

Technology and sites of display

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Technology and Sites of Display

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Introduction

In her book, *Technology, Literacy and Learning* (2006), Carey Jewitt discusses the difference between the page and the screen as two distinct ‘sites of display’. In these different sites, she observes, different modes take on different kinds of functions and different kinds of social meanings. The dynamic and ephemeral nature of print on the screen makes available different functionalities, different meaning potentials and exists in different relationships to other modes than the permanent and linear print in a book. Jewitt’s observations come chiefly from secondary school English classrooms in which she collected data on the different ways students learn with different media like computer games and novels on CD-Rom. But ‘sites of display’ constitute more than just the material media through which information is displayed. They are *social occasions* in which particular configurations of modes and media converge in a particular time and space in order to make particular social actions possible.

A ‘site of display’ is essentially what Scollon (1998) calls ‘a watch’—a configuration of social actors in which one social unit (person or group) provides a *spectacle* for another social unit (person or group) to watch. ‘The spectacle together with its watchers,’ says Scollon (283), ‘constitutes ‘a watch’. Examples include not just books and computer screens, but also exhibition halls, television and cinema screens, live ‘platform events’ (Goffman, 1983; S. Scollon, 2003) like lectures,

ceremonies and beauty pageants, boxing rings, roadside billboards, shop windows and singles bars.

The problem with examining sites of display outside of the context of their use by ‘watchers’ to perform particular social practices is that what people can do with different sites of display alters radically in different contexts: a television set in an electronics shop, for example, is functionally different from a television set in a family’s living room, embedded in different social practices, different ‘interaction orders’ (Goffman 1983), and different material circumstances, and making different kinds of social identities available to watchers and to displayers. While one might be able to talk about the ‘affordances’ and ‘constraints’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001) of different media in a rather general way outside of the social context of their use, one can never know how these ‘affordances’ and ‘constraints’ alter as people strategically mix media and modes in performing the concrete social actions of ‘displaying’ and ‘watching’.

Insert image 1 here.

Image 1 is an example of a site of display-- a notice board in a park in China where, at the time this photograph was taken (the mid 1990s) the daily newspaper was hung every morning and passers-by stopped to peruse it. The closer one analyzes this situation, however, the more difficult it is to pin down what the site of display actually is: the newspaper itself would be considered a site of display if someone were holding it in his or her hands, but hung on a notice board it becomes part of a larger site of display—a notice board, with a new set of affordances and constraints. The situation becomes even more complex when such activities are used, as they sometimes were at

this time in parks in China, as a front for gay men to meet possible sexual partners (Jones 2002). In such cases, the site of display of the notice board becomes a tool through which participants engaged in a different kind of ‘watch’—one in which the spectacle was not the newspaper, but other ‘readers’. The display of the newspaper, in other words, made possible the creation of the display of ‘reading the newspaper’, which in turn made possible other more surreptitious displays. For the analyst, as for the casual observer, the main interaction may appear to be that between the ‘readers’ and the news posted on the board. For participants, however, the information displayed on the notice board might have been largely irrelevant.

The point of this example is to illustrate a number of principles about sites of display, which I will proceed to develop in the remainder of this chapter. The first is that sites of display are always embedded in or overlap with other sites of display, and very often what can be *done* with a site of display depends very much on this phenomenon of *embeddedness*. A newspaper on someone’s breakfast table, for example, cannot be used in the same way it can when it is hanging on a notice board in a Chinese park. It is in part this situatedness of sites of display that creates opportunities for ‘watchers’ to use them in strategic ways. This point is often forgotten when people consider digital sites of display like Facebook pages that seem sometimes to ‘float free’ of any concrete physical context, appearing exactly the same on multiple computer screens and mobile devices scattered across multiple physical locations. This notion of embeddedness reminds us that those physical locations are not irrelevant. The Facebook page of a secondary school student’s girlfriend is functionally and materially different depending on whether he is looking at it on his laptop computer in his family’s living room with his mother looking over his shoulder, on a desktop computer in his English class, or on his mobile phone on the

school bus with his friends gathered around him. In each of these situations this particular site of display has the potential to make possible very different sorts of social actions and social identities (Jones, 2010). At the same time, within the site of display of the Facebook page are embedded multiple other sites of display such as photo albums, 'timelines', profile 'info', and 'friends' lists, which displayers can strategically conceal or make available to different watchers, as well as other displays like advertisements which users have less control over.

