

These excerpts demonstrate how the Friends draw upon the particular genre of the Sinterklaas poem in order to perform their affectionate relations to one another. It is through these intimate yet public performances that gender and sexuality get (re)articulated within the social network of Friends, using

traditional codes that signify amity (the stylistic schema of a Sinterklaas poem) and citing them in a gushy and slightly absurd manner. In this way, affection ‘flows’ through the network as it is continually being redistributed by the individual Friends who exchange symbolic gifts in the form of ‘poetic’ comments. These flows produce gendered and sexualized relations that are contingent upon their place within the social network. For instance, Jenny T assumes a series of polymorphous subject/object positions as her place within the flow of affection changes: she hints at lesbian subjectivity when she gets intimate with Jessie; she features as the object of desire in Jessie’s response; she then declares herself Patrick’s princess and suggests that they have been intimate; and this heterosexual subject position is eventually acknowledged by Patrick’s articulation of adoration for her in the last excerpt.

The following series of exchanges show that the Christmas holidays evoked an equal outpouring of affectionate behavior:

François → Karen

[An image depicting a young woman with long blond hair, dressed in a red and white, Christmas style, bikini. Positioned next to her are two burning white Christmas candles, adorned by red and white flowers (possible fake). Above the candles hangs a small, heart-shaped chandelier containing a burning tea light. The scene is set against a red background featuring almost indistinguishable leaves and part of a face. Besides the woman’s head, the gold-colored words read ‘Happy Christmas Days’ in Dutch.]

Love you xx

↓

Karen → François

Sweetheart, I hope you’ve had a wonderful Christmas and that you’re enjoying yourself in Madrid, give that redhead a nice French kiss from me!

I’m now in Ede and I’m watching the rerun of All You Need Is Love, the Christmas special¹². And I am wearing a pink nightgown from my momma.

How do you like that? I am thinking about you and see you in a hundred days,

Love, your honey.

François → Guy

[A photo of what appears to be a living room. Santa Claus is sitting in a big white chair with one small girl on his lap, while two slightly older children stand on both sides of him. All three of them are smiling at the camera in an apparently awkward manner. Santa’s face is completely buried under his white beard. On the left side, a decorated Christmas tree stands in the background.]

↓

Guy → François

[A photo of a naked Santa, laying on his belly and wearing nothing but his hat and boots. He is pictured from the side, as he supports his head with one arm and smiles into the camera. The background is snow white.]

Hopefully Santa will come and also treat François to something tasty =)

The expression of affection instigated by François is reciprocated by his Friends, who can appreciate his ironic use of Christmas imagery. This creates a sense of intimacy in which the members of the group share their mutual pleasure in the rejection of 'normalcy', which is in this case embodied by traditional Christmas rituals. They take a private ritual like the exchange of Christmas cards and turn it 'inside out' by posting parodic images on publicly accessible profiles. Non-normative sexual desire is repeatedly implicated in these exchanges, whether it is through Karen's wish to French kiss 'that redhead' (Jenny T), or Guy's suggestive response to the image posted by François. Here, François is positioned as a passive recipient of homosexual pleasure, as implied by the naked Santa and Guy's accompanying comment. This exchange mainly serves to create an amicable relationship based on a shared pleasure in the ironic transgression of sexual and social prohibitions (sex between a young man and Santa Claus). Instead of being deemed odd or offensive, these Friends collectively indulge in these ironic gestures, which tighten their Friendship bonds.

2. Nightlife

A number of comment exchanges refer to escapades in clubs, bars and other nightlife sceneries. As can be gathered from the conversations, these parties often figure as the locations where the Friends meet each other in 'real life'. Their experiences are then retrospectively discussed in the comments that they post on each other's profiles.

Although Jenny T now lives in Madrid, she is not solely dependent on MySpace to keep in touch with her Friends. During the month that I observed the group's interactions she received some visitors to accompany her in 'real life'. After a night out, the Friends back in Amsterdam are provided with feedback on the latest adventures:

Tessa Joe → Karen

Alright, so yesterday I was laying down at Elastico (the better indie dance stuff) with Jenny on top riding me real nice, when this bouncer taps on our shoulders and asks 'whether we could act normal'. It's really hard to strike the golden mean, finally you find a club where they really play the hits, but then you can't even mob the floor. That bouncer was rather hot though.

↓

Karen → Tesso Joe

*I feel like
riding
you my
little
slipper.*

*I have to work soon and rather stay home in bed, where is the party animal in me ☺
I comfort myself with the thought that I'll soon have the prettiest view of Amsterdam!
kissess*

As Tessa Joe reveals on Karen's profile, she was enjoying some dance floor intimacies with Jenny T until the bouncer came and ended the fun. She first positions herself, and by proxy also Jenny T, as someone who likes to get physically intimate with girls, but then suggests a heterosexual lust for the 'hot' bouncer. This ambiguity concerning her sexual preference is further perpetuated by Karen's reply, in which she expresses her own desire to 'ride' Tessa Joe, whom she affectionately coins her 'little slipper'. By alluding to lesbian sexuality and 'lewd' behavior, the girls show a proclivity for challenging common conceptions of what is 'normal'. They do not want to be ordinary, and do not hesitate to articulate this in either physical or digital environments. By acting 'crazy' at parties and publicly exchanging anecdotes about their debauchery, these Friends are transgressing what is traditionally considered to be socially acceptable behavior (especially for young women). It is through this transgression that they consummate their friendship, appreciating each other in a shared penchant for deviance.

3. Narcotics

For a number of Friends, the consumption of alcohol and drugs forms an integral part of their social life. These substances are believed to increase the fun and in this way function as a kind of social glue. To go out and 'get wasted' is a common goal for most Friends who predominantly socialize at parties and other nightly events. After Guy returns to Amsterdam from his visit to Madrid, Jenny T admits her desire to buy some cocaine and go out to party again:

Jenny T → Guy

Hi Guy,

I feel a little stupid because I want to go out but I am just gonna go I deserved it! And especially because my boss just paid me 1.5 months in advance CASH damnzz I'm gonna score myself some sweet grams of coke tonight. Well and uuuh, do I have to say hi to anyone in particular?

Xxxxx, Jenny

↓

Guy → Jenny T

Do you have a list ready? Could you send my personal regards to everyone I fucked over the past weekend and tell them that I am thinking of them...

Ow, and also that Johnny from that restaurant who put his number in my pocket...

Thanks a lot [in English], that saves me a lot of phone credit

Mhah mwah

The rather casual reference to drug use mainly functions to establish common ground between the Friends, providing them with a shared social context for interaction. Within this social context, the articulation of desire for narcotics is juxtaposed with the articulation of desire for each other as friends, through the exchange of affectionate expressions. In this way, Friendship relations are consummated and reinforced through the discussion of things that occupy their everyday lives, both offline and online. In the context of drugs and alcohol, these articulations often transgress the boundaries of what is generally seen as socially and morally acceptable, positioning the Friends as distinctly youthful and 'anti-establishment'.

In his response, Guy speaks in an equally casual manner about his multiple sexual encounters during their weekend together. His remark about his phone credit and ironic request whether Jenny T could pass on his 'personal regards' suggests that the intimacy between him and his partners was only temporary. Additionally, his reference to 'that Johnny' insinuates that at least one of these encounters was with men, alluding to his identity as an openly gay young man.

4. Sex

In the previous excerpt, the articulation of Friendship connections occurred in a social context that involved both drugs and sex. The following conversation is another example of how the Friends socialize through the discussion of issues that have represented youth culture since the late 1950s: *sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll* (or in this case, dance music).

Karen → Jenny T

(...)

*I miss you, where are you, who are you in love
with, are you over me*

????????????

↓

Jenny T → Karen

*I still love you but I met a boy from Paris and I saw him standing there and it was love at first sight
and also for him because he couldn't resist me and when he talks French I melt.....*

*But when I come back I wouldn't be opposed to French kissing you again!! Where you at Ninja
Styles or what?*

↓

Karen → Jenny T

Haha ja I was at Ninja Styles and there was this really fat French DJ who I didn't know but you did play majestically. I danced until my feet started to bleed. And I made out with a drunk hunk [English term], after that he was mainly just really annoying. So I don't know his name??

Do you have a picture of your objet d'amour [French term]?

↓

Jenny T → Karen

It was Teri Velvet right?

No I don't have a picture because he hates pictures and myspace stuff and all that

⊕

Fortunately I already told him about my myspace addiction and besides that he also has his addictions zzzzzz

How nice that it was nice yeah that's really nice yeah nice my baby [English term] kiss

↓

Karen → Jenny T

Yeah yeahyeyeayyeah it was so much fun! Teri Velvet yes, I tried to pick up that fatso but my girlfriend who speaks French stole him from me. I was with Marjorie, Lisa and Evelien, my highschool lovers [English term] ya know.

Ps: what sort of addiction does he have? Did you bang [English term] him yet?

↓

Jenny T → Karen

Coke and yes

While nightlife and alcohol/drug use provide part of the social context for this interaction, it is sexual desire that features as the main catalyst. In various instances during the conversation, the girls articulate their sexual or romantic interest in each other and the people featured in their anecdotes. These articulations of sexual desire constitute transgressive performances in two ways. First, the girls' anecdotes signify promiscuous behavior, which challenges conventional conceptions of how young women should behave. Their lesbian flirtations and accounts of multiple liaisons with different men defy traditional codes of gendered moral conduct. Although it is common for youth to engage in rebellious behavior while growing up, the explicit discussion of sexual promiscuity and drug use publicly breach established norms of propriety and circumscribes this Friends group as 'renegade'.¹³

This relates to the second way that these articulations are transgressive: their location. Conversations like these deal with topics that are commonly confined to the private sphere, where people discuss lust, sex, and drug use in a relatively intimate environment. The interactions between these MySpace Friends, however, are located in a public space that is freely accessible to anyone who happens upon one of the profiles (none of the profiles discussed here were set to private). In this sense, these articulations form a transgression between the private and the public sphere, with personal revelations about sexual desire circulating in a public network.

I will end with a final example, which illustrates how these Friends make creative use of the digital resources available to them:

Guy → Jenny T

This is my way of showing luv ♥ [in English]

[Two webcam windows stacked on top of each other. The top window depicts a webcam still of Jenny T (head and shoulders visible) with a photoshopped erect penis in her mouth. The bottom window depicts a webcam image of Guy (head and shoulders visible) sticking his tongue out and closing his eyes, pretending to lick a photoshopped erect penis.]

↓

Jenny T → Guy

I thought we agreed that it was gonna be blingee [English term]? Tss, oohhh Guy I met one of my myspace buddy's [English term] yesterday and he's sooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo cute DAMNIT

It's a homo though

Through the manipulation of webcam images, Guy performs his embodied identity as a gay young man and simultaneously positions Jenny T as his heterosexual female friend. In addition, he visually positions them both in a submissive sexual position, purportedly giving oral pleasure to an unidentified male body part. Apparently, Jenny T does not find these images weird or offensive, as her only reaction concerns their lack of 'blingee'¹⁴. Instead of repulsing Jenny T, Guy wants to 'show love' to his Friend by articulating their shared sexual desire for men, particularly their genitals, which ironically signifies their Friendship bond. In this sense, the playful use of explicit sexual imagery serves to strengthen the relationship between Friends who communicate with one another in a highly sexualized social network.

5.6 — Conclusion

Through the analysis of a network of interconnected Dutch profiles on MySpace, this study has attempted to answer the following two research questions (see p. 6): how are gender and sexuality articulated in the comment exchanges between a group of networked profiles on MySpace; and how do these exchanges produce a sense of cohesion within this particular network? In relation to the first question, it is demonstrated how a particular group of Dutch Friends make use of different semiotic resources (i.e. poems, photos, webcam images) to articulate their affectionate relationships. In these interactions, affection can be conceived as 'flowing' through the network as it is continually being (re)assembled and (re)distributed in accordance with the specific social context in which the exchanges are embedded. These practices repeatedly produce new subject-object

relations within the network: subjects distribute affection to their desired objects, positioning them through the interpellations that are contained in the comments. This is a performative process, in the sense that the members of the network acquire their subject/object positions by virtue of being included in the flows of affection. However, because flows are always transitive and dynamic, these positions are temporary and contingent upon their specific location within the social network.

Within these flows of affection, the power of binary gender as a symbolic structuring mechanism is repeatedly challenged. As some examples have illustrated, the often sexualized interactions contain multiple instances where heterosexual masculinity and femininity are temporarily destabilized or rendered ambiguous. In this network, articulations of intimacy are indiscriminately distributed among the various Friends, creating a multidirectional flow of polymorphous desire: everyone ♥ everyone else. These queer performances ironically transgress the heteronormative gender binary that commonly structures everyday life. For this network of Friends, the traditional male-female dichotomy is largely irrelevant, as they all engage in the collective distribution of desire and affection. This produces a multitude of Friendship relations that are heterogeneous rather than merely heterosexual.

Next to the transgression of binary gender norms, the articulations contained in the comment exchanges comprise three other types of transgressive performances: of social/moral prohibitions; of the boundary between the private and the public; and of the offline-online boundary. In the first case, the Friends' invocation of drug use, sexually explicit imagery, and lewd conduct infringes upon established norms that demarcate 'decent behavior'. Second, the public discussion of personal subject matters, like sexual encounters and drug habits, breaches the boundary between the private and public sphere. These practices can be seen as symptomatic of the exhibitionist/voyeuristic tendencies that flourish on digital networks like MySpace, which call into question the traditional boundaries between private and public social spheres. Third, the continuous references to physical encounters and repeated emphasis on the corporeal aspects of affectionate relations constitute a definite transgression of the boundary between digital and physical space. Evidently, this online network of Friends is firmly rooted in the shared experience of everyday life, which concurs with much of the recent literature on internet culture (e.g. 'Author' et al., 2007; Kennedy, 2006; Bakardjieva, 2005; Hardey, 2002).

In relation to the second research question, it is important to note that these transgressive performances are not necessarily deliberate, in the sense that these Friends are intentionally trying to challenge sexual and social boundaries. Rather,

they mainly seem to comprise a mode of interaction that signifies their membership of a peer group. In order to be acknowledged as members of the network, these Friends need to cite its queer codes of friendship, irony and sexual desire. Sexualized communication forms an integral part of this group's collective identity performance, which transgresses the private realm of the members' physical network of friends and enters the public MySpace network via their comment exchanges. Eventually, it is through these various transgressive articulations that the members accomplish their Friendship relations, performatively shaping a queer network of interconnected profiles which constitutes their shared social reality. Recalling Sundén, these profiles can be conceptualized as 'digital bodies' that are collectively written into being, creating a cohesive assemblage of online archives that contain the gendered and sexualized performances of a particular group of Dutch MySpace Friends.

These findings form an empirical contribution to both the specific field of SNS research and the broader area of scholarship on gender, sexuality and digital culture. In the context of SNS research, this study has build on danah boyd's insights on the networked performance of identity in order to demonstrate how these practices intersect with gender, sexuality, and friendship in a particular Dutch MySpace network. Additionally, this empirical focus on a digital network infrastructure in relation to the performance of gender and sexuality also represents a relevant contribution to digital culture research in general.

From a theoretical perspective, I conclude that Butler's concept of performativity is both useful and relevant as an analytical lens for the study of gender and sexuality in digital networks. The examples discussed in this study have illustrated how stylistic strategies such as irony and parody can be achieved in concrete social contexts, through the resignification of Sinterklaas poems, digital Christmas cards, or webcam images. These ironic/parodic citations echo Butler's notion of 'queer performativity', in the sense that they challenge dominant heteronormativity and its moral boundaries. Consequently, however, the findings also suggest that these citations produce a different set of norms. In order to qualify as a member of the group, or to become intelligible as such, the Friends have to reiterate the 'queer' group norms concerning gender, sexual desire, and friendship. In this sense, these citations serve to performatively delineate the network as such.

5.7 — Future research

I have suggested that these networked profiles can be understood as an assemblage of online archives that contain the performances of a particular

group of MySpace Friends. This idea raises new questions for future research that examines SNSs as locales where diary writing becomes both a public and a collective practice. To what extent do these profiles serve as digital records containing the shared memories and performances of millions of interconnected people? In what way, then, do these records offer new ways of thinking about the boundaries between our physical and digital experiences, between reflective writing and social interaction, between the author and the actor, and between the public and the private? Accordingly, this phenomenon raises important questions regarding privacy issues: who owns these archives (such as MySpace and LiveJournal) and who will be allowed to ‘roam around’ in them?

Notes

¹ Even though the demographic background of the contemporary MySpace user has changed over the past few years, music remains the site’s backbone. The initial claim to MySpace’s fame was its ability to provide a platform where bands could directly connect to their fan base, and over the past years MySpace has carefully fostered its music-loving image by hosting exclusive shows and giving away free tickets.

² Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation bought MySpace for 580 million USD in July 2005.

