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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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Publication date
2010

Citation for published version (APA):
van Doorn, N. A. J. M. (2010). *Digital Spaces, Material Traces : Investigating the Performance of Gender, Sexuality, and Embodiment on Internet Platforms that feature User-Generated Content.*

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

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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

<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	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. 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.

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> :\
<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

<div align="right">(#Queer, January 12-13)</div>

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 'abject' 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

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<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 :>
<Greeklove> 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 buttton
<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

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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> ackkkkkkk
<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 enugh 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).