The second principle is that sites of display are always used to take real time social actions in the context of particular social practices, and to some degree it is the configuration of modes made available in a site of display that defines or constitutes the social practices that can be carried out with it, practices like teaching secondary school English, watching television with your family, and 'cruising' for sex partners in a public park. Social practices and sites of display, then, exist in a symbiotic relationship, with sites of display amplifying and constraining social practices and social practices affecting the kinds of functionalities sites of display develop.

Just as sites of display help to organize social practices, they also work to organize the social relationships between and among those using them. First and foremost they help construct relationships between those who have created the spectacle and those who consume it. The relationship between the author of a book and a reader, for example, is generally more distant and anonymous than that between the authors and the readers of a Facebook 'status update' (which readers are able to comment on or 'like'). But sites of display also help to organize relationships among 'watchers'. They allow, for example, the people who use them to claim certain kinds of interactional rights and social territory: people reading a newspaper or a computer screen, in a coffee shop can claim very different rights-- such as the right to exclusive

viewing of the spectacle and the right to non-interference by others (Scollon 1998) -- than can people reading a newspaper on a public notice board or students operating computers in the kinds of English classrooms studied by Jewitt.

Finally, following from the previous points, is the notion that sites of display are inherently 'ideological'--that they help to construct social realities in which certain kinds of social practices and social identities are possible and others are not. Newspapers create certain kinds of 'citizens'; Facebook creates certain kinds of 'friends'. Sites of display embedded in particular social contexts help to produce and reproduce sets of expectations about meaning among users which Blommaert (2005) calls *orders of indexicality*—stratified, ordered patterns of indexical values attached to semiotic signs. Different combinations of modes embedded in different social contexts result in different kinds of meanings being assigned to gestures, utterances and other social actions. Being seen reading a newspaper in a coffee shop, for example, is unlikely to leave one open to assumptions of sexual availability the way reading a newspaper posted on a notice board in certain parks in China would, and 'linking' a 'friend's' profile picture on Facebook is unlikely to be construed in the same way a similar act might be on a dating website for gay men.

Technology and Sites of Display

Much has been written on how computers and other new media have altered the ways we display information and consume these displays. Most of this work comes from the field of literacy studies, and so focuses on comparing the computer screen with the printed page. One of the main differences these scholars observe between 'page' and 'screen', for example, is that information on computer screens tends to rely more on visual images and less on text (Kress, 2003; Kress and van

Leeuwen 2001). They also note the degree in which the screen allows the user to control and interact with the display as opposed to static text on the page, forming their own reading paths through hypertext and availing themselves of increasing opportunities to respond to the text on the screen. The interactivity of computer based displays calls into question traditional notions of authorship as well as traditional notions of textuality itself: freed from the physical medium that conveys it, text becomes more of a dynamic process and less of a static artifact (Jones and Hafner, 2012; Kress, 2003). Finally, they note how the technology of the screen allows for the integration of multiple modes including text, images, animations, video, voice, music, and sound effects, making the production of texts less a matter of 'writing' and more a matter of 'design' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001).

This last observation points to one of the most important features of the screen as a site of display: its unique ability to embed and create links between different sites of display. Movie and television screens, maps, books, photo albums, webcam broadcasts, advertising banners, game boards, playing fields, and a host of other sites of display are regularly embedded into the display of the screen. In fact, the new configurations of *embeddedness* made possible by the screen reveal the limitations of an approach that focuses on comparing it to the printed page, an approach which is largely based on the assumption that we do the same kinds of things with computers that we do with books, when the fact is, when we use computers we spend only part of our time doing 'bookish' things like reading, and searching for information, and much more of our time engaged in activities which would be more fruitfully compared to those that involve cinema screens, boxing rings, shopping malls and singles bars.