³ See <http://www.telecomwereld.nl/n0002265.htm> (in Dutch).

⁴ See <http://www.emerce.nl/nieuws.jsp?id=1977269> (in Dutch).

⁵ I only selected public profiles, which are visible to anyone visiting the site (even when they are not logged in). Private profiles, on the other hand, are only visible to one’s direct Friends.

⁶ Although this technical limitation is not explained on the MySpace website, it can be inferred that this decision forms a reaction to public concerns about SNSs as places where younger teens are vulnerable to online advances by sexual predators. By prohibiting users to browse for teens under 18, MySpace signals that they have taken measures to prevent such deviant practices on their site.

⁷ Users’ ‘Top Friends’ are visibly located on their profiles. This section allows the user to display his/her most favored Friends in a hierarchical form that usually varies between a Top 4 and a Top 36.

⁸ A ‘regular’ Friendship link between profiles is established when a user accepts another user’s Friendship invitation. This link allows them to comment on each other’s profiles and view images that might not be accessible to non-Friends. A Top Friends link has the same qualities, yet it also signals a higher status within the Friends hierarchy, since Top Friends are visible on one’s main profile page.

⁹ A music profile is a place for bands to promote themselves on MySpace, by presenting music, images and videos to their MySpace audience. Band profiles are composed of different components, tailored to the context of music promotion. This excludes any information about ‘personal details’ or ‘interests’ on the main profile page.

¹⁰ ‘Sinterklaas’ is a Dutch holiday, named after the 4th century bishop Nicholas of Myra. It is mainly directed at children, who sing traditional songs and receive presents. The exchange of presents is often accompanied by special Sinterklaas poems that address the receiver of the gift.

¹¹ These poems have been translated from Dutch to English. Obviously, some rhythmic and/or linguistic subtleties have been lost in this translation.

¹² All You Need is Love is a Dutch television show where people get surprised by their loved ones, who often live far away and get reunited in the show.

¹³ When I am mentioning 'established norms of propriety' I am referring to the Dutch moral context, since this is the environment (online and offline) in which these Friends interact. Although the Dutch society is often regarded as morally liberal (whether rightfully or not), these interactions can still be said to transgress national norms of moral conduct.

¹⁴ 'Bling' is an American slang term for expensive-looking, flashy jewelry.

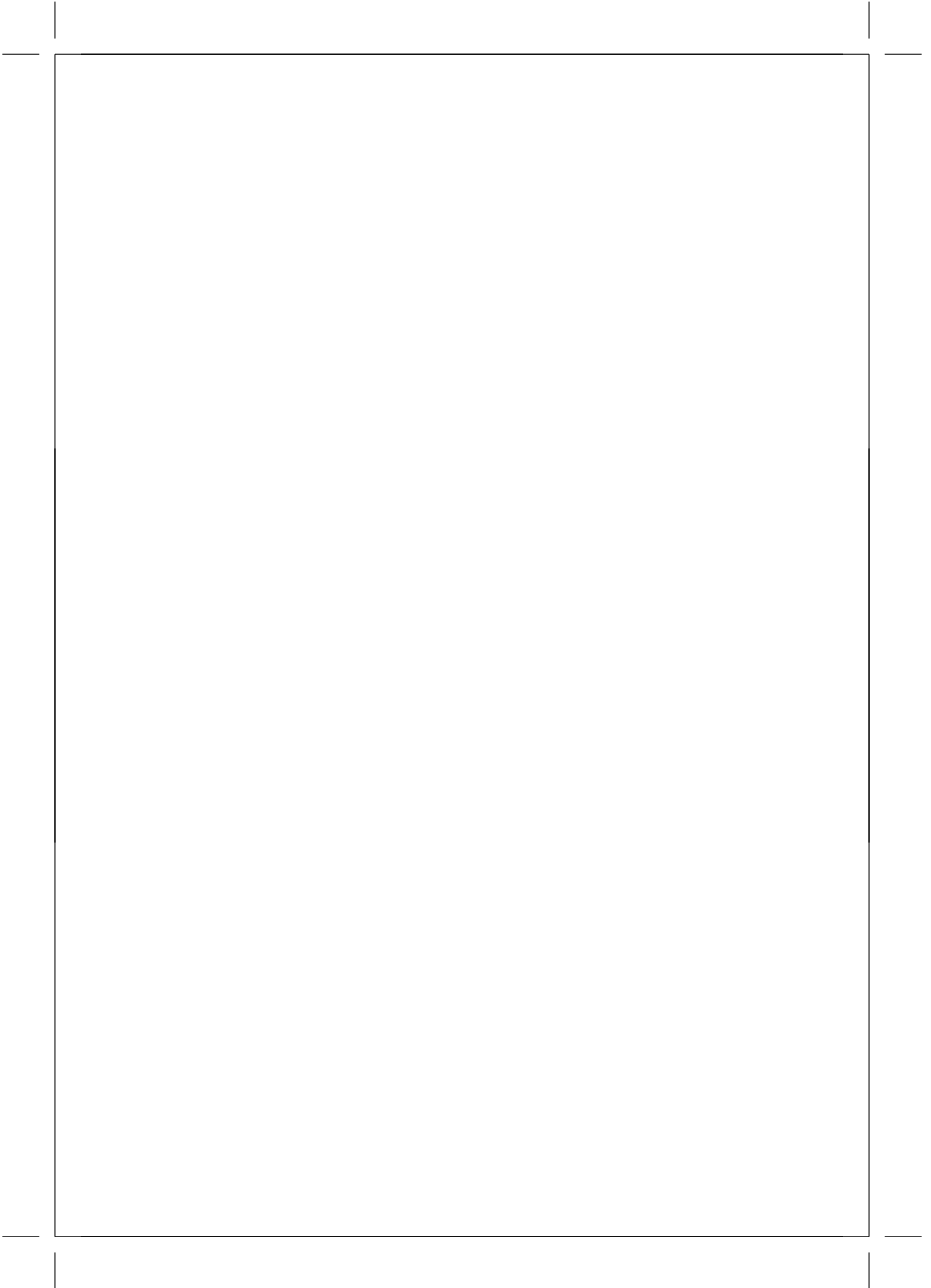
Postscript to chapter five: Returning to the MySpace study

Thirteen months elapsed between finishing the weblog study (chapter four) in April 2006 and starting the MySpace study (chapter five) in May 2007. I would like to use the first half of this postscript to recount what transpired during this period, in order to use this narrative as a way to situate the MySpace study and illuminate the events that led to its inception. The second half will reflect on one particular aspect of the study, which retrospectively deserves more attention.

Right after ending my activities on the *Gender Bending on the Internet* project at ASCoR, where I completed the first two case studies (on IRC and Dutch weblogs), I was invited to participate on a new project at the then recently founded Virtual Knowledge Studio for the Humanities and Social Sciences (VKS) in May 2006. This *Dynamics of Digitization* project aimed to examine the ways that scholars and academic institutions make use of new media technologies to represent their work and cooperate with others in their field. My participation in this project greatly expanded my knowledge of new media technologies and the diverse practices that they engender, so it was unfortunate that the four months for which I was scheduled to work at the VKS could not be extended due to budgetary reasons. At the end of August 2006, I was unemployed. From October 2006 until April 2007 I worked a few temp jobs as an administrative employee, but in the meantime I made sure that my connections to academic life were not eroding. Around the beginning of November, Liesbet van Zoonen responded to my inquiries and contacted me about writing a book chapter together (see postscript to chapter two). It was during this period of writing that the idea of integrating my output thus far (two completed case studies and a literature review in progress) into a coherent PhD proposal and adding two more case studies was realized. The proposal, written at the start of 2007, aimed to investigate the performance of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in diverse forms of user-generated content on the internet. Having already examined the gendered performances in text-based environments (IRC) and on weblogs, my next focus was going to be on how these practices were enacted on social network sites, which had quickly grown into some of the most popular applications of the burgeoning 'Web 2.0'. Of all these popular sites MySpace dominated the charts, which explained the decision to include this digital network in my project (see chapter five). Eventually, the proposal was accepted by ASCoR in May 2007 and during that same month I officially started my PhD trajectory with the investigation of the performance of gender, sexuality, and friendship on MySpace, the result of which is presented in chapter five.

The study has since been accepted for publication in *New Media & Society* and will feature in their last issue of 2009.

Now that the study's (pre)history has been accounted for, I would like to use the second part of this postscript to briefly discuss one aspect of the analysis that could have been treated in more detail. While this study is generally attentive to the material elements of new media technologies, addressing profiles as 'digital bodies' that are located within the 'architectural structure' of a particular social network site, the analysis would have benefited from a more explicit consideration of the extent to which the social and the technical are intimately enmeshed on these sites. This entails a more comprehensive understanding of how the affective relationships between the MySpace Friends are an integral part of the digital network technology, which they shape through their performative articulations of friendship, gender, and sexuality. Conversely, the network technology of MySpace constitutes a fundamental component within these 'flows of affection', which they materially and logistically delineate and make possible. As I suggested in my postscript to the IRC study, it is exactly this amalgamation of social/discursive and material elements that make these affective practices more performative. Moreover, it is the materiality of these practices which produces digital traces throughout the network, as I noted at the very end of the article (in relation to memory and the archival function of MySpace). These matters are further elaborated upon in chapter seven.



Chapter Six

Keeping It Real: User-Generated Pornography, Gender Reification, and Visual Pleasure

6.1 — Introduction

The past few years have witnessed the proliferation of three separate yet interrelated phenomena in the Western media and the societies in which they are embedded. First, many authors have argued that we are experiencing a ‘sexualization’ or ‘pornification’ of media and society (McNair, 1996, 2002; Levy, 2005; Attwood, 2006; Poynor, 2006; Paasonen et al., 2007). Sex is increasingly the topic of public discussion and scrutiny in different media, popular culture is flirting with the stylistic conventions of pornographic representation, and porn stars like Jenna Jameson are treated as pop icons. One could therefore argue that pornography has been involved in a ‘mainstreaming’ process over the past decade and that, simultaneously, the public discourse on sex and sexuality has grown exponentially.

Second, since the 90s the media have shown an increased preoccupation with the mundane, everyday lives of ‘ordinary’ people. This trend is mainly symbolized in the rise of Reality TV as the prevailing television genre, which has spawned many successful programs such as *Big Brother*, *Temptation Island*, *The Real World*, and *The Osbournes*. (Andrejevic, 2004; Hill, 2005). These productions thrive as much on the fetishization of the ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ experiences of regular people, as on their willingness to divulge private and ‘truthful’ information in front of a camera. In this sense, the Reality genre owes its wide public appeal to its entrenchment within a broader ‘confessional’ culture, which it concurrently perpetuates.

Third, the development of new media technologies has brought with it the promise to reinvigorate participatory communities and transfer communicative power from multinational media conglomerates to ‘the people’. This promise is best captured in the ‘birth’ of Web 2.0 and its commercial reappropriation of user-generated content on the internet (‘Author’, 2008). As illustrated by the YouTube slogan ‘Broadcast Yourself!’, media consumers are encouraged to become producers and participate in the collective presentation of self, while interacting with others in their various social networks.

I argue that these three developments, only briefly introduced here, converge in the figure of YouPorn: a website featuring user-generated pornographic video material. More specifically, the so-called 'amateur' videos found on YouPorn offer an interesting site for the investigation of the interconnections between pornography, the representation of 'authentic' experience, and participatory online culture. While pornography has traditionally had an antithetical relationship with feminism, which condemned pornographic production for its heterosexism and glorification of male dominance (e.a. Dworkin, 1981), more recently feminist scholars have suggested that new media technologies are opening up spaces for the sexual emancipation of previously marginalized groups (Attwood, 2007; Jacobs, 2004; Albury, 2003). These 'Do It Yourself' web cultures would allow for different, more authentic, representations of gender and sexuality than is conventionally available in mainstream pornography. In response to these suggestions, this study examines the 'amateur' videos on YouPorn from a gender perspective, asking the following questions:

- 1 – *How do the 'amateur' videos on YouPorn make aesthetic or narrative claims to an authentic 'reality'?*
- 2 – *How are gender and sexuality represented in these videos?*

I start by further discussing the connections between pornography, participatory media technologies, gender, and the representation of 'reality'. This is followed by an introduction to YouPorn and an explanation of the methodological approach, after which the outcomes of the analysis are considered. With this study, I aim to contribute to current scholarly debates about the opportunities and pitfalls of internet pornography, addressing the issue with an empirical research agenda (McCreadie Lillie, 2004).

6.2 — From the obscene to the on/scene

I adopt the conceptual distinction between on/ and obscenity from Linda Williams, who, in the introduction to her edited volume *Porn Studies* (2004), uses the terms to describe the 'gesture by which a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, and pleasures that have heretofore been designated ob/scene and kept literally off-scene' (3). As such, on/scenity marks both the controversy surrounding the increasing proliferation of sexual representations in the public sphere, and the fact that these have become increasingly available to the general public (Williams, 2004). The recognition of this tension between the 'speaking' and the 'unspeakable' has led to new scholarly and popular interest in pornography's changing position within a

society that becomes ever more savvy when it comes to the representation of sex and sexuality (for a discussion, see Paasonen et al., 2007).

Brian McNair (1996; 2002) has identified this increased proliferation of sexual representations as part of a process he terms the 'pornographication' of mainstream culture in our late/postmodern capitalist society. He sees this pervasive fascination with sex and sexuality as bringing about a transgression of traditional boundaries between public and private spaces, which can be more broadly witnessed in recent media trends that focus on 'reality' programming, interactive audience participation and various confessional formats. The ongoing commodification of sex and the emphasis on sexual consumerism are both aspects of a so-called 'striptease culture': the privatization of the public sphere through the expansion of popular participation in sexual discourse, often located in commercial media environments (McNair, 2002). He understands this expansion, facilitated by the introduction of new communication technologies (from print to the internet), as promoting a 'democratization of desire', which couples an extended access to the means of sexual expression with the emergence of a more pluralistic sexual culture.

Fiona Attwood (2002; 2006; 2007) concurs with McNair that the contemporary emphasis on the relation between sexuality and consumer culture has made sexually explicit material more available to audiences who were previously excluded from its consumption. As sexuality has become an issue of aesthetics, rather than ethics or morality, women have increasingly been addressed as consumers of 'tasteful' versions of pornography that allude to a sense of sophistication and liberation from traditional sexual mores in middle/upper class culture (Attwood, 2006). By linking sex to matters of health, pleasure, and self-fulfillment, porn is making new claims to aesthetic value and sells itself as a part of women's 'progressive' sexual politics (Juffer, 1998, Attwood, 2006). Although this 'domestication' of pornography does help to create new genres that are agreeable to women and establishes new connections between sex and everyday life, Attwood argues that the proliferation of such commercial initiatives does not necessarily guarantee the democratization of sexual desire as envisaged by McNair. As she writes:

It may be true that our sexual repertoires are broadening, that sexual discourse is increasingly accessible to all, and that 'sex' now functions as a privileged site through which the ordinary, the personal, and the individual are embodied in the public sphere, but a simple celebration of these developments ignores the ways in which they also make our sexual practices and identities more available for regulation. This approach also oversimplifies the ways in which developments in sexual taste, representation and practice may be related to positions of power, particularly in terms of class and gender relations. (Attwood, 2006: 82-83)

Attwood, along with a number of other scholars (Whelehan, 2000; Williamson, 2003; Gill, 2003), warns that contemporary postfeminist visual culture might invite an uncritical reception of glossy sexual representations that disguise sexism as 'porno chic'. Gill most vehemently argues that the mechanisms that work to objectify women are now being reassembled to create an ironic, 'knowing' version that involves the 'sexual subjectification' of women who are finding themselves under a constant self-scrutinizing gaze (Gill, 2003).

The often difficult issues surrounding sexuality and sexual representation in today's late/postmodern society, then, force us to consider a new ethics of sex (Attwood, 2006). Two authors who have been instrumental in articulating such a new framework are Ken Plummer and Jeffrey Weeks. Plummer (1995; 2003) observes a democratic potential in the emergence of what he calls 'intimate citizenship'. He uses this concept to invoke the major changes that have taken place in the spaces and discourses surrounding intimate subjects. Areas that were previously considered taboo (obscene) or solely debated by experts are now increasingly accessible to ordinary citizens who are able to challenge authoritative discourses with heterogeneous 'participant stories' about a large variety of topics dealing with bodies and sexuality. This corresponds to what Jeffrey Weeks has called the 'sexual citizen', who 'makes a claim to transcend the limits of the personal sphere by going public' (Weeks, 1998: 37). However, he adds that the going public is a necessary yet paradoxical move in order to protect the possibilities of private life and choice in a more inclusive society. He follows Plummer in the claim that sexual/intimate citizenship is eventually about the control over one's body, access to representations and spaces, and choices about identities and experiences (Weeks, 1998; Plummer, 1995).

