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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 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.

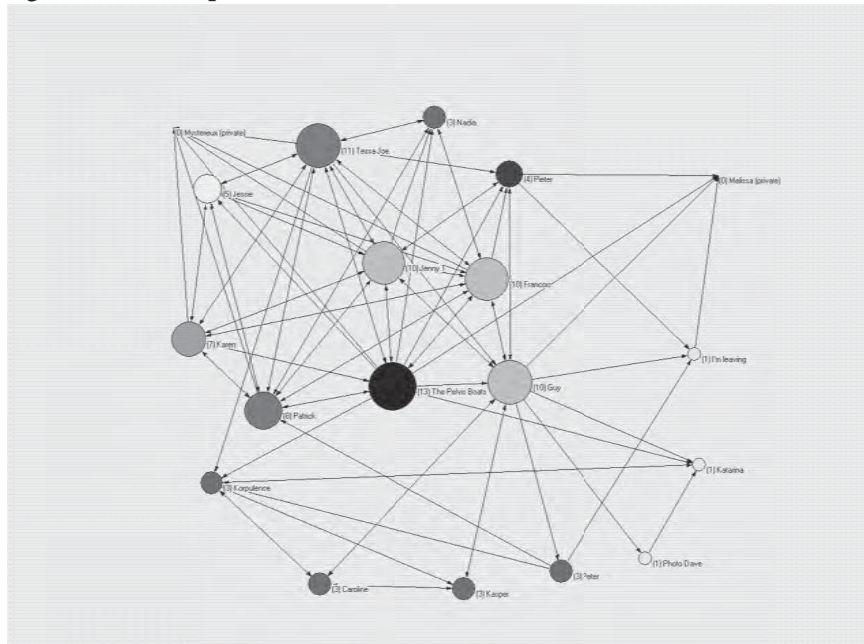
Data collection and analysis

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?

Xxxx, 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 sooo 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.