Displaying the Body

In this paper I will explore the effects of technology on sites of display by focusing on a particular kind of display: the display of the human body. How, I will be asking, does the computer screen change the way people display their bodies and the kinds of social actions that can be taken with those displays. In particular I will be focusing on how the screen affects the display of the body in the context of a social practice not far removed from the one involving newspapers and notice boards in Chinese parks described above, the practice of looking for a sexual partner. New communication technologies, however, make available to participants in this practice modes of interaction, social identities and social practices that are very different from those available to the 'newspaper readers' in the public parks considered above.

The mediated display of the human body goes back as far as the earliest cave paintings, but the communicative potential for such displays has altered drastically over time with the development of new technologies of representation and new sites of display. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), for example, observe that it was not until the fifteenth century that subjects of portraits began to look directly at the viewer, an innovation which dramatically affected the potential for the body to display information in the context of a painting by creating a sense of reciprocity between the viewer and the person depicted. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also saw the development of the practice of combining portraiture with written text, as in the sixteenth century Italian convention of including mottos or slogans (called *imprese*) in paintings to enhance the role of the bodily display as an expression of the character or biography of the person portrayed. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought other important innovations, such as the increased popularity of miniatures, portraits that could be held in the hand or placed inside lockets, affording to bodily displays a

portability they had previously not had and giving them the status of personal possessions which could be reserved for private viewing. Another important innovation of the eighteenth century was the development of pastel portraiture which allowed artists to render bodily displays in a way that made them seem much more lifelike. West (2003:60) comments that ‘because they rendered the person both lifelike and seemingly touchable,’ pastel portraits began to take on an ‘an erotic or fetishistic quality.’ In fact, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such portraits were frequently used for purposes in many ways similar to the ways they are used in the website I will analyze below, in marriage negotiations between well-to-do families in cases where potential spouses lived a great distance from each other. Just as with the posting of snapshots on internet dating websites, these exchanges of portraits chiefly served the purpose of validating the physical attractiveness of the sitter.

Of course, the affordances offered by bodily representations, especially for such documentary or verification functions, changed dramatically with the development of photography, which allowed for representations even more lifelike and accurate than those achieved through pastels. Just as important as the increased accuracy of photographic displays, however, was the increased ‘reproducibility’ of them that photography made possible, and the social consequences of the rise of what Benjamin (1936) calls ‘the age of mechanical reproduction.’ This development also brought about changes in other traditional sites of display in which photographs could now be embedded such as newspapers and police reports.

Another dramatic change came about when photographic equipment became widely and cheaply available, and people could produce representations of their own and others’ bodies on a regular basis to later display in wallets, photo albums and,

more recently on webpages. Finally, the rise of computers and the internet further increased individuals' potential to create and control bodily displays, to reproduce them, alter them (using such applications as Photoshop), to combine them with other modes, to make them more immediate and interactive, and to disseminate them at an unprecedented speed to an unprecedented number of people, both acquaintances and strangers.

Bodily displays have taken on different kinds of social functions over the years and become implicated in a number of distinct social practices. They have functioned as works of art, as representations of the biography or the character of individuals, as documents verifying the identity or characteristics of an individual, as expressions of the relationship between the person portrayed and one or more of the viewers, and as a substitute or proxy for the absent body of that person (West 2004). Different technologies and the sites of display associated with them give users different potential for realizing these different kinds of social functions and in carrying out different kinds of social practices. Different media impose upon the body different affordances and constraints as to what can be displayed and how, and different media come with different resources for users to control and modulate the kind of information the body 'gives' and the kind of information that it 'gives off'.