6.3 — Pornography, participatory culture and the internet

McNair, Attwood, and Plummer all seem to agree on the democratic potential of the internet. While the internet has, since its inception, been an important catalyst for the proliferation of mainstream pornographic representations and the exponential growth of the porn industry¹, these authors argue that it also provides access to exactly those alternative spaces that allow individuals control over their own stories and representations. Attwood (2007) mentions how new web technologies have given rise to various participatory networks, some of which have emerged as 'new sex cultures' where "savvy media practitioners' are producing and distributing alternative porn in online arenas for peer-to-peer sharing, sex activist and art networks' (442). It is in these arenas that alternative bodies, desires, and sexual practices can become visible, which is instrumental in the sexual emancipation of groups who have been previously marginalized

and/or oppressed (Attwood, 2007; Jacobs, 2007; Lehman, 2007; Albury, 2003). The proliferation of queer, fat, hairy, or old bodies online makes the relationship between aesthetics and ethics explicit: it challenges the boundaries of what can be counted as 'real' sex/bodies/pleasures and expands the representational space to include non-normative practices.

Katrien Jacobs (2007) has emphasized that, next to the aesthetic dimension of so-called 'indieporn' or 'altporn' sites², another important ethical aspect of these new online sex cultures is their community-centered, participatory agenda. Many of these websites, such as *Suicidegirls* or *NoFauxxx*³, facilitate interaction between the 'models' and the spectators, and often encourage visitors to become part of the production processes as well. This focus on communication and participation generates possibilities for identification and intimacy that extend beyond the realm of 'carnal lust' (Arvidsson, 2007). In this way, then, these sites create an aura of authenticity that transforms the pornographic spectacle into 'real' sex, as experienced by everyday people with whom one can identify and interact, but who have previously lacked the means of sexual representation that reach outside their direct intimate circle. This drive for authenticity is particularly pronounced in the 'amateur' or 'reality' porn phenomenon, which has become increasingly ubiquitous in the realm of internet pornography.

Amateur porn and the claim to the 'real'

In part, the desire for 'real', authentic sexual practices formed a reaction to the increasingly spectacular, silicon-enhanced artificiality of mainstream pornography (Russo, 2007; Patterson, 2004). In opposition to the supposed 'fakeness' of mainstream productions, amateur porn posits the 'real' bodies and pleasures of people who could be your neighbor (Russo, 2007; Attwood, 2007; Patterson, 2004; Hillyer, 2004; Albury, 2003; Barcan, 2002). In fact, they might indeed *be* your neighbor, as amateur pornography has traditionally relied on homemade footage. In the early stages of the amateur phenomenon during the mid-80s, this footage mainly consisted of photographs and low-grade Super-8 videos, which were traded and sold among a small network of aficionados (O'Toole, 1999). However, the advent of the internet and other digital technologies has expanded these amateur practices in both their scale and heterogeneity, and catapulted the private sexual practices of ordinary people into the (semi-)public realm of the internet (Barcan, 2002).

Julie Levin Russo (2007) has argued that the central claim to 'realness' is not only present on 'amateur' and 'altporn' sites, but constitutes a more general conception of pornography as having a privileged relationship to the real. More specifically, this conception holds that porn 'records an unsimulated, authentic

sexual act (realness of production)' and 'its images appear real due to their character and conventions (realness of representation)' (239). Amateur porn sites place a particular emphasis upon the realness of production and representation, in order to produce images that exude a sense of 'liveness' and intimacy (Hillyer, 2004). Over the past several years, this phenomenon has grown into a subgenre with its own aesthetic codes that have been widely adopted in mainstream productions (Esch and Mayer, 2007; Jacobs, 2007; Penley, 2004). As Barcan notes:

[T]he stylistic "naturalness" of the home-made sex video has become an aesthetic unto itself. Its technical features (e.g. graininess, blurriness, and poor lighting) would often be considered flaws in public genres, but in private they function as values themselves, signs of indexicality and authenticity. It should be no surprise that authenticity itself should have become an erotic stimulant. (Barcan, 2002)

As amateur porn (whether featuring 'real' amateurs or not⁴) made its way onto the internet, its homemade production process was supplemented by web-based technologies, which augmented its 'raw' amateur aesthetic by adding the low-resolution quality of streaming video and webcam images. Next to the experience of online interactivity, these grainy images provide an added feeling of authenticity (and thus of erotic pleasure) by intensifying porn's already 'privileged relationship to the real'. According to Patterson, this relationship between grainy web cam images and the 'real' is 'enhanced by their similarity to the image sequences obtained from video surveillance cameras, which have a similar claim to liveness' (Patterson, 2004: 113). This suggestion leads us to consider the intersections of amateur/reality porn on the web and the broader field of media modalities that seek to discover and represent 'the real' through mechanisms of confession and surveillance.

'Reality', confession, and the 'truth' of sex

Several authors have placed amateur/reality porn on the internet within the larger context of the rise of reality TV and contemporary (media) culture's fascination with confessional genres, characterized by a desire for authenticity, participation, and the revelation of 'truth' (Attwood, 2007; Patterson, 2004; Barcan, 2002; McNair, 2002). As discussed above, McNair's notion of the privatization of the public sphere through the on/scenity of sexual discourses within popular media illustrates the shifting boundaries of the public and the private in late modern western culture. These boundaries are being renegotiated in media formats that privilege lifestyle, 'human interest', interactivity, and 'reality'. For McNair, this commodification of the intimate provides common

people with a platform for self-expression and participation in sexual discourses, albeit under the banner of sexual consumerism (2002). Other scholars, however, have been less enthusiastic about this commercial ‘incitement to discourse’ through various confessional formats.

In his critical book *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*, Mark Andrejevic (2004) carefully analyzes the way in which reality TV poses an injunction to participate in various forms of surveillance under the guise of ‘self expression’ and access to ‘reality’, while in effect placing people in a constantly scrutinized position that generates market value through ‘the work of being watched’. He relates reality TV’s promise of experiencing the ‘real’ through extensive monitoring to the way in which audiences are encouraged to participate online, which ‘functions as an incentive to enter the digital enclosure – and to, in turn, offer oneself up as an element of that reality, as a *participant* in it’ (Andrejevic, 2004: 123, italics in original). According to Andrejevic, this invitation to participate plays into people’s desire for the resuscitation of democracy and community, while in fact setting them up for a voluntary submission into a corporate ‘participatory panopticon’ (Whitaker, 1999, in Andrejevic, 2004: 113). In this way, the search for authenticity through self-disclosure and interactivity is commodified through comprehensive online systems of disciplinary (self-) surveillance that turn these activities into marketable information.

In Andrejevic’s analysis, the mechanisms of participation, confession and surveillance are not only mutually related, but simultaneously tied up with the promise of ‘reality’, which serves as an overarching catalyst. His Foucaultian perspective on how the ‘real’ functions as an ideological tool for the incitement to divulge information resembles Williams’ discussion of pornography as a particular form of confessional technology (William, 1989). In her classic study of hardcore heterosexual pornography, Williams traces the origins of pornographic representation in film and sees in these technologies ‘an impetus toward the confession of previously invisible “truths” of bodies and pleasures in an unprecedented “frenzy of the visible”’ (Williams, 1989: 7). Andrejevic himself already addresses the connection between pornography and ‘the real’, in a passage that resonates with the assertions made earlier by Russo and Barcan:

The relation between reality TV and pornography is (...) not an incidental one. Voyeurism is an undeniable aspect of the appeal of reality TV and lends this appeal a distinct erotic charge. (...) At the same time, pornography carries with it the promise of the real: that the act of copulation is neither imitated, as in fictional movies, nor stylized, as in erotica, but presented in all its raw, mundane, reality. (Andrejevic, 2004: 87)

In Williams's discussion, pornography's claim to reveal the previously undiscovered 'truths' of gendered (predominantly female) bodies is equally inscribed by the desire to know the 'reality' of sex. Following the ideas developed by Foucault in volume one of his *History of Sexuality* (1978), she relates his notion of modern society's compulsion to speak incessantly about sex to hardcore pornography and the visual pleasure of seeing sex itself 'speak' (Williams, 1989). For Williams, this pleasure is inextricably linked to knowledge: the knowledge of pleasure and the pleasure of knowing pleasure. This knowledge/pleasure constellation, which lies at the heart of pornography, instigates the construction of discourses on sex, gender, and sexuality, augmenting existing discourses that have been institutionalized by medicine, psychiatry, and law (idem).

Similarly, Hansen, Needham, and Nichols (1991) see pornography as part of a larger discourse of sexuality and the 'organization of pleasure'. They draw comparisons between the aesthetic and discursive aspects of pornography and ethnography, arguing that pornography's careful visual analysis of bodies and pleasures relies on a 'documentary impulse' shared by the ethnographic film's 'will to knowledge' about the reality of human relations. In this sense, pornography can be understood as another form of visual inquiry, deploying a 'scientia sexualis'⁵ in order to 'understand, label, codify, and cure sexuality' (Hansen et al, 1991: 210). Thus, the proliferation of sexual bodies and desires (both off- and online) should not necessarily be taken as a liberatory process that escapes the power structures of a hegemonic moral authority, but may rather be understood to function as an extension of its disciplinary power (McCreadie Lillie, 2004; Foucault, 1977; 1978).

6.4 — User-generated pornography: discipline or emancipation?

How does this dystopic view of participatory pornography relate to the more utopic position expressed by Jacobs, Attwood, and Plummer? As discussed above, these scholars are equally concerned with online porn's relation to interaction, 'reality', and 'truth', but argue that the internet allows participatory communities to represent different versions of 'reality' and contest the hegemonic 'truths' of sexuality. Thus, instead of foregrounding the disciplinary qualities of these spaces, they invoke their emancipatory potential to actualize sexual citizenship online.

Two empirical studies that emphasize the subversive potential of websites that facilitate the participatory, or user-generated, production of porn have focused on the way that gendered bodies are represented in these spaces. In their investigation of 'interactive sex entertainment' on CU-SeeMe video conferencing

sites, Kibby and Costello (2001) argue that through the breakdown of the distinction between producer and consumer these sites enable individuals to express their own sexual identities, which can encompass diverse desires and cultural meanings. Furthermore, they show how these interactions bridge 'the gap between the image and the act' by providing a space where the positions of spectator/spectacle and active/passive are fluid (367). According to Kibby and Costello, this allows for the subversion of traditional gender relations in pornography and the possibility for the rewriting of gendered codes of sexuality (idem).

In his essay on the representation of the penis in user-generated pornographic images, Lehman (2007) is clear about what he sees as the revolutionary potential of websites that allow users to participate in the production and distribution of sexual content, in this case Voyeurweb:

Voyeurweb has shifted the balance to the amateurs and away from the professionals and opened the sexual representation of the male and female body to a much wider variety of age, race, body type, and range of features with regard to cultural norms of beauty than previous forms of porn, sexual representation, or even the artistic representation of the body. Instead of just feeling a sense of frustration or exclusion or even perhaps deploring what we are seeing when we look through magazines, watch porn films, or walk through art museums, for the first time in history we are able to enter directly into the process of affecting and changing such representation, and for the whole world to see (Lehman, 2007: 110)

Like Attwood and Plummer, Lehman stresses the link between sexual ethics and the importance of alternative aesthetic production in participatory media. He relates the political importance of these user-generated porn websites to that of Youtube, which has widely been heralded (most prominently by *Time* magazine) as a harbinger of democratic media production that challenges traditional hierarchies in the culture industry and opens up space to alternative voices (Lehman, 2007). Lehman bases these assertions on his research about the ways that the penis is represented on Voyeurweb. His survey suggests that the images on Voyeurweb show a much larger variety of representations than is permitted in either porn or art, especially when it comes to the size and shape of the (often flaccid) penis. These images thus allow for the representation of male bodies that have previously been excluded from visual culture, challenging hegemonic ideologies of what maleness and masculinity may look like.

But what about other contemporary websites that have adopted the YouTube model of facilitating the distribution of user-generated content and applied it to pornographic material? What representations of gender and sexuality can be found in the 'amateur' videos that are uploaded each day by these participatory

communities of porn enthusiasts? As Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa (2007) point out, 'porn is a question of genre and embodied practice, not simply sex or sexual expression' (13) and its stylistic conventions can be both reiterated and subverted by people engaged in the grassroots production of pornographic images. I want to investigate these images and the embodied practices that they contain through an analysis of the user-generated videos distributed on YouPorn, which currently features as the most popular 'adult' website on the internet.

6.5 — Method

You Porn: An introduction

In November 2008, Voyeurweb ranked 919th on Alexa's list of most trafficked websites worldwide, whereas YouPorn had a worldwide ranking of 51, making it one of the most popular websites on the internet (ranking above CNN.com and Livejournal)⁶. Most of its visitors reside in the United States (22.2%), followed by Germany (13.9%) and Italy (13.1%). Additionally, the national traffic rankings show that the site is even more popular in Greece (14), Italy (15), Switzerland (17), and the Philippines (17). These modest statistics suggest that YouPorn is an international phenomenon, although its popularity seems to be concentrated in the United States and Europe.

Like YouTube, YouPorn functions as an online depository that allows users to upload and distribute millions of videos, but where the former does not accept any sexually explicit material, the latter focuses exclusively on such content.⁷ In addition, compared to the way that videos are organized on YouTube's main page, the YouPorn interface shows less editorial effort concerning the presentation of its videos. YouTube arranges its videos in three different ways ('Videos being watched now', 'Special attention', and 'Recommended videos'), while the videos that are uploaded on YouPorn are all displayed under the rubric 'New Videos', with the most recent clip posted at the top of the main page. As such, the clips initially appear to be largely unorganized, in the sense that they are not divided into any predefined categories.

However, analogous to YouTube, clips can be further organized by the user, which is facilitated in two different ways. First, the material can be filtered by length of video, highest rated video, most viewed video, date of upload, title of video, and type of content ('Straight', 'Gay', and 'Cocks'). Second, users can employ a 'search' tool in order to seek specific types of content by entering keywords, which correspond to 'tags' that are attached to the uploaded videos. Like YouTube, YouPorn offers its users the opportunity to 'tag' their uploaded videos so they can be retrieved by other users when searching for specific

contents. These tags are usually keyword descriptions of the content, such as information about the people depicted in the video, the type of sexual conduct, the place of conduct, and the body parts that are emphasized in the particular clip.

Next to the video-sharing section of the YouPorn website, there are a variety of other facilities hosted on related pages that can be accessed by clicking on the links on top of the main page. Most of these facilities provide the user with different ways to 'get involved', thereby actively promoting a sense of interactivity and community, while also building strategic business alliances with other companies in the adult industry:

- **YouPorn Dating** (provided by AdultFriendFinder⁸): requires registration (no fee), after which the user can look for sex partners in their region by browsing the profiles in the social network.
- **YouPornMate**: 'The hottest live cam community', where users can browse for 'amateurs' who perform interactive webcam shows 'from their own homes'. This feature also requires registration without a fee.
- **YP Chat**: this affiliate program, licensed by YouPorn, allows users (after registration without a fee) to chat to other registered members in one of the many chat rooms.
- **YP Sexblogs**: a page featuring hundreds of links to 'adult' weblogs.
- **YouPorn Premium**: a service which allows the user to download and watch licensed porn DVD's in high quality. This requires both registration and a fee.
- **Web TV**: an external link which leads the user to BluVu.tv; a 24-hour online broadband television site with 'over 18 channels of hardcore content', which requires registration and a fee.

In contrast to these extra facilities, the video-sharing part of YouPorn does not require registration and is thus freely available to anyone. In this section, the ideas of community and interactivity are encouraged by allowing users to rate videos (on a scale of one to five stars). Furthermore, users are able to add videos to their 'Favorites', in order to create a personal collection of preferred videos. Leaving comments, which is a very popular feature on YouTube, is not possible.

Data selection

This study focuses on 'amateur' videos that were uploaded on the video-sharing section of YouPorn. On November 13, 2008, a search for the term 'amateur' resulted in 656 videos that were tagged with this particular keyword.

Subsequently, every 6th clip appearing on the 'search results' pages was selected and downloaded in order to create a sample of 100 'amateur' videos. It should be noted that, *by default*, the search results consisted exclusively of clips featuring heterosexual content. To access non-heterosexual material, the user has to filter the results by choosing the 'Gay' option in a drop-down menu (which provides the options 'Straight', 'Gay', and 'Cocks'). A subsequent search for 'amateur' clips within the 'Gay' content area resulted in just five videos, which were located on a separate domain: YouPornGay.com. Because of this location on an ancillary website (similar to YouPorn's Dating and Cam sites) and the fact that a discussion of gay pornography requires a different theoretical framework than is currently employed, it was decided not to include these five clips. The empirical focus is thus solely on the sample of 100 'straight amateur' videos.

