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

van Doorn, N.A.J.M.

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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).