New Media and Bodily Display: The case of Fridae.com

The website I will be analyzing illustrates the dramatic shifts in the way the internet is used as a site of display since the rise of 'Web 2.0' at the dawn of the millennium. This shift is exemplified by the popularity of tools like Twitter, Facebook, My Space, Flickr, and del.icio.us. These more interactive sites of display involve participants creating displays for one another, and commenting upon or

adding to one another's displays. They operate according to a kind of 'attention economy' (Goldhaber, 1997; Lanham, 1994; Lankshear and Knobel, 2002) in which users attempt to attract the attention of other users and then display that attention as part of their own displays. The more people use a particular site the more its 'value' as a site of display increases, thus attracting even more people to use it, a phenomenon known as the 'network effect' (Economides, 1995).

All of these sites, however, are not the same in terms of the kinds of functions, features and modal configurations that they offer. Since sites of display develop around social practices and define the contours of such practices, the kinds of affordances and constraints they develop depends to a large degree on the demands of the social practice for which they are used.

Insert Image 2 here.

Image 2 depicts a personal profile on the popular gay website, Fridae.com, a social networking site catering primarily to gay men and lesbians in Asia. The site contains gay related news and information on travel, entertainment, health and advocacy, but its most popular feature is its 'personals' section where users can post their profiles and search through the profiles others have posted using a variety of search options and then interacting with the authors of these profiles in a variety of ways. These profiles nearly always contain depictions of the author's body in the form of photographs and textual descriptions. Like other social networking sites like Facebook, the features of the site allow users to strategically embed bodily displays within the context of other displays, (including the displays of other people's bodies), to produce displays that are dynamic and interactive, and to control and modulate the

access different users have to different parts of their display. These affordances. I will argue, give rise to particular social norms and particular ways of organizing relationships that are impossible in older sites of display associated with similar social practices such as gay bars, saunas, and notice boards in Chinese parks.

The site of display created by this website's interface makes possible a multimodal display of the body involving icons, written text and photographs, in which the body is semiotized and resmeiotized (Iedema, 2001) as it interacts with these different modes and these different modes interact with one another. Below I will consider the various features of this display.

Username

The first decision a displayer on Fridae.com must make when he or she applies for a profile is what screen name to choose. As with screen names on Twitter, MSN Messenger (Lou 2005) and elsewhere, these names often contain a wealth of information in the form of socially recognized identity cues. In the example here, the name gwmswimmerhk (1) indicates that the author is a gay, Caucasian man who lives in Hong Kong and enjoys swimming. Extracting this information, however, to a large degree depends on readers understanding the 'shorthand' used by this particular discourse community (for example, abbreviations such as gwm for 'gay white man') as well as the 'orders of indexicality' for particular terms ('swimmer', for example, indexes not just participation in a particular sport but also a particular body type). This label, then, often draws on information available in other places (visual and textual) in the profile (information about race, appearance, interests, etc.) and *resemiotizes* (Iedema 2001) it into an identity label.

Icons

The icons next to the name give further information about the author and

reveal more about the orders of indexicality within which users negotiate identity. Some signs on the site give information about the author's identity. Others give information about the site of display itself and the way the author and others are interacting with or have interacted with it.

An example of the later type of sign is the circular icon to the left of the username which shows the author's membership status, specifically whether or not the author has purchased 'perks' which allow him or her to access certain kinds of information on the profiles of others. This icon, then, is important in informing the reader of the ways in which he or she will be able to interact with the author.

A similar function is performed by the green circle to the far right (3) which indicates whether or not the user is on-line. Further information on the author's on-line habits appear in the lower left hand corner (4) where information is given regarding when the author was last on-line, when they joined the service, when they last updated their profile and how many people have viewed their profile. This last piece of information is an example, more of which will be discussed below, of how, by interacting with the profile, in fact, simply by viewing it, 'watchers' alter the spectacle which they are watching.

