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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 Seven

Conclusions

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

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

I began this dissertation by asking the following research question:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7.2 — *Making connections: some theoretical inferences*

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

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

The Virtual

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

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

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

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

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

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

Actualizing gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital space

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Boundary work

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7.3 — *Taking inventory: research contributions*

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

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

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

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

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

7.4 — *Looking forward: recommendations for future research*

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

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

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