Mode of analysis

The 'amateur' videos on YouPorn can be approached from two different conceptual and methodological angles. On the one hand, they can be viewed as manufactured images similar to other forms of cinematic representation. This perspective, rooted in the film studies tradition, emphasizes the artificial nature of the production and aims to investigate the aesthetic and narrative construction of meaning through and within the visual frame. This has been the predominant analytical approach to pornographic representation. On the other hand, these videos can be conceived as 'homemade' recordings of regular people (amateurs) engaged in sexual practices. This perspective, rooted in the performance studies tradition, examines the way that meaning is created through everyday social (and thus also sexual) performances, documented on digital video.

As Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001) rightfully point out, '(t)he issue of 'record' versus 'construct' exists because many images have an element of both and so require a mode of analysis which is sensitive to both' (5). This study thus adopts a combination of these two approaches and their respective methodologies, by recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of both modes of analysis in the context of addressing the 'amateur' videos on YouPorn. Whereas the performance studies approach treats the camera as a 'neutral' device for recording social performances, which constitute its primary object of analysis, a film studies perspective acknowledges the role of the camera as an active agent in the production of meaning. Conversely, while a film studies approach allows for the investigation of how the camera frame enables certain identifications and arranges a particular 'gaze' on the side of the spectator, it tends to neglect the notions of interaction and performance as important mechanisms in the social

construction of meaning in everyday life. As such, this study employs an interpretative framework that accounts for the performances *on* as well as *of* the screen.

6.6 — Results: Amateurism and the aesthetics of ‘the real’

As noted above, the low production values of ‘homemade’ amateur porn have become an aesthetic unto itself. Whether due to practical necessity or formal considerations, a large majority of the videos included in the sample indeed contain aesthetic qualities that set them apart from mainstream productions and could thereby be categorized as ‘amateur’ porn. Similar to previous observations by scholars such as Barcan (2002) and Hillyer (2004), the analysis of the YouPorn sample indicated that most of the videos consist of rather blurry, grainy and often underexposed footage. In addition, when the camera is not placed in a stationary position the camerawork is frequently shaky, including recurring attempts to zoom in and out in order to focus on a particular shot. Perhaps one of the most instructive examples of this ‘homemade’ aesthetic is a video called ‘Amateur sex with the ex’. The camera is operated by a man, who lies on his back while filming a young woman as she sits on top of him and slides his penis inside her. During the whole video the spectator is positioned to assume the man’s point of view as he tries to produce close up shots of her vagina, stomach and breasts. His attempts only partially succeed however, due to the dim lighting and unstable camerawork, which repeatedly obscure the indexicality of the images.

Although a large number of videos are shot manually (nearly always by men) there are also numerous occasions when the camera is stationed somewhere in the room. Yet this rarely means that it simply assumes a position as passive onlooker, as many clips show a frequent interaction between the ‘performers’ and the camera/screen. For instance, the video ‘Amateur couple X4’ features grainy footage of a couple having sex on a bed while the camera shifts angles and zooms in/out. Only after a wide shot of the couple, the viewer notices how the man (lying on his back) is consistently engaged in adjusting the camera with two remote controls, in an attempt to achieve the right perspective. He seems rather distracted from the actual sex and more focused on catching a good shot of the penetration.

Some videos feature webcam images of performers (usually women) who interact with the computer screen and repeatedly adjust their webcam, while others display ‘scenes’ in which the performers use the extended digital screen of their camera to watch themselves having sex. In these videos, the performers are simultaneously the exhibitionist/object and voyeur/subject, scrutinizing their

own performance which is mediated through the (computer) screen. On many occasions, the male performer eventually picks up the stationary camera and continues filming the 'action' from his point of view. These particular videos closely resemble the 'gonzo' aesthetic: a pornographic subgenre in which the cameraman/director records himself having sex with many different 'amateur' women. The 'gonzo' genre, in turn, originated as a low-budget alternative to feature-length pornography, adopting its production values from amateur porn. Another aesthetic element that many of the sample videos share with 'gonzo' porn is their lack of narrative structure. With the exception of a few clips that did feature some kind of contextual narrative (usually in the form of a short interview with the female 'performer'), the sample consisted of short, fragmented clips depicting sex and masturbation devoid of any narrative framework. This YouTube-style assemblage of scattershot sexual imagery starkly contrasts the average mainstream porn movie, which usually employs some kind of storyline to accompany the 'sexual numbers' (Williams, 1989). In this sense, the performances on the YouPorn screen are *mimetic* rather than *diegetic*: they (claim to) directly represent sexual interactions rather than recounting these interactions within a unified narrative framework.

But even though the majority of the sample videos appear to be relatively straightforward representations of regular people engaged in sexual practices, the spectator rarely gets to see 'uncut' footage. Only videos that last less than two or three minutes occasionally provide an unedited account of sexual (inter)action. Still, the crudely edited scenes of most videos attest to their 'amateur' status by distinguishing themselves from the smooth continuity of professionally edited porn movies. For example, the video 'Amateur tattoo couple fucking hard on sofa' features a woman who briefly shows her breasts while smiling at the camera and (presumably) watching herself on a screen next to the lens. The scene abruptly ends and is followed by a shot from the same angle, yet suddenly a naked man sits on a sofa behind her. The woman proceeds to fellate him while he stoically stares into the camera and attempts to stimulate her manually. Then there's another cut to a scene that depicts the couple having sex on the sofa, until the woman apparently strains herself and climbs off the man after expressing her pain. After another cut the woman has climbed back on the man, but this time she has her back towards him, facing the camera. This shot lasts about a minute until the phone rings and they again stop having sex. Following yet another disjunctive cut the man picks up the camera and records himself penetrating the woman from behind until he pulls out and ejaculates on her back. Although the video is 15 minutes long, it is thus comprised of five

discontinuous scenes that primarily serve to emphasize the different sexual 'numbers' that have been performed.

As the above example also illustrates, a number of videos contain unexpected, disruptive elements. Sometimes the sexual (inter)action is interrupted because of a coughing fit ('Amateur fuck and facial'), a ringing telephone (see above), a barking dog ('Amateur dildo action, part 1'), or an adjustment of the camera ('Amateur'). At other times the 'performance' is accompanied by distracting sounds and noises, such as slamming doors ('Amateur couple does the old in and out'), radio/TV commentary ('Amateur'), or a strange mechanic hum ('Hungary Amateur'). Occasionally, the sound is suddenly lost or there is no sound at all ('Amateur couple having sex'), while one video ('Amateur') contains interludes of static and blue screen, suggesting that this clip has been converted from analogue camcorder footage to a digital format. Despite, or perhaps rather *because of* the often rough editing that precedes the online distribution of these clips, these disruptions remain visible and audible aspects of the eventual video. In this way, they give the spectator a sense that what is being watched is improvised, unstaged and thus 'real'.

The presence of the medium

The examples discussed above suggest that these amateur videos' proximity to the 'real' is established *not* by minimizing or annihilating the presence of the medium, but instead by emphasizing this presence. This shows the artifice of the 'real', which in effect shows the reality of artifice; of the labor that *really* produced such authentic images (Andrejevic, 2004; Latour and Weibel, 2002).⁹ This sharply contrasts the efforts to erase the presence of the medium in the majority of mainstream feature-length porn, through increasingly sophisticated technologies that render images fully transparent and leave no trace of their production. As a result, the mainstream porn movie constitutes a fetish object that has assumed a life of its own. It offers a hyperbolic spectacle of blonde babes with tiny waists and big shiny breasts, always ready to be 'taken' by muscular men with spectacular penis sizes, enacting an athletic sexual choreography embedded in an often flimsy plot. It forms a 'fake' fantasy space, separated from one's 'real' everyday life. Conversely, the majority of the amateur videos on YouPorn transplant the object of fetishism onto the various mundane aspects of its production process, by which the video acquires its 'aura' of authenticity. In this way, everyday 'reality' is transported onto the screen as a new kind of spectacle: the 'inverted spectacle' of the sexual self. The screen is no longer separated from the spectator, as two detached realms, but becomes a genuine *medium* that connects both spaces in their mutual desire for the 'real'.

However, by foregrounding the presence of the medium and underscoring the ‘reality’ of the circumstances in which the images on the screen were produced, these amateur videos effectively deny their phantasmatic dimension, instead claiming a direct proximity to the real life bodies within the visual frame. In other words, the emphasis on the *construction* of ‘reality’ paradoxically works to *disavow* its imaginary component. As I argue below, this contributes to the reification of a politically conservative gender ideology in the name of representing ‘authentic’ sexual pleasures. First, however, I want to discuss how representations of gendered bodies are organized around a particularly masculine version of visual pleasure.

6.7 — Results part two: the construction of visual pleasure

This analysis confirms the claims of scholars like Jacobs (2007) and Attwood (2007) that the rise of online participatory sex cultures allows for the representation of body types that have previously been marginalized in the mainstream porn industry. Indeed, many of the sample videos feature hairy, chubby, pale, or aging bodies of both the male and female gender. However, while this constitutes a transgression on the level of bodily representation, it quickly became apparent that it does not necessarily result in alternative or subversive sexual performances. In contrast, the videos suggest that both the sexual practices and the way they are visually displayed on screen are structured by a normative mainstream ‘pornoscript’. Therefore, the analytical focus should not be on bodies in themselves, but on the way that these bodies are engaged in gendered sexual interactions and the techniques that are employed to visualize them.

Fragmentation

The predominant way in which this mainstream ‘pornoscript’ permeates the YouPorn videos, is through the operation of the camera. In many of the clips, the lens of the camera (nearly always operated by a man) probes the female body in a decidedly atomistic way. Her vagina, breasts, buttocks, anus, and (to a lesser extent) face are often framed in isolated shots, as if they were separated from the body to which they are attached. In these shots, every body part seems to evoke its own specific visual pleasure that can only be experienced through close scrutiny, subsequently stimulating other pleasures. For example, at the start of ‘Not bad for an amateur’, a young woman is interviewed by a man operating the camera. He gives her compliments and asks her to show parts of her body, to which she complies. As she pulls up her skirt the camera zooms in on her vagina, but then quickly moves upwards for a close up of her breasts. The man’s face

briefly enters the screen when he reaches forward to lick them, after which he continues to give her both compliments and requests. She is then asked to look into the lens and after a brief close up of her face the camera moves down again for a shot of her buttocks, which she is requested to spread open so he/the camera can have a good look at her anus and vagina. Following this visual 'mapping' of the woman's erogenous zones the man puts down the camera and proceeds to have sex with her.

The male body is visualized in an equally fragmented way, although it only enters the frame in association with the female body, mostly during fellatio or penetration shots. In these shots the visual focus is on the penis, testicles, and pelvic area, with the penis as centerpiece. Since the male 'performer' often doubles as cameraman, his face is usually absent from the spectator's view (with the above example as one of the few exceptions). Yet even in videos that feature a third person operating the camera, the man's face remains mostly obscured in order not to compromise the 'faceless' anonymity of his primary function: to induce sexual pleasure in a woman, which can then be 'caught on tape'. This fragmentary way of framing male and female bodies closely resembles the visual conventions found in contemporary commercial porn, such as the popular 'gonzo' genre.

From female to male pleasure

In order to capture this 'confession' of female sexual pleasure, to borrow Linda Williams's terminology, it has to be organized around the visualization of the 'truth' of sexual difference as the source of this pleasure. A broad trend among the sample videos is to expose this embodied 'truth' by having the camera repeatedly zoom in to capture the vagina in the most intimate way possible. In many instances, the lens gets so close to the spread open labia that the spectator almost feels able to enter her. It is as if a woman's sexual pleasure can be comprehended through the visual penetration of the organ that presumably constitutes its source, in search of the essence of femininity which lies hidden somewhere deep inside this otherwise unknowable body (Williams, 1989). The most excessive example of this 'will to knowledge' is the clip 'Feuchte amateur muschi', which features a minute-long studious close up shot of a spread open vagina, but numerous other videos follow a similar motif. Several clips show masturbating women who grant the spectator a look at their open vagina ('Extreme Horny Amateur Girl is Masturbating'), while other videos feature women exposing their 'rear entry' as another fetishized orifice that might convey an alternative route to the 'truth' of female sexual pleasure ('Check this Amateur Hottie').

In some clips the attempt to visually penetrate the woman's body either precedes or follows the 'actual' penetration. Williams (1989) has argued that this attests to the inherent failure in any attempt to properly visualize penetrative sex as the ultimate consummation of heterosexual desire, which means that the 'proof' of complementary sexual difference necessarily remains out of reach in any form of pornographic representation. However, the sample videos indicate that this does not detract from the visual pleasure of trying, as the majority of clips features a variety of so-called 'meat shots' that provide a close up view of the penetration of either a woman's vagina or anus. These are predominantly shot from the man's point to view, allowing the spectator to vicariously experience the 'action' from his perspective. Both these 'meat shots' and the way they are positioned in a masculine visual framework are staples of mainstream pornographic representation.

In addition, many clips suggest that this incapacity to completely visualize penetration, and by proxy sexual difference, is regularly compensated by the mobilization of two other representational conventions in contemporary pornography: the 'cream pie' and the 'cum shot'. In 'Amateur wife properly inseminated', two men and a woman are involved in a threesome. While one man lies on his back, the woman fellates him while simultaneously being penetrated from behind by the other man. The camera, operated by a fourth person, focuses on the woman in the middle and largely excludes the men from the frame. During the following minutes, the camera attempts to get a good shot of the penetration from different angles, including a position between the man's legs which results in a view of his testicles that partly obscure the favored shot. Eventually the man ejaculates, which is discernable from the sperm that runs down from his testicles and the woman's vagina. Yet this image is apparently not satisfactory, as the two men proceed to jointly spread her buttocks and labia so that the camera is able to closely scrutinize the sperm that has been 'inseminated' into her vagina. This shot, which is referred to as a 'cream pie' in porn vernacular, figures as the 'post hoc' visual evidence of the penetrative act. This compensatory move addresses the spectator as a witness to the material trace of the man's virility and thereby paradoxically shifts the focus from female to male pleasure. While the close up shots of opened vaginas and various 'meat shots' already suggested a male voyeuristic pleasure in excavating the 'truth' of sexual difference and female bodily exaltation, the 'cream pie' shots explicitly transfer male pleasure to the centre of the frame.

Analogous to the cream pie, the 'cum shot' also projects the 'essence' of male sexual pleasure onto the screen, in the form of the ejaculating penis. Here, the visualization of (hetero)sexual difference is entirely dominated by the male

genitals, relegating female pleasure to the supplementary task of watching the penis as it ejaculates on her chest, face, or mouth. Also wryly coined 'facial', it quite literally compels the woman to 'face the fact' that his pleasure can not coincide with hers, at least not when expressed in a visually satisfying manner. Meanwhile, her gaze seems to be a partial source of his pleasure. Yet instead of a controlling gaze it rather denotes a subordinate one, as signified by her bodily position which is nearly always below his, kneeling or otherwise. In this position, she again serves as a reservoir for the trace of his sexual pleasure, which usually heralds the end of the clip: when the man finishes so does the video. This dialectical relationship is most vividly enacted in 'Real German amateur facial (Deutsch)', which begins with a woman looking directly in the camera and telling the cameraman (in German) to 'come on her face'. In a subsequent shot she is lying on the bathroom floor while the cameraman stands above her and masturbates. Although she mentions that she wants him to come, she looks quite uncomfortable and closes her eyes. Even after the man asks her to open them again she keeps her eyes closed until he ejaculates on her face and the video ends.

6.8 — Conclusion: Gender ideology and its 'scopic regime'

As discussed above, the adoption of a normative 'pornoscript' structures the possible ways in which sexual pleasure is visualized in the 'amateur' videos on YouPorn. As a result, many of these clips negotiate the (impossible) challenge of fully representing female sexual difference and pleasure by either positioning women as objects of intense visual scrutiny, or shifting their focus to the much more photogenic 'evidence' of male pleasure. Both strategies thereby effectively highlight sexual difference as the primary source of heterosexual visual pleasure, which is predominantly experienced from a male subject position. Through this adherence to a male-centered, conventional 'porno norm', these videos perpetuate an essentialist (and sometimes sexist) gender ideology that ties gender to the male and female anatomy and the heterosexual pleasures derived therefrom. The way that ideology operates in these 'amateur' videos is perhaps more pernicious than the ideological work contained in conventional pornography. In contrast to the latter's feature-length 'spectacle', these compressed clips disavow their imaginary dimension and claim to provide brief, (f)actual representations of 'real' bodies and 'authentic' sexual experiences. In this way, the YouPorn videos more precisely embody the 'documentary impulse' of pornography, as theorized by Hansen, Needham, and Nichols (1991), translated into a fragmented YouTube format. Their presumed proximity to 'real life' works to ground these images, which enables the reification of their gender ideology through a denial of the phantasmatic support (in the form of the

‘ pornoscript’) that organizes the sexual performances and their visualization on the YouPorn screen.

When invoking the concept of ‘ ideology’ here, I am not referring to its transcendental manifestation, in which a moral authority installs its prohibitions (in the form of laws and regulations) in order to enforce a universal conception of proper sexual conduct from the top down. Instead, I believe one can witness an *immanent* embodied ideology at work on YouPorn. Its participants are facilitated to explore their sexuality and exhibit every visible fraction of it, in the pursuit of a hedonistic, narcissistic individuality and pleasure. The ‘ sexual self’ is realized by making it available for continuous surveillance, in search of the visual ‘ truth’ of sexual bodies and their pleasures. This generates a scopic regime in which the explicit injunction to ‘ Enjoy!’ is embedded in the implicit ideological imperative to produce knowledge about sex and sexual difference, extending the ‘ scientia sexualis’ to Web 2.0. It is within this framework that YouPorn can be understood as a user-generated confessional technology, soliciting its participants for ever increasing amounts of visual disclosure. Additionally, this is also the point where YouPorn manifests itself as a site where (amateur) pornography, participatory online culture, and the representation/fetishation of ‘ reality’ converge to maintain a politically conservative gender ideology.

While I principally agree with authors like Jacobs, Attwood and Lehman, who assert that the internet can provide representational space for sexual cultures and individuals whom have previously been marginalized by mainstream cultural production, I would warn against an overly optimistic appreciation of the contemporary internet landscape and its opportunities. With an ever-increasing amount of web space acquired by multinational media conglomerates, Web 2.0 has witnessed a return to user participation under corporate control and it is not likely that marginal sexual practices will be able to thrive in these spaces. Although YouPorn has not (yet) been purchased by one of the porn industry moguls, its enormous popularity suggests that this might change in the near future. Currently, the site reflects mainstream pornography’s enduring popular appeal, with little evidence to sustain the hope for a proliferation of alternative sexual representations. Individuals with a proclivity for the ‘ abject’ thus see themselves retreating to the peripheral cultural spaces on the Web, from where they form heteronormativity’s ‘ constitutive outside’ (Butler, 1993). It is from this position that the relations between representation, emancipation, and sexual citizenship will continue to be negotiated in an effort to challenge the dominant scopic regimes and their hegemonic gender ideology. Additionally, I propose a healthy dose of skepticism towards any form of cultural production that claims a privileged relationship to ‘ reality’. While I concur with

Lehman (2007) that there is a critical ethico-political significance in the representational struggle to define what can count as 'real' and 'authentic' sexual experience, this study has argued that a claim to the 'real' can equally serve to reify a gender ideology that is in fact counter-progressive.

Postscript: the pornoscopic sublime

In order not to write off YouPorn as a monolithic bastion of heterosexist, male-dominated representation, I want to conclude by stressing that some videos do contain images that deviate from the normative repertoire. These instances usually involve a camera that is stationary for the whole duration of the clip, so that there are no close up 'meat' or 'cum' shots, and a woman that is noticeably in control of the interactions. The men in these videos can be seen elaborately performing cunnilingus ('Full length amateur porn - 41 min'), or exhibiting pleasure through facial expressions ('Amateur couple having sex'). Nevertheless, I would like to argue that the most subversive moments arise when bodies are *not* represented, or rather, become unrepresentable. This phenomenon, which embodies a ' pornoscopic sublime', repeatedly transpires when the camera gets too close to its object-body in a failed attempt to visually capture it. This failure results in a temporary distortion of the screen, obscuring the indexicality of the bodies within the frame. I have already pointed to such an incident in the first video discussed above, but its most expressive incarnation can be found in the clip 'Amateur wife deepthroat her husbands cock'. Here, the once discernable bodies emulsify into what can best be described as an abstract landscape of flesh tones.

In these instances, the scrutinized body is able to resist representation and escapes its entanglement in the scopic regime. Instead of an indexical *representation* of gendered bodies, the spectator is confronted with an amorphous *presentation*, a grotesque formless object on the screen (reminiscent of the Kantian 'Unform'). These moments of digital sublimity interrupt the 'frenzy of the visible' through a rupture of the screen and substitute the spectator's visual pleasure for what Lacan has termed 'jouissance': an uneasy amalgamation of pleasure and pain, grounded in the fascinated inability to apprehend what is before him/her and what will come next. It is during these moments of ambiguity that the unskilled amateurism of many YouPorn videos might prove to be a productive force in the destabilization of dominant modes of visuality and the social control they assert.

Notes

¹ It is outside the scope of this article to discuss at length the role of the internet in the development of the sex industry, and vice versa. For an overview, see Fredrick Lane's *Obscene Profits: The Entrepreneurs of Pornography in the Cyber Age* (2001). For now, it is important to note that the sex industry has been instrumental in the development of new internet technologies, most notably the advancement of streaming video applications.

² These terms denote the 'independent', or 'alternative', pornographic/erotic websites that operate below the radar of the mainstream porn industry and often develop in explicit opposition to its aesthetic and economic norms. However, as I discuss later, the industry has since co-opted these alternative aesthetic values so that a distinction between the two is often a difficult exercise.

³ See www.suicidegirls.com and www.nofauxxx.com.

⁴ I argue that attempts to determine whether these representations feature actual amateurs are not only infeasible but also largely irrelevant. They are infeasible because of the highly problematic nature of the relation between 'amateur' and 'professional' in the context of pornography (when does the amateur become professional and how can one tell by viewing?). They are also irrelevant because the crucial issue concerning 'amateur' porn in this particular study is the aesthetic claim to authenticity and the presumed proximity to the 'real', rather than the 'behind the scenes' ontological status of the participants involved.

⁵ 'Scientia sexualis' is a term used by Foucault (1978) to describe the scientific organization of sexual practices, predominantly in the fields of medicine and psychiatry, which commenced in the 19th century.

⁶ For a detailed ranking and traffic overview, see http://www.alexa.com/data/details/traffic_details/youporn.com (consulted: November, 2008).

⁷ In relation to this content, it is important to note another similarity between YouTube and YouPorn: while both websites feature user-generated content, this material can effectively be divided into user-created content and user-distributed content. The difference is that while users on both websites are enabled to upload and distribute videos, the contents of these videos are not necessarily created by the users themselves, but are instead 'remediated' (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). In the context of YouTube, many users distribute content created by others (either professional media productions or amateur footage), which is then sometimes 'remixed' or 'mashed-up' with other materials. Although these sorts of creative practices do not seem to occur on YouPorn, many of the uploaded videos on the website feature recycled clips from (copyrighted) professional releases, varying from high-end productions to cheap 'amateur' footage. As stated before, this makes a clear distinction between 'genuine' amateur and 'professional' amateur clips unattainable (Esch & Mayer, 2008).

⁸ AdultFriendFinder is the world's largest adult social network and a place where people looking for sexual adventures can post contact ads on their profiles.

⁹ For instance, think of the surveillance cameras that were often visible during episodes of the now famous 'reality' TV show Big Brother.

Postscript to chapter six: assessing the YouPorn study

If there is one area where gender, sexuality, embodiment and new media technology converge, it is the vast topography of internet pornography. Next to the nearly infinite number of professional websites, the distribution of internet pornography has always depended on 'do-it-yourself' networks of users engaged in sharing and uploading their materials (see chapter six). For these reasons, it was clear that my project should include a case study of user-generated pornography to follow up on the MySpace study. I started my investigation of YouPorn in May 2008 and by the end of January 2009 I submitted the final manuscript to *Convergence*, an international journal focusing on new media technologies and their relationship to culture and society. At the beginning of July 2009 I received a 'revise and resubmit' assessment, which has increased the likelihood of a future publication (especially given the fact that the suggested revisions require no profound changes to the manuscript's argumentation). In this postscript, I would like to devote some attention to the study's position in relation to the other case studies assembled in this dissertation, especially pertaining to their respective objects of analysis.

While the YouPorn study focuses on the dissertation's central themes of gender, sexuality and embodiment, and examines the ways that these are visually performed in user-generated video clips on YouPorn, there are two aspects in which the study deviates from the preceding three case studies. First, whereas those three studies deal with users' individual and collective performances that are enacted through the various forms of digital content they generate on the respective platforms, this study analyzes the performances that take place in the uploaded video material. Thus, instead of focusing on the *online performance* of gender, sexuality and embodiment, the YouPorn study looks at the online representation of *physical performances* of gender, sexuality and embodiment. Second, while the 'performers' in these videos may use YouPorn to distribute their own productions (as amateur pornographers), the videos are also often uploaded by third parties. This entails a provisional distinction between the *user of YouPorn* and the *'performer' in the YouPorn videos*. I already addressed this issue in a note (#7) at the end of the article, in which I discuss how user-generated content can be divided into 'user-created content' and 'user-distributed content'. Because of the prevalence of 'remediation' (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), or the 'recycling' of existing content on YouPorn, any attempt to discriminate between videos that contain 'actual' user-created amateur porn and those that are remediated (professional) productions is bound to result in speculation at best. Yet as I argue in another note (#4), the purpose of this study has never been to

interrogate the 'real' status of the participants in these 'amateur' videos, but instead to examine how this 'reality' is visually/aesthetically performed and to relate these practices to the embodied performances of gender and sexuality on the digital screen. Even though the recordings of these performances might not have been *created* by the users of YouPorn, they are still the ones who *distribute* the videos through its digital database, thus qualifying them as 'user-generated content'.

Additionally, and in conjunction with my reflections on the previous case studies, I want to emphasize the role of new (and old) media technologies in the process of producing these 'representations'. While the material dimension of the uploaded video clips is a recurring theme in the study, it is never fully explicated or worked out in detail. Nevertheless, the analysis has pointed to the numerous ways in which media technologies are employed to construct a certain visual framework that delineates the 'amateur porn' genre. Instead of hiding the materiality of the medium, it is exhibited through various forms of 'performer-camera interaction' (on-screen) and crude editing practices (off-screen – see chapter six). Add to this the material infrastructure of the YouPorn interface, which facilitates users to upload, annotate and access the videos in a particular way, and it becomes clear that these videos are more than mere 'representations' of sexual performances. Rather, they are highly specific sociotechnical and aesthetic objects attuned to producing a certain sense of amateurism and 'real sex', while remaining tightly structured around a regulative visual 'pornoscript'. It is this focus on the performative engagement of gendered 'representational' practices and new media technologies that ties this case study to the others in this dissertation. Chapter seven will further discuss the practical and theoretical consequences of this engagement, by comparatively assessing the outcomes from all four case studies.

Chapter Seven

Conclusions

In this concluding chapter, I reflect on the dissertation as a whole by 1) providing a brief summary of the preceding chapters, 2) addressing some of the theoretical consequences that follow from comparing and contrasting the outcomes of the four case studies, 3) evaluating the dissertation's contributions to the different research fields it has intersected with, and 4) making recommendations for future research.

7.1 — *Looking back: a recapitulation of the previous chapters*

I began this dissertation by asking the following research question:

How are gender, sexuality, and embodiment performed on internet platforms that feature user-generated content?

Chapter one introduced the subject matter by discussing the main concepts included in this research question and situating them within a social constructionist framework. It further assessed their interconnections and highlighted the material dimension of cultural processes that involve gender, sexuality and embodiment. Finally, this opening chapter explicated the dissertation's relevance to the surrounding research fields and discussed the methodological considerations that have shaped the empirical case studies. Chapter two offered a review of the literature that has dealt with the connections between gender and the internet since the early 90s. It identified two conceptions of gender common within a feminist theoretical framework: 'gender as identity' and 'gender as social structure'. It then assessed a selection of studies that have adopted these two different approaches to gender and concluded that they often contain gender-essentialist and/or technological-determinist tendencies, ignoring users' positioned and embodied everyday experiences with internet technologies. A third strand of research was therefore reviewed, focusing on

approaches that counter essentialism and determinism by attending to the mutual shaping of gender and internet technology in situated practices and spaces. The concluding section discussed the current prevalence of applications featuring user-generated content, assembled under the name 'Web 2.0', in relation to the three approaches evaluated in the chapter, suggesting future research interests. It argued that, rather than causing a schism in the established research tradition on gender and the internet, the sociotechnical features of Web 2.0 are more likely to raise questions similar to those asked before, although they will require a reformulation that suits today's cultural, technological, and economic environment.

The following four chapters presented the four case studies designed to answer the research question formulated in chapter one. The study in chapter three re-examined the relations between gender identities, embodiment, sexuality, and text-based synchronous CMC. A discourse analysis of the conversations that occurred in two different IRC channels identified three 'interpretative repertoires' that involved the invocation of corporeal elements in the participants' textual performances of gender and sexuality, suggesting that the notion of embodiment played a pivotal role in both channels. This invocation reaffirmed the connection between gender and a binary sexed body, which limited the scope of possible gender performances in these text-based spaces. Eventually it is concluded that the discourse in both channels is constructed by participants who bring their everyday, embodied experiences online. IRC might be a textual environment, in contrast to many of the web's popular graphical spaces, but this does not mean that the body is any less present.

Chapter four investigated how weblog authors perform their online gender identity, in order to establish to what extent their modes of self-presentation correspond to the existing research field of gender and CMC. After a preliminary descriptive analysis of a sample of Dutch and Flemish weblogs, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on four of these 'blogs'. It was concluded that these weblog authors perform their gender identity through textual and visual narratives of everyday embodied practice, which remain closely related to the traditional binary gender system. However, their performances of masculinity and femininity turned out to be more diffuse and heterogeneous than some scholars in the field of gender and CMC have previously assumed. In addition, it was argued that the traditionally feminine act of diary writing on these blogs can be understood to challenge the notion of the weblog as a masculine ICT, demonstrating that the use of media technologies is pivotal in shaping the ways in which these technologies are conceived of as 'masculine' or 'feminine'.

Chapter five focused on the comment exchanges between a group of Dutch MySpace users, demonstrating how these networked Friends engage in gendered and sexualized interactions through the use of various digital resources (i.e. text, images, and video). In this particular network, articulations of affection are indiscriminately distributed among the Friends, creating a flow of polymorphous desire in which the heteronormative gender binary is repeatedly transgressed. The study concluded that these Friends make use of ironic and/or transgressive citations in order to be recognized as a member of the group, performatively delineating and shaping the digital network that constitutes their shared social space.

Finally, chapter six presented a study on the video-sharing website YouPorn. It critically examined the proposition that new media technologies are opening up spaces for the sexual emancipation of previously marginalized groups by allowing for different, more authentic, representations of gender and sexuality than is conventionally available in mainstream pornography. Through the analysis of one hundred 'amateur' porn videos, it was demonstrated how an adherence to a masculine, heteronormative 'pornscript' structures the possible ways in which sexual pleasure is performed and visualized in these videos. Simultaneously, their alleged proximity to 'real life' works to naturalize these representations, enabling the reification of their gender ideology through a denial of their imaginary dimension. It was concluded that, rather than providing a space for alternative sexual representation, YouPorn manifests itself as a site where (amateur) pornography, participatory media, and the representation/fetishation of 'reality' converge to maintain a politically conservative gender ideology.

Now that I have summed up the outcomes of the individual case studies presented in this dissertation, the next step is to mutually assess them in light of their consequences for theorizing the performance of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital culture.

7.2 — *Making connections: some theoretical inferences*

As long as the human subject is envisioned as an autonomous self with unambiguous boundaries, the human-computer interface can only be parsed as a division between the solidity of real life on one side and the illusion of virtual reality on the other, thus obscuring the far-reaching changes initiated by the development of virtual technologies.

N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999: 290)

The Virtual

The most important conclusion that encapsulates the proceedings of the four case studies presented here is that the online performance of gender, sexuality, and embodiment is intricately interwoven with people's physical embeddings in everyday life, as well as the media technologies they employ to extend everyday experience into digital locales. For this reason, I have largely refrained from using the term 'cyberspace' to describe the dynamic networked environments that are at once "materially real, socially regulated, and discursively constructed" (Hayles, 1999: 291). In contrast, the invocation of 'cyberspace' connotes a retro-futuristic image of a sluggish, passive body that is left behind while an active, disembodied subjectivity (mind) escapes into a virtual realm of pure information (possibility).¹ This understanding of 'cyberspace', which owes its existence to William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984) and has since gained considerable credence within scholarly and popular writings on internet culture, offers an ahistorical, technologically determinist view of the 'virtual' as an illusory dataspace that radically differs from the 'real'. If anything, the case studies included in this dissertation have proven this understanding to be thoroughly flawed.

In order to theoretically address and make sense of the gendered practices that have been discussed in the previous chapters, it is necessary to re-examine the notion of the 'virtual' and situate it within the context of online identity performance. First, the term 'virtual' is often meant to signify the opposite of the 'real': a fictional unreality, or non-existence. However, the concept of the virtual has been more positively figured in the work of authors such as Marcel Proust, Henri Bergson, and Gilles Deleuze. For Proust, memories are virtual: 'real without being actual, ideal without being abstract' (cited in Shields, 2003: 25). Instead of treating the virtual as unreal, these authors have approached it as an integral part of everyday reality. Memories, dreams, hopes, and desires are an essential and productive part of our daily 'real' lives, although they are not *actually* present in any tangible sense. Thus, rather than opposing the virtual to the real, it can be contrasted to the concrete, which is materially *actualized* in definite forms. This distinction can also be recognized in the definition of the term 'virtual'. According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* 'virtual' stems from the Latin term *virtus*, which translates as strength or power. It is defined as "relating to, or possessing a power of acting without the agency of matter; being functionally or effectively but not formally of its kind". In this way, the virtual can be understood as 'immaterial agency': effectively but not formally or materially existing.

Second, from the above it becomes apparent that the virtual does not solely pertain to electronically mediated or digitally produced images and experiences, but has a much longer and richer history. In relation to ‘virtual’ imagery, Anne Friedberg has argued that “before the digital age, there was virtuality – painterly, photographic, cinematic, and televisual – and its aesthetics and visual systems cannot be reduced simply to information” (Friedberg, 2006: 11). Prior to the digital image, mirrors, paintings, and photographs populated our lifeworld and produced mediated representations in a “virtual register” (idem). Thus, instead of a contemporary media-specific property, the virtual reveals itself as a transhistorical ontological category that inhabits many different media and objects (Friedberg, 2006; Shields, 2003; Lévy, 1998). Following these insights, Friedberg distinguishes the virtual image as

any representation or appearance (...) that appears “functionally or effectively *but not formally*” of the same materiality as what it represents. Virtual images have a materiality and a reality but of a different kind, a second-order materiality, liminally immaterial. The terms “original” and “copy” will not apply here, because the virtuality of the image does not imply direct mimesis, but a transfer – more like metaphor – from one plane of meaning and appearance to another. (Friedberg, 2006: 11, italics in original)

Although Friedberg is explicitly cautious not to conflate the virtual with the digital, instead emphasizing its historicity and scope, her definition nonetheless provides a useful framework for thinking through the performative practices that have shaped, and have been shaped by, the different online platforms included in this comparative study. In the context of these ‘digital spaces’, an idiom I prefer over the term ‘cyberspace’, the questions concerning the (im)materiality and ontological status of the virtual are particularly evident. Platforms such as IRC or MySpace are ‘digitally virtual’ spaces in which the virtual is not only an inextricable part of users’ everyday reality, but also becomes harder to separate from the materially concrete. While users may not be physically present in these spaces, their virtual presence takes on a ‘different kind’ of materiality in the form of digital text or images, which are supported by the ‘digitally material’ architecture of profiles or channels (Van Dijck, 2007; boyd and Heer, 2006; Slater, 2002; Taylor, 2002; Senagala, 2001; Manovich, 2001). This suggests a convergence of the virtual and the concrete in digital space, in which the ‘immaterial agency’ of the virtual is materially *actualized* in the form of digital objects (textual, pictorial, and cinematic). In this sense, performative practices in digital spaces such as weblogs resemble everyday physical experience in their simultaneous incorporation of virtual and concrete elements to make sense of daily life. As Shields has argued, the digitally virtual is “embedded in the

ongoing life of the concrete” and is “an important extension of the notions of reality and the context of action” (Shields, 2003: 79).

Actualizing gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital space

Now that the status of the virtual and its relationship to digital and physical space has been clarified, we are in a better position to evaluate the performances of gender, sexuality and embodiment on the four online platforms discussed in the previous chapters. As a start, it now makes sense to conceive of gender and sexuality as ‘virtual’ phenomena: they are not concrete, materially existing entities, but rather constitute a variety of experiences, desires and regulatory ideals that are repeatedly *actualized* in material-discursive practices. In this way, senses of embodiment can also be understood as being virtual, since the experience of one’s body depends on a multitude of psychological, cultural, and medical practices and thus cannot be located within a stable ‘natural’ body (Lim and Browne, 2009; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Colebrook, 2000). This is one of the central arguments in Butler’s theory of gender performativity, discussed in chapter five, and has been taken up in less abstract terms by McNay, who perceives gender and sexuality as ‘lived social relations’ that have to be continually renegotiated (McNay, 2004). The case studies gathered in this dissertation have shown how these ‘lived social relations’ extend into digital space, where they are renegotiated within, and made possible by, hybrid assemblages of embodied users, cultural discourses, and media technologies. These assemblages produce digital configurations of embodied gender and sexuality that qualitatively differ from actualizations in physical space, while at the same time retaining an intimate relationship to one another.

When we recall, from chapter three, the ways that participants employed the text-based digital space of IRC to invoke various textual incarnations of their gendered and sexualized bodies, it is crucial to notice how these specific performative practices only become possible through their embedding within the sociotechnical assemblage of embodied participants, IRC software, computer hardware, and discourses of gender and sexuality. Consequently, it is of vital importance to underline that the media technologies that facilitate the interactions on IRC become an integral part of how users experience their bodies, gender, and sexuality. These ‘virtual’ experiences extend beyond their conventional associations with the physical body into the textual space of IRC, where they produce digital ‘bodies of text’ that cannot be understood as mimetic copies of the ‘real thing’, but rather, as Friedberg reminds us, work to transfer gender and sexuality “from one plane of meaning or appearance to another” (Friedberg, 2006: 11 – see above quote). In this sense, the textual imagery on IRC

acquires an agency of its own, as participants effectively and affectively interact with one another's textual incarnations, rather than experiencing 'immediate' contact: the medium *is* the experience (Van Dijck, 2007).

The other case studies have similarly demonstrated that the assemblage of embodied users, media technologies, and cultural practices, or what Manovich (2001) has called the 'cultural interface', fundamentally shapes the ways that users perform their embodied gender and sexual identities. As has been noted in the postscript to chapter five, the performative practices that constituted this particular group of MySpace Friends could only be accomplished *because of* their incorporation of the network technology offered by MySpace, revealing the material aspects of any 'durable' performative act (Latour, 2005). At the same time, the network technology was shaped by these performative practices, as the members articulated their digitally material friendship links through various forms of gendered and sexualized affection. One could thus say these 'flows of affection' produced the network as such. Within these flows, the members feature both as subject and object of gendered desire as they exchange comments and write each other's 'digital body' into being (see chapter five). Unlike the textual bodies constructed on IRC, these bodies consist of an amalgamation of (hyper)text, photographs and appropriated webcam images, making the link to their physical counterparts more explicit. Yet like the textual bodies on IRC, the embodied digital objects on MySpace conjure up an 'iconic presence' that is not just a copy of the absent 'real' physical self but exerts a sense of agency within the network (Belting, 2005). It is through this combination of textual and 'iconic' comment exchanges that the group members experience and perform their embodied affection for one another, producing digital conceptions of the gendered and sexualized self/other that are highly specific to the techno-social assemblage in which they arise. In this assemblage, gender, sexuality and embodiment are reconfigured by the new ways in which they are visualized and enacted, which allows users to perceive them as 'virtual' practices rather than properties rooted in a stable physical body.

The MySpace study shows the boundary-transgressing potential of this interlacing of media technologies, cultural/discursive practices, and embodied users, which all figure as agents, or 'mediators', that shape one another within a network that extends from physical into digital space and back again. These practices suggest that it is becoming increasingly more difficult to separate bodies, gender, and sexuality from the technological networks that give them meaning and form. Conversely, (media) technologies cannot be apprehended without accounting for the embodied and gendered use cultures that imbue them with significance by mobilizing them within larger everyday networks –

both virtual and concrete. This, then, poses serious questions concerning the notions of (gendered) human subjectivity and its boundaries. Where does the human body end and technology begin? If the experience and performance of the gendered body can extend into non-physical spaces, where is subjectivity located? Is it enough to speak of a singular 'human agency'? Given the inextricable relations between humans and machines, in these cases represented by new media technologies, it might be more useful to think in terms of 'distributed agency', which recognizes agency as being allocated to human as well as non-human actors that depend on each other for their respective efficacy (Van Dijck, 2007). Additionally, it would be productive to approach the performative practices in these online platforms as everyday 'posthuman' activities in which gender and sexuality do not solely belong to the territory of the sovereign human body, but can be 'deterritorialized' by enabling their virtual potential in digital space (Wegenstein, 2006; Munster, 2006; Hayles, 1999; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). This does not imply an anti-human perspective, let alone signal any 'end of humanity' or 'death of the body', but merely acknowledges the ways in which the ever-increasing amount of technological mediators that surround us have radically expanded our experience of what it means to be 'human' (Thrift, 2007).²

However, in contrast to the MySpace study, the other three case studies indicate that the complex new ways in which gender, sexuality, and embodiment are reconfigured within contemporary sociotechnical networks do not necessarily entail a break with their traditional and essentialist articulations. Despite the fact that the cultural practices on IRC, YouPorn, and Dutch weblogs are already deeply embedded in the media technologies that grant them their shape and durability, the previous chapters show that these performances remain ardently attached to conventional humanist notions of gender, sexuality and embodiment. In other words, rendering gender and sexuality 'virtual' again, by detaching them from any essential foundation in the 'human' body and reassembling their figuration in digital media practices, does not automatically result in subversive performances. It is exactly the 'virtual', immaterial quality of gender and sexuality as regulatory schemas that enables their persistence and 'reterritorialization' through a diverse range of actualizations in both physical and digital space.

As demonstrated in chapter six, the immaterial agency of a normative 'pornoscript' delineates the ways that gender and sexuality are visualized in the user-generated amateur videos on YouPorn. Rather than mobilizing technologies such as video cameras, webcams, editing software and the YouPorn

platform to produce and distribute alternative visualizations of sex and gender, this sociotechnical network is predominantly employed to perpetuate a scopoc regime in which gender and sexual pleasure are firmly tied to a heteronormative body. To be sure, it is unlikely that the ‘performers’ appearing in the clips are also the ones who edit these videos and upload them to YouPorn, or that they are even ‘actual’ amateurs (see chapter six). Yet what matters here is that they are all interconnected within the extended network of people and technologies that eventually produces the images of ‘real amateur sex’ available on the YouPorn interface. This study shows the importance of this network, which integrates normative gender schemas, new media practices, and pornographic representational strategies to visually construct a conservative image of gender and sexuality.

These normative gender schemas also play a pivotal role in the interactions on IRC (chapter three) and the posts on the Dutch weblogs (chapter four). While both platforms facilitate the creation of user-generated content, their technological capacities and user practices radically diverge, bringing forth different performances of gender and sexuality. At the same time, the two case studies propose that these performances similarly reproduce a traditional gender discourse that functions as a foundation for making sense of the interactions and representations of self in digital space. In the case of the Dutch weblogs, the combination of the blogs’ technological affordances and the ways the authors put them to use resulted in multiple performances of masculinity and femininity, which were accomplished through the incorporation of different (hyper)textual and pictorial artifacts. Moreover, the female bloggers’ biographical practices challenged the masculine connotations of weblogs in media discourses. Still, the authors adhered to their conventional, everyday experiences of gender identity which they extended into the digital space of their weblog. Users’ reliance on traditional gender schemas, combined with the weblog’s function as a technology to publicly narrate one’s daily life, thus limited the potential to resignify common conceptions of gender and embodiment.

Although the text-based channels on IRC lack the ‘image objects’ available to weblog users, and their main purpose is to facilitate real-time interaction instead of reflective diary writing, the ‘virtual’ agency of gender and sexuality as regulatory institutions was likewise reified in these spaces. In both the ‘straight’ and ‘gay’ channels, users constructed textual bodies that often conjured up a stereotypical image of their physical bodies. While the embodied identities written into being in #Queer extended heteronormative notions of masculinity, the users still rejected any attempts to transgress commonly held ideals about the gay masculine body and its sexuality. These shared ideas about the ‘correct’

formations of gender and sexuality produced cohesive yet dynamic social bonds, which were effectively *actualized* through the creation and maintenance of the two digitally material IRC channels. This again underscores that it is indispensable to account for both user practices and technical affordances when investigating new media cultures.

Boundary work

Aside from being virtual, these digital spaces are littered with the material traces of embodiment, in the form of the various textual, pictorial, and cinematic artifacts that are employed to perform gender and sexual identities. In this way, everyday (inter)actions are *materialized* in digital space. From the discussion above, a paradox arises: on the one hand, these digital actualizations of embodied subjectivity reconfigure the way that gender and sexuality can be visually articulated, reassembling their relation to one another and the bodies they have traditionally been associated with. Consequently, the everyday performative practices that take place in the various platforms featuring user-generated content ask us to reassess the boundaries between the virtual and the material, the social and the technical, as well as the increasingly porous borders between gendered bodies and media technologies which mutually shape each other's formations. On the other hand, these same practices request that we do not forget about the perseverance of conventional norms concerning gender and sexuality, which different use cultures utilize as organizing principles to make sense of their digital performances. In spite of the 'prosthetic potential' offered by the media technologies that embed users in their everyday lives, bodily integrity and the boundaries it necessitates are far from becoming irrelevant in digital space (Wajcman, 2004). On the contrary, three of the four case studies in this dissertation suggest that the majority of users mobilize the sociotechnical possibilities of these platforms to reinforce, rather than experiment with, established boundaries that designate the 'appropriate' place for bodies and technologies, leaving the changing conditions of embodied gender and sexual identity largely uncomplicated.

Eventually, it would be a mistake to favor either cultural norms or technological affordances as the 'dominant agency' in these online practices. The case studies have made clear that the performance of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in user-generated content is often a highly contingent accomplishment, in which cultural norms are not enacted in any straightforward manner. Instead of being simple intermediaries, new media technologies act as 'mediators' that translate common cultural notions in different and unforeseen ways (Latour, 2005). In turn, as cultural practices adopt new media technologies

they continue to redefine their very function and identity. Over 30 years ago, Raymond Williams characterized a medium as a 'material social practice', a set of techniques, habits, tools, and conventions (Williams, 1977; Mitchell, 2005). Perhaps it is useful to apply this same definition to gender, sexuality, and embodiment, which can be equally comprehended as ongoing performative processes that involve the incorporation of both material and socio-symbolic (virtual) components. In these processes, the aforementioned boundaries will repeatedly be crossed, but this does not mean that the borders will soon become obsolete.

Body, media, memory: gender performance and the networked archive

Authors such as Belting (2005) and Wegenstein (2006) have also questioned the boundaries that delineate the human body, asserting that this body is itself a 'living medium'; a productive site that mediates between the public and the private, the personal and the collective/cultural, and between the discursive and the material. One particular location where these 'opposing' spheres are negotiated is the embodied memory, in which their mutual encroachments are continually worked out as people interact with, and attempt to make sense of, their socio-material lifeworld. As such, memory is never merely private/personal or public/cultural but mediates between these spheres as it appropriates and invests itself in objects that 'externalize' memories, transforming them in the process. It could thus be said that embodied memory is extended through the everyday practice of producing 'mediated memories'. According to Van Dijck, mediated memories are "the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies for creating and re-creating a sense of our past, present, and future selves in relation to others" (Van Dijck, 2007: 170-1). In the past, these memory objects mainly existed of photographs, home videos, diaries entries, and other analogue media artifacts. Like the embodied memory to which they are connected, these objects continually straddle the line between intentions of private/personal use and the possibilities of sharing them with a larger public/cultural realm. However, with the advent of new media technologies and the concurrent digitization of media objects, the scale on which these tensions are played out and the possibilities for their incorporation into communicative practices have dramatically increased. Contemporary web-based platforms that facilitate the distribution of user-generated content, such as the ones examined in this dissertation, are profoundly reassembling the interconnections between embodied memory, media technology, communication, and (gender) identity formation (Van Dijck, 2007).

In fact, all the performances that were examined in the previous chapters simultaneously function as digital memory objects (textual, pictorial, and cinematic) that could only be employed in these case studies because they were stored in online networked databases and made accessible through their respective 'cultural interfaces'. In the case of the Dutch weblogs, this cultural interface evokes the functionality of their analogue predecessor, the diary, which results in the creation of online 'diary entries' in the form of blog posts. At the same time, however, this is where the analogy ends, since the specific techno-social assemblage of the weblog generates different practices than those made possible by the traditional diary. As became evident in chapter four, the bloggers perform multiple versions of their gender identity while simultaneously communicating personal experiences to an imaginary audience of readers. The weblog here constitutes a mutable archive containing multiple digital memory objects, which concurrently feature as the performative resources for the articulation of identity in digital space. On the weblog, more than in the diary, private and personal experiences of gender become publicly and culturally mediated memories whose entanglements with digital media technology shape the way bloggers remember, and thus retroactively experience, their gendered and embodied selves.

These tendencies become even more pronounced on MySpace, especially with respect to the communicative aspects of mediated memories. In chapter five it was already noted how the networked MySpace profiles can be understood as an assemblage of online archives containing the gendered and sexualized performances of a particular group of friends. Additionally, the study showed how some members of the network ironically used the comments as reflective diary entries on their friends' profiles. On MySpace, these friends are engaged in the collective performance of shared memories, whose 'virtual' presence is actualized in the various digital memory objects that are distributed through the network. As discussed above, this distribution assumes different formations as it is continually being reassembled within the 'flows' of mutual affection. The predominance of this group's affective practices suggests that 'technologies of the self' can be developed into 'technologies of affect' that reinforce social ties (Van Dijck, 2007; Thrift, 2007). Moreover, since the articulations of affect are so thoroughly mediated by the cultural interface of MySpace, one could propose that the group members are developing affective relationships with the digital technology itself. The close connection between self, medium, and other in this network implies the instability of the boundaries between reflective writing and social interaction, identity performance and affective communication, and between being an author and an actor on MySpace (see chapter 5). Finally, the

study demonstrated that 'technologies of self', in addition to becoming 'technologies of affect', also function as 'technologies of gender' (De Lauretis, 1987). By mobilizing social network technology to recollect and discuss their physical encounters, these friends not only reconfigure the form of collective and affective memory, but also performatively shape the shared memory objects through which their embodied gender and sexual identities are articulated.

These practices evoke the question of sexual/intimate citizenship raised in chapter six. When the Dutch blogger Jetty writes about her fears of being exposed while swimming, after having undergone a mastectomy, or when the MySpace friends discuss each others' sexual exploits, they are actively (although not always intentionally) engaging with intimate memories in spaces that occupy a liminal position between the public and the private. In this sense, these platforms allow them to exercise their sexual citizenship by reflectively working out personal issues that would otherwise often remain hidden in the privacy of their direct social circles, effectively extending their support base and potential audience. However, not every platform that facilitates the distribution of mediated memories also generates emancipatory practices, as became clear in the YouPorn study. The amateur porn videos discussed in chapter six contain recordings of sexual performances and could therefore also be understood as cinematic memory objects that are uploaded, stored, and distributed through the cultural interface of YouPorn. In this way, the ostensibly 'private' sexual content of the videos is transferred to the public domain of the internet and becomes part of its pornographic visual culture.³ Digital memory objects that recall intimate practices are thus integrated into an extensive techno-social archive, where they are appropriated and added to communal (re)collections. While these activities do manage to dislocate mundane sexual practices from the temporality and privacy of the bedroom, I have argued in chapter six how the resulting representations mainly perpetuate the gendered visual order prescribed by the mainstream porn industry. As such, YouPorn facilitates a user-generated expansion of conventional pornographic visuality, rather than serving as a platform where users engage in reflexive sexual citizenship.

Although the 'real-time' interactions on IRC initially seem to be an unlikely occasion for the production of mediated memories, due to its ephemeral quality, the conversations that take place in the channels still acquire a sense of persistence and traceability due to the option of logging entire chat sessions. This creates the opportunity for users to return to past conversations in order to ensure a sense of continuity while interactively constructing personal and collective identities through textual communication. Thus, instead of being strictly transient textual artifacts, these 'bodies of text' become more durable and

are able to function as mediated memories in the process of (re)assembling gender and sexual identities within a personal narrative framework. Like the weblog and MySpace, IRC merges practices of recollection, communication and identity formation, reshaping the way people experience and perform their past, present, and future selves in relation to others. As discussed above, these performances are intricately tied up to understandings of gender, sexuality, and embodiment, which are in turn increasingly mediated by digital technologies. Still, a crucial difference between IRC and the other platforms discussed here is that the textual conversations on IRC can only be logged on personal hard drives, instead of being archived in web-based, networked databases. This means that while the logged conversations can function as mediated memories for individual users, they do not allow for the *shared recollection and alteration* of digital memory objects, which constitutes a vital practice available to the Dutch bloggers and MySpace Friends. In contrast to digital spaces like MySpace, IRC lacks a collective sense of ‘enduring materiality’, which means that users have to reproduce themselves and their temporal environment every time they enter a channel (Slater, 2002: 233).

7.3 — *Taking inventory: research contributions*

The previous section discussed some theoretical inferences that follow from comparing and contrasting the outcomes of the four case studies, implicitly invoking the theoretical contributions of this dissertation. In this section, I make these matters more explicit by summing up the research contributions on an empirical, methodological, and theoretical level.

This dissertation has offered a comparative empirical analysis of the ways that gender, sexuality, and embodiment are performed on four different platforms featuring user-generated content. Instead of a singular focus on identity performance in text-based CMC, or concentrating on gendered reflexive writing on weblogs, this project has addressed and evaluated a broad range of user practices: synchronous textual communication, blogging, social networking, and video-sharing. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, these practices generate different forms of content that range from digital (hyper)text to (moving) images and their various intersections, creating distinct performances of identity, sociality, and memory. This comparative analytical approach has thus produced valuable situated knowledge about the ways that gender, sexuality and embodiment are mutually performed in specific digital spaces, thereby providing an important empirical and interdisciplinary contribution to the fields of gender studies, (new) media studies, CMC research, and digital culture studies.

In addition, the methods employed to examine these different digital spaces were specifically designed to meet the demands of their particular user practices and technological facilities. Rather than opting for a standardized set of methods, each case study has followed an iterative approach that acknowledged the specific possibilities and limits of the digital architectures it needed to adapt to. This approach also recognized that these digital spaces have multiple coinciding functions: they are at once research environments; settings for social (inter)action and identity performance; in addition to serving as analytical material (Markham, 2004). The resulting combinations of discursive and visual analysis have been able to trace the digitally material artifacts that the users produced and distributed to accomplish their social, representational, and affective practices, and have connected these performances to broader issues regarding gender and sexuality. As such, through the innovative design and combination of online methods, this dissertation has made a vital methodological contribution to the study of new media culture, which continually needs to develop new ways of investigating an ever-evolving research landscape.

It is often noted that internet technologies play an increasingly central role in people's everyday practices and are becoming more and more integrated into the social fabric of daily life in contemporary postindustrial societies. However, as mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation, it is one thing to signal these processes and another to empirically analyze and understand their precise dynamics. The case studies included here have collectively provided such an analysis, elucidating the situated ways in which internet applications are used in the performance of gender, sexuality, and embodiment. It was shown that any dichotomy between the offline and online world, between physical and digital space, and between the real and the virtual cannot be taken for granted when doing research on digital cultures on the internet. The performance of gender and sexuality and embodiment in digital space employs both virtual and material elements from daily life, incorporating internet technologies to mediate between bodies behind the screen and their 'virtual' counterparts made up of digitally material artifacts that supplant the body's physical absence. Thus, instead of assuming a schism between two realms, this dissertation has demonstrated how these users are negotiating an everyday flow of material and virtual/symbolic practices that runs from offline to online environments and back again. These findings not only constitute an important empirical contribution to the fields mentioned above, but also comprise valuable theoretical insights that should instigate scholars in these fields to rethink the relationships between the virtual and the material in everyday life, wherever this life occurs and proceeds.

Similarly, these outcomes should stimulate future interdisciplinary research on gender and digital culture to further investigate how situated user practices relate to questions of agency, virtuality, and space (both physical and digital), as the new media technologies they are entangled with become more and more ubiquitous.

7.4 — *Looking forward: recommendations for future research*

Finally, then, I would like to suggest some avenues for such future research, particularly those potential paths and alleyways that constitute fruitful extensions of the matters of concern raised in this dissertation. As has been argued in this final chapter, performances of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital spaces incorporate both virtual and (digitally) material elements, continually bridging the ostensible gap between the offline and the online. In this way, users make their performances more meaningful, durable, and 'real'. Future projects should advance the study of this interplay between the virtual and the material, as well as the physical and the digital, and investigate how people employ and experience these elements in the various spaces they traverse and inhabit. These projects would examine how gender, sexuality, and embodiment are alternately (re)configured as they trace people's everyday movements in and between digital and physical spaces as diverse as offices, dance floors, Twitter, shopping malls, airport lounges, and World of Warcraft. By extending its scope beyond the digital spaces of the internet, this kind of research would be able to illuminate the connections between different forms of gendered (new) media use, while at the same time following the trajectories and practices of non-users. It is important to remember that there are still large numbers of people who are not included in the many digital networks on the internet, either by choice or not, and new research projects should not let these groups be eclipsed by the radiating popularity of online participatory culture (Wyatt, 2003, 2005; Wyatt, Thomas & Terranova, 2002). Yet even though the various digitally virtual spaces of the internet remain uncharted territory for most non-users, they nevertheless traverse many other spaces that are made up of both virtual and material elements, which together provide the conditions for the situated performance of gender, sexuality, and embodiment. It is these situated performances, whose dynamics are perpetuated by a continuous flux of people, objects, and events, that need to be thoroughly accounted for if we want to understand the complex and ever-changing ways in which gender, sexuality, and embodiment are at once "materially real, socially regulated, and discursively constructed" (Hayles, 1999: 291). The concept of 'the virtual', its relationship to material spaces and objects

(both digital and physical), and their mutual shaping of everyday 'reality' are indispensable pillars on which such accounts can be produced.

In addition to tracing people's movements through various digital and physical spaces and examining the situated practices that arise from such movements, future research should also trace the connections between the architectural affordances of these spaces and questions of ownership. As discussed in chapter two, the production and distribution of user-generated content increasingly takes place on internet platforms that are owned by multinational corporations. Similarly, physical spaces that previously belonged to the public domain have become incorporated into corporate spheres of influence (for instance, in the case of the Sony Center on the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin).

These developments in spatial ownership raise important questions about the ways that corporate decisions regarding architectural design, planning, and order are implemented on the level of everyday spatial practices and how these policies circumscribe embodied performances of gender and sexuality in these spaces. For instance, how are gendered spatial relations affected by limitations set on certain digital and physical spaces, such as 'members only' access policies in clubs or chat rooms, or other kinds of spatial restrictions, segmentations, and 'crowd control'? Additionally, future studies should address how people actively negotiate the specific architectural affordances of these branded spaces through their virtual and material practices and interactions with other inhabitants (both objects and people). Do these negotiations, in light of the recent rise of so-called 'participatory culture' (see chapter one), reshape the notion of spatial ownership and branding? What are the gendered and sexual dimensions of these practices? It is evident that the relationship between architecture and spatial ownership represents a crucial yet under-researched element in the study of everyday gender performance, social interaction, and other cultural practices taking place in digital and physical environments.

Notes

¹ In this sense, the idea(l) of 'cyberspace' as disembodied refuge follows a long historical trajectory that can be characterized by the desire to transcend the earthly trappings of the material world: from early Gnostic spirituality, via Romantic Idealism, to abstract art, the longing to free the 'spirit/idea' from its body has been a recurring leitmotiv for centuries of Western history.

² This is also the reason why I have opted for Hayles' concept of the 'posthuman', instead of Haraway's 'cyborg', to make sense of these online performative practices. Whereas the cyborg was mainly intended as a provocative theoretical postulate pertaining to the context of the developments

within the natural sciences, the notion of the 'posthuman' relates more closely to everyday engagements with ICTs (Wajcman, 2004; Hayles, 1999; Haraway, 1991).

³ Even though most of these videos may have been manufactured with the intent to distribute them online and thus cannot be understood to originate from a strictly 'private' context, the sexual practices and the way they are visualized appeal to a sense of authentic intimacy. In other words, these videos perform a sense of private sexual conduct, with the viewer as 'voyeur'.

Afterword

As discussed in chapter one of this dissertation, I have adopted a social constructionist research approach that takes into account the material dimensions of social construction, in addition to its symbolic and discursive aspects. Yet, as the reader may have gathered from the previous chapters (and my reflections in the postscripts), this ‘material awareness’ only gradually became part of my research perspective. In this sense, the ‘representational model’, which initially framed my thinking about gendered, sexualized and embodied performances in digital spaces, was slowly but surely augmented by something that could be called a ‘material-performative’ model. This entailed a reconfiguration of my understanding of what exactly was taking place in these spaces and what it was that made these performances so interesting and worthwhile to investigate. Instead of only focusing on practices of signification and symbolic interaction, I started thinking about how these practices and processes related to the spatial conditions of digital environments. This, in turn, necessitated a more pronounced acknowledgement of the sociotechnical and affective dimensions of online gender performances, which is what I have tried to achieve in the postscripts and the concluding chapter.

I sincerely hope that this ‘epistemological transition’ will not be perceived as somehow contrived or otherwise ill-conceived. Rather than retrospectively attaching a new theoretical framework to the finished studies, I consider these studies to still be very much alive and vibrant with possibilities for revision and renewal¹. As I revisited the studies and went through my notes and annotations in an attempt to start writing the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I became increasingly aware of their ‘untapped’ potential. This potential was, by definition, virtually present but had yet to be actualized. As such, the addition of the postscripts and the theoretical inferences postulated in the concluding chapter should be understood in the context of my aspiration to actualize these studies’ virtual potential, by making certain matters more ‘concrete’ in retrospect. As stated above, this has been accomplished by supplementing the existing

research with a perspective that is more sensitive to the ways in which gendered, sexualized and embodied “matter comes to matter” in digital spaces (Barad, 2003).

Notes

¹I therefore consider the published versions, which appear in this dissertation, to be just one incarnation in these studies’ ongoing lives in which they negate any attempt at foreclosure.

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Nederlandse samenvatting

(Dutch summary)

Introductie

Genderidentiteit, ofwel de ervaring man, vrouw, of iets daar tussenin te zijn, is een zeer belangrijk onderdeel van ons dagelijks leven. Denk alleen al aan de manier waarop we ons elke dag weer kleden, bewegen en introduceren, of hoe we ons gedragen in gezelschap van vrienden, familie en collega's. Bij het merendeel van deze (inter)acties speelt de representatie van mannelijkheid en vrouwelijkheid een grote rol. Wanneer we het hebben over de representatie van genderidentiteit is het vervolgens noodzakelijk om ook aandacht te besteden aan seksualiteit en lichamelijkeheid. Gender en seksualiteit hangen in onze samenleving op 'heteronormatieve' wijze met elkaar samen: 'echte' mannen horen zich mannelijk te gedragen en vallen dus *normaal* gesproken op vrouwen, terwijl 'echte' vrouwen zich vrouwelijk horen te gedragen en daarbij *verondersteld* worden op mannen te vallen. Zo wordt zichtbaar hoe een heersende heteroseksuele norm ervoor zorgt dat mannen/mannelijkheid en vrouwen/vrouwelijkheid eerst oppositioneel van elkaar worden gescheiden om vervolgens samen te komen in de 'natuurlijke twee-eenheid' van het heterokoppel. Met andere woorden, heteroseksualiteit vormt een sociale norm die de gender dichotomie 'man- vrouw' naturaliseert en in stand houdt. Ook het lichaam speelt een belangrijke rol in dit naturalisatieproces, waarin de beleving van genderidentiteit wordt gekoppeld aan het 'geseksueerde' lichaam: mannen zijn mannelijk *omdat* zij een lichaam met mannelijke geslachtskenmerken bezitten en vrouwen zijn vrouwelijk *indien* zij een lichaam met vrouwelijke geslachtskenmerken hebben (en *alleen dan* zijn zij volledig als vrouw dan wel als man te beschouwen). Wanneer we ons tevens bedenken dat seksuele verlangens en praktijken meestal een sterk lichamenteel karakter hebben, wordt duidelijk dat gender, seksualiteit en lichamenteelikeheid innig met elkaar zijn verbonden. Samen vormen zij drie belangrijke elementen in de alledaagse beleving en representatie, ofwel 'performance', van identiteit binnen onze sociale omgeving.

Maar wat nu wanneer deze ‘performance’ van identiteit plaatsvindt in een omgeving waar het fysieke lichaam niet direct aanwezig is en iemands gender en seksualiteit dus niet kan worden afgeleid uit de lichamelijke kenmerken die men anders ziet, hoort en voelt? Dit proefschrift onderzoekt hoe de performance van gender, seksualiteit en lichamelijkeheid tot stand komt op het internet, waar mensen kunnen werken, ontspannen en socialiseren zonder fysiek in dezelfde ruimte te verkeren. Gedurende de laatste jaren zijn steeds meer mensen gebruik gaan maken van het internet, mede vanwege de enorme populariteit van websites zoals YouTube, MySpace, Facebook en Twitter. Deze zogenaamde ‘Web 2.0’ applicaties hebben gebruikers de mogelijkheid gegeven om op een simpele manier digitale inhoud (in de vorm van tekst, foto’s en video’s) online te zetten en zo zelf vorm te geven aan hun internet omgeving. Deze inhoud, ook wel ‘user-generated content’ (UGC) genoemd, kan bovendien worden gedeeld met anderen via de sociale netwerken die gebruikers op de verschillende sites opbouwen. Hoewel het voor internetgebruikers altijd al mogelijk was om tekst en beeldmateriaal online te verspreiden (denk maar aan email, chat en homepages), hebben diverse technologische en economische ontwikkelingen zoals de toename van snelle, goedkope internetverbindingen en de vergroting van zowel de capaciteit als het gebruiksgemak van hedendaags ‘Web 2.0’ applicaties geleid tot een enorme stijging van UGC op het internet. Er kan dan ook worden geconstateerd dat een steeds groter deel van onze dagelijkse sociale activiteiten zich afspeelt in de genetwerkte digitale ruimtes van het internet, waar we foto’s uitwisselen, video’s uploaden en bekijken, weblogs bijhouden en sociale netwerken creëren. In deze praktijken zullen gender, seksualiteit en lichamelijkeheid vermoedelijk een belangrijke rol blijven spelen, maar op wat voor manier? In dit proefschrift wordt zodoende antwoord gegeven op de volgende onderzoeksvraag:

Hoe worden gender, seksualiteit en lichamelijkeheid ‘performed’ op internet platforms waar user-generated content centraal staat?

Aan de hand van een literatuurstudie en vier verschillende case studies wordt deze vraag beantwoord. In deze samenvatting zal iedere studie eerst apart worden besproken, voordat in de samengevatte conclusie alle resultaten samen worden geëvalueerd.

Studie 1: Nadenken over gender en het internet: verleden, heden en toekomst

De eerste studie bestaat uit een bespreking en evaluatie van de literatuur over gender en het internet die sinds de vroege jaren ’90 is verschenen. Het

voornaamste doel van deze studie is om de lezer bekend te maken met de belangrijkste ideeën en onderwerpen uit dit specifieke vakgebied. Hoewel de bespreking zeker niet alle studies en onderwerpen behandelt, biedt het een perspectief op de manier waarop de relatie tussen gender en het internet is bediscussieerd in de academische literatuur van de laatste twee decennia. Het belangrijkste argument dat in deze studie uiteen wordt gezet is dat het onderzoeksveld grofweg verdeeld kan worden in drie invalshoeken: een benadering die gender conceptualiseert als een aspect van online identiteitsconstructie, een benadering die gender behandelt als onderdeel van sociaal-economische structuren van internetgebruik en toegang, en een benadering die focust op de wederzijdse vormgeving van gender en digitale technologieën zoals het internet. Aan de hand van een evaluatie van diverse studies wordt betoogd dat de eerste twee benaderingen vaak gender-essentialistische en/of technologisch-deterministische neigingen bevatten die de gesitueerde, lichamelijke en alledaagse ervaringen van internetgebruikers over het hoofd zien. De derde benadering bestrijdt deze neigingen door de nadruk te leggen op de verschillende praktijken en ruimtes waarin gender en internettechnologie elkaar beïnvloeden en vormgeven. De drie benaderingen worden vervolgens beoordeeld in relatie tot hun respectievelijke waarde en relevantie voor toekomstige studies naar zogenaamde ‘Web 2.0’ internetapplicaties, waarmee digitale inhoud kan worden gedeeld door gebruikers. Uiteindelijk wordt geconcludeerd dat de sociale en technische aspecten van Web 2.0 applicaties niet voor een breuk zorgen met de erkende onderzoekstraditie binnen het vakgebied, maar dat zij eerder dezelfde soort vragen zullen oproepen. Deze vragen zullen echter opnieuw moeten worden geformuleerd op een manier die recht doet aan de culturele, technologische en economische omstandigheden van onze huidige tijd. Op deze manier biedt deze literatuurstudie een historische achtergrond voor de vier empirische case studies die volgen, waarbij zij tevens gepositioneerd worden in een breder onderzoekslandschap.

Studie 2: Een lichaam van tekst

De eerste empirische case studie onderzoekt hoe de bezoekers van twee verschillende IRC ‘kanalen’ hun lichamelijke genderidentiteit performen in relatie tot hun seksuele identificaties en verlangens. IRC is een van de eerste op tekst gebaseerde chatprogramma’s op het internet, waar mensen onder een pseudoniem (een ‘nickname’) met elkaar kunnen converseren in een grote diversiteit aan chatruimtes, ook wel ‘kanalen’ genoemd. Iedere bezoeker kan vervolgens ook zelf kanalen aanmaken en mensen uitnodigen om in zijn of haar

kanaal te socialiseren. Deze vergelijkende case studie focust op twee kanalen: een die voornamelijk wordt bevolkt door heteroseksuele bezoekers en een die speciaal in het leven is geroepen voor en door homoseksuele mannen. Aangezien deze kanalen alleen uit tekst bestaan is het hier dus de vraag hoe de bezoekers van beide kanalen hun gender, seksualiteit en lichamelijke performen via tekstuele interacties zonder dat deze vergezeld worden van grafisch materiaal. Door middel van een discoursanalyse van de conversaties gedurende een periode van vijf weken zijn drie 'interpretatieve repertoires' geïdentificeerd: het 'echte lichaam' repertoire, het 'fallische' repertoire en het 'fysieke bewegingsrepertoire'. Al deze repertoires bevatten referenties naar de lichamelijke aspecten van gender en seksualiteit in het alledaagse leven van de bezoekers, hetgeen suggereert dat het lichaam en lichamelijke een belangrijke rol speelt in de tekstuele identiteitsperformances in beide kanalen. Deze herhaaldelijke referenties aan alledaagse lichamelijke leiden echter tot een bevestiging van de veronderstelde connectie tussen gender en het binair geseksueerde lichaam, wat vervolgens zorgt voor een inperking van de mogelijke alternatieve gender performances in deze digitale, tekstuele kanalen. Dit geldt voor zowel het 'hetero' als het 'homo' kanaal. Uiteindelijk wordt geconcludeerd dat het discours in beide kanalen wordt geconstrueerd door bezoekers die hun alledaagse lichamelijke ervaringen meenemen naar een online omgeving, in dit geval IRC. IRC mag dan een tekstuele omgeving zijn, in tegenstelling tot de meeste hedendaagse grafische ruimtes op het internet, maar dit betekent niet dat het lichaam minder aanwezig is. Conventionele opvattingen over het geseksueerde lichaam structureren en limiteren ook hier de performances van gender en seksualiteit.

Studie 3: Schrijven vanuit ervaring

De tweede empirische case studie concentreert zich op de manier waarom Nederlandse en Vlaamse weblog auteurs via tekstuele en visuele middelen hun online genderidentiteit performen. Daarnaast wordt gekeken naar hoe deze vormen van zelfpresentatie zich verhouden tot het onderzoeksgebied dat zich richt op gender en 'computer-mediated communication' (CMC). Als derde aspect van deze studie wordt onderzocht hoe deze praktijken vormgeven aan de genderidentiteit van de weblog als traditioneel mannelijke technologie. Op deze manier combineert de studie een focus op online identiteitsformatie met een onderzoeksperspectief dat ontvankelijk is voor de wederzijdse vorming van gender en nieuwe media technologie. Na een descriptieve analyse van een sample van honderd Nederlandse en Vlaamse weblogs, waarin de demografische gegevens van iedere weblog auteur zijn beschreven, zijn vier van deze 'blogs' onderworpen aan een kwalitatieve inhoudsanalyse. Uit deze analyse blijkt dat de

weblog auteurs (twee mannen en twee vrouwen) hun genderidentiteit performen door middel van tekstuele en visuele narratieven die alledaagse lichamelijke praktijken beschrijven, welke nauw gerelateerd blijven aan het traditionele binaire gendersysteem. Toch blijken deze performances van mannelijkheid en vrouwelijkheid meer diffuus en heterogeen dan sommige onderzoekers in het onderzoeksveld van gender en CMC hiervoor hebben verondersteld. Bovendien wordt beargumenteerd dat de traditioneel vrouwelijke praktijk van het dagboek bijhouden, die op deze weblogs sterk terug is te vinden, kan worden gezien als een bestrijding van het idee dat de weblog een mannelijke communicatietechnologie is. Dit demonstreert vervolgens dat het alledaagse gebruik van mediatechnologieën cruciaal is voor de manier waarop deze technologieën worden geïnterpreteerd als mannelijk of vrouwelijk.

Studie 4: De banden die binden

De volgende case studie richt de aandacht op MySpace; een van de meest populaire sociale netwerksites ter wereld. De studie onderzoekt hoe een groep Nederlandse MySpace vrienden, wiens profielen onderling aan elkaar gelinked zijn, binnen hun netwerk gebruik maken van tekstuele en visuele artefacten (zoals digitale foto's en hyperlinks) om zo hun genderidentiteit, seksualiteit en vriendschappen te performen. Hiervoor zijn gedurende een periode van vijf weken alle verzonden 'comments' binnen dit vriendennetwerk verzameld (comments zijn multimediale opmerkingen die door vrienden op elkaars profiel worden geplaatst). De studie concentreert zich voornamelijk op de relatie tussen affectieve netwerken, diverse vormen van grensoverschrijding en gender performance. Uit de analyse van de comments blijkt dat in dit specifieke netwerk de uitingen van genegenheid en liefde door alle vrienden onderling worden verspreid, wat een wederkerige golf van meervormig verlangen teweeg brengt. Dit zorgt er vervolgens voor dat de heteroseksuele gendernormen die gelden in onze samenleving herhaaldelijk worden ondermijnd. Er wordt geconcludeerd dat de leden van dit vriendennetwerk gebruik maken van ironische en grensoverschrijdende stijlmiddelen, in de vorm van digitale tekst en beelden, om zo erkend te worden als lid van de groep en tegelijkertijd op een performatieve manier hun sociale netwerk vorm te geven. Deze vormgeving vindt plaats op zowel cultureel als materieel en technologisch niveau.

Studie 5: Hou het 'echt'

In de vierde en laatste case studie wordt een analyse uitgevoerd op een sample van honderd digitale 'amateur' pornovideo's op YouPorn. YouPorn is een zogenaamde 'video-sharing' site (zoals YouTube) waarop gebruikers

zelfgemaakte of gerecyclede pornovideo's kunnen uploaden en distribueren. De studie onderzoekt op kritische wijze een aantal academische publicaties waarin gesteld wordt dat nieuwe mediatechnologieën, zoals het internet, ruimte vrijmaken voor de seksuele emancipatie van voorheen gemarginaliseerde groepen, waaronder niet alleen queer en transgender personen maar ook 'alledaagse' mensen met dikke, harige, of oude lichamen. Dit zou vervolgens leiden tot meer diverse, alternatieve, en 'authentieke' representaties van gender en seksualiteit dan gewoonlijk is toegelaten in commerciële pornografie. Op deze wijze brengt de studie zaken als pornografische representatie, de deelnemingscultuur van het Web 2.0 en de visuele constructie van 'echtheid' en 'authenticiteit' in verband met de in dit proefschrift centrale kwesties van gender, seksualiteit en lichamelijkeheid. Er is voor 'amateur' video's gekozen omdat deze video's de kijkers het idee moeten geven dat de beelden op het scherm 'echt' en dus niet gefingeerd zijn. Het is dan vervolgens de vraag hoe deze authenticiteit wordt geconstrueerd in relatie tot de performance van gender, seksualiteit en lichamelijkeheid. Uit de analyse van de video's blijkt dat het gevoel van 'echtheid' en 'authenticiteit' wordt opgeroepen door de stijl waarin de video's zijn opgenomen: de beelden zijn vaak van slechte kwaliteit. Dit komt overeen met andere 'reality' genres zoals homevideo's, surveillance beelden en low budget documentaires. Daarnaast laat de analyse zien dat de seksuele performances in de video's sterk gestructureerd zijn door het standaard repertoire aan posities en beeldperspectieven afkomstig uit de commerciële pornografische beeldcultuur. Dit heteronormatieve 'pornoscript' bepaalt dus welke performances er in beeld worden gebracht (en de manier waarop ze in beeld worden gebracht) in deze 'amateur' video's. Tegelijkertijd zorgt hun vermeende 'echtheid' voor een naturalisatie van deze beelden, wat ertoe leidt dat de seksistische genderideologie die wordt uitgedragen in de video's als 'natuurlijk' en 'normaal' kan worden beschouwd: het is alledaagse seks bedreven door doorsnee mensen. Uiteindelijk wordt geconcludeerd dat YouPorn niet zozeer een ruimte biedt voor alternatieve seksuele representaties, maar zichzelf eerder manifesteert als een plaats waar (amateur) pornografie, online deelnemingscultuur en de representatie van 'echtheid' samenkomen en zo een conservatieve en seksistische genderideologie in stand houden.

Conclusie: Connecties maken

Terugkijkend op de uitkomsten van de vier case studies kan de conclusie worden getrokken dat de online performance van gender, seksualiteit en lichamelijkeheid op een complexe manier is verweven met zowel de fysieke inbedding van mensen in hun alledaagse leven, als de media technologieën die door deze

mensen worden gebruikt om hun alledaagse ervaringen uit te breiden naar digitale locaties. Om deze reden is afgezien van het gebruik van de term 'cyberspace' om de dynamische digitale omgevingen van het internet te beschrijven. Deze omgevingen kunnen niet meer los worden gezien van de fysieke, politiek-economische en sociale condities waarin zij zijn ontstaan en zijn dan ook gelijktijdig materieel concreet, sociaal gereguleerd en discursief geconstrueerd. Het concept 'cyberspace' is daarentegen door de jaren heen geassocieerd met retrofuturistische visies waarin een passief lichaam wordt achtergelaten voor het scherm terwijl een actieve geest kan ontsnappen in een virtuele wereld van pure informatie. Dit soort visies hebben geresulteerd in een ahistorische en technologisch-deterministische opvatting van virtualiteit als radicaal verschillend van realiteit. Als dit proefschrift echter iets heeft laten zien dan is het wel dat de virtuele werelden van het hedendaagse internet alles behalve losgekoppeld zijn van de alledaagse, gesitueerde en lichamelijke werkelijkheid van de mensen die deze werelden bevolken. Virtualiteit, zo moet worden geconcludeerd, is niet het tegenovergestelde van realiteit maar vormt een inherent onderdeel van onze dagelijkse werkelijkheid. Hoewel virtuele fenomenen geen concrete of materiële substantie hebben, spelen zij wel een belangrijke rol in onze sociale levens als 'immateriële' vermogens. Men zou echter ook kunnen zeggen dat de virtuele omgevingen en praktijken op het internet wel degelijk een soort van materialiteit bezitten, ook al is deze materialiteit van een kwalitatief andere categorie: we zouden moeten spreken van een 'digitale materialiteit'. Dit betekent dan dat in de digitale ruimtes van de diverse internetapplicaties het virtuele en het concrete met elkaar samenvallen, waarbij de 'immateriële' vermogens van virtualiteit worden *gematerialiseerd* in de vorm van digitale objecten die zowel tekstuele als grafische gedaantes kunnen aannemen.

Wanneer we nu opnieuw kijken naar de online performance van gender, seksualiteit en lichamelijkeheid, kan als eerst worden opgemerkt dat deze drie elementen van identiteitsconstructie beschouwd moeten worden als 'virtuele' fenomenen: het gaat hier immers niet om concrete, materieel bestaande substanties, maar eerder om een variëteit aan ervaringen, verlangens en regulerende normen en waarden die continu gerealiseerd moeten worden door middel van materieel-discursieve praktijken. Zelfs de beleving en performance van lichamelijkeheid is niet alleen afhankelijk van het fysieke lichaam maar hangt ook af van een combinatie van culturele, psychologische en medische praktijken, wat inhoudt dat lichamelijkeheid niet gelokaliseerd kan worden in een 'natuurlijk' stabiel lichaam. Gender, seksualiteit en lichamelijkeheid komen dus tot stand tijdens processen van geleefde sociale en materiële relaties. De case studies

hebben gezamenlijk laten zien hoe deze 'geleefde sociale en materiële relaties' zich hebben uitgebreid naar diverse digitale ruimtes, waar zij onderhandeld worden in (en mogelijk gemaakt worden door) assemblages van belichaamde internetgebruikers, culturele vertogen en media technologieën. Deze assemblages produceren digitale configuraties van lichamelijke, gender en seksualiteit die kwalitatief verschillen van hun realisatie en materialisatie in fysieke ruimtes, maar hier gelijktijdig ook een nauwe band mee behouden. De digitale ruimtes van internetapplicaties zoals IRC of MySpace zijn dus niet alleen virtuele omgevingen, maar zijn tevens doortrokken van de materiële sporen van lichamelijke, in de vorm van digitale teksten, foto's en video's die worden gemobiliseerd in de online performance van gender en seksualiteit. Hoewel deze praktijken in principe de mogelijkheid bieden om nieuwe invullingen te geven aan gender, seksualiteit en lichamelijke, bijvoorbeeld door traditionele verbeeldingen van de relatie tussen gender en het lichaam via digitale media te herschikken, hebben de case studies in dit proefschrift aangetoond dat een meerderheid van de internetgebruikers de mogelijkheden van deze mediatechnologieën aanwendt om bestaande normen rondom gender en seksualiteit te handhaven in plaats van te betwisten.