Next to the circular icon is an icon of a red ribbon, which indicates whether or not the author professes to practice 'safe sex'. The 'red-ribbon' symbol is familiar icon, the indexicality of which is easily interpretable by competent members of this discourse community. Its meaning goes beyond its association with certain concrete actions (such as using a condom), indexing a certain kind of 'gay man' and certain kinds of ideological assumptions about what it means to be a 'responsible' member of this community.

Pictures

Perhaps the most important ingredient in this site of display is the author's 'main picture' which appears near the top of the profile underneath the user's name and above the profile menu (5). In fact, it is this display which, at least initially, is likely to be the main focus of viewers, and all of the other displays available at this site somehow refer to it or depend on it; it is unlikely that viewers who are neither interested in nor attracted to this display will go on to engage with other parts of the site like the written text. This particular bodily display is just one of several that the author can make available in his or her 'album', the contents of which is displayed as thumbnail images underneath the main picture.

The semiotics and function of such pictures is complex. Like conventional portraiture, these displays are multifunctional, operating as aesthetic objects, as representations of individuals' characters or histories, as documents of identity or of particular physical traits, and as communicative gestures in the ongoing interaction among users (Jones 2005). Their most important function, however, is to attract the attention of other users. As a participant in a study by Brown and his colleagues (2005) investigating a similar website put it, 'your picture is your bait.' Therefore, the kinds of features displayers choose to include in these pictures provide a good indication of the kinds of visual signs that index desirability in this particular community: certain kinds of poses, gestures and facial expressions, certain kinds of clothing (or lack thereof), certain kinds of places, certain kinds of activities, and certain kinds of bodily parts displayed in certain ways.

One important aspect of these bodily displays is that they are always *situated* within some kind of environmental and/or behavioral context -- they are 'frozen actions' which portray not just social actors but also the particular place and time where the photographs were taken and the particular activities social actors were

involved in. This contextual information is sometimes as important as the bodily display itself in communicating desirability. Particularly popular, for instance, are pictures taken at famous tourist destinations or in natural settings like beaches and mountains. One reason for this, of course, is that situations like visits to the beach or to foreign locales are typically occasions when one has one's picture taken, and so such photos are often those most available to authors searching for images to insert into this site. Such images, however, can also index affiliation to certain places or cultures, a certain adventurous spirit, as well as a certain economic status which makes such visits possible. Sometimes photos are taken in the company of others—friends, family members, partners—which also communicates particular character traits or social relationships indexed by the people in whose company one is photographed.

In this regard, such images are examples of 'social portraiture' (Goffman 1979)—meant to communicate something about the 'type of person' the author is and, in doing so, to rehearse community norms about what 'type of person' is considered desirable and the kinds of 'body idiom' (Goffman 1963) which index attractiveness in this community.

Some of the images authors include, of course, are not chosen from old snapshots but rather taken especially for use on this site. This is particularly true for images which display parts of the body not normally revealed in vacation snapshots or for images posted by authors who are concerned about revealing their identities online. Such images often consist of disembodied bodily parts (torsos, genitals), or of images in which the author's face has been somehow obscured by sunglasses, for example, or special photo-editing techniques. These photos are also often taken by the authors themselves, sometimes using mirrors. Such photos highlight another function

of bodily display on this website—its *documentary* function. Like images of scientific specimens, these pictures function to create a document of the specimen's physical characteristics. Thus it is common for authors to choose pictures which display their bodies in different poses, from different angles, or wearing different kinds of clothing, so as to highlight various physical features, rather in the same way police reports contain photographs of crime suspects taken from different angles.

While such photographic displays of body parts document certain features of the author's body meticulously, they also can strategically conceal other parts, most typically the author's face. It is precisely the documentary nature of such images that makes some people reluctant to 'document' their identities in the pictures they post. The purpose of these images, then, is not just to display information, but also to conceal it, either to protect the identity or modesty of the author or to create an air of mystery or suspense.

Authors can also post images which are not publicly available in their 'albums' but rather stored in their 'photo vault' (7) and available for viewing only to those to whom the author has provided with a virtual 'key'. Such images are generally more revealing (authors might include close-ups of their faces, for example, or pictures of their genitals). Although 'requesting a key' involves only clicking an icon on the toolbar, it usually requires some kind of interactional history; most users will not comply with requests coming from people they have not exchanged messages with.

The images that the author posts of him or herself are not the only images available in the profile; below the thumbnail images of the author's 'album' is another row of thumbnails consisting of the images of other members of the network who have agreed to be identified as the author's 'friends'. Being someone's friend simply

involves sending them an automated request to include them on one's 'friends list' which the receiver can either approve or deny. Beyond this, 'friends' may have no other contact whatsoever. Thus, the inclusion of 'friends' in the profile is not so much a matter of friendship in a conventional sense, but more a matter of display— as with other bodily displays, bodies take on certain meanings based on the other bodies they are displayed with. In this case, one's 'friends' list expresses information not so much about one's real social relationships as about ones 'ideal' social relationships-- the kinds of people one finds desirable. By inviting others to be one's 'friend', or by accepting their invitations, the displays of others become strategic ingredients in one's own display.

Text

Along with these images, authors also create a textual display of their bodies following the parameters made available at this site, and it is from these, parameters, that the kinds of social categories, values and orders of indexicality that govern this particular discourse community are most clearly revealed. This textual display is divided into several parts, all of which involve certain constraints upon the nature of the messages that can be included and all creating a particular kind of relationship between text and images. First, underneath the main photo, the author can include a short 'introduction'. Authors choose to use this space for a variety of functions, including providing descriptions of personal attributes (personality, profession) not evident from one's photo, providing information about the kind of interaction or the kind of person one is seeking, engaging in greetings or other phatic communication, providing slogans or mottos, and even talking about one's travel plans. Unlike one's username, one can alter the contents in one's 'Introduction' to fit one's mood or circumstances. Thus, like the MSN screen names studied by Lou (2005), these

introductions are not static *sign vehicles*, but rather constitute *sign activities*, performances in an ongoing conversation the author engages in with other members of the community.

In addition to the introduction, the profile includes a long ‘resume’ of facts and figures about the author divided into four parts: ‘The Basics’ (10), ‘What you See’ (11), ‘What you Don’t’ (12), and ‘Interests’ (13). The information given here serves to supplement, amplify, anchor and constrain the information ‘given off’ by the images one includes, just as the images serve to verify claims made in the textual part of the profile. The most important thing about this information, however, is the way it anchors and constrains the kinds of selves which this site of display makes possible. Unlike the ‘Introduction’ discussed above, authors do not have the freedom to include any information they want in this section, but rather are limited to a fixed set of categories upon which to comment and a fixed set of identity labels to choose within these categories. The categories and the choices within them are a reflection of the ‘orders of indexicality’ of this community, the kinds of allowable, recognizable selves that make it up, and the values and expectations that have grown up around the social practice for which the site is used. By including ethnicity, height, weight, and age under the heading ‘the Basics’, for example, the site reinforces a view of the self based on certain aspects of physical appearance (rather than other traits like intelligence, wealth, kinship ties, or religion) and reflects and facilitates the social goals associated with the site. This emphasis is also seen in other domains where gay men meet to seek sexual partners such as chat rooms, where such information (specifically age, height and weight) commonly referred to as one’s ‘stats’, is usually exchanged at the outset of interactions (Jones 2005).

The choices that appear under each category constrain users in terms of the

kinds of traits they can claim: As for 'build', for instance, one can be 'average', 'chubby', 'curvy', 'large/solid', 'lean/toned', 'muscular', 'overweight', 'slim' or 'voluptuous'. Descriptors for 'look' include 'alternative', 'casual', 'drag', 'formal', 'leather', 'military', and 'punk'. These pre-determined identity labels do not only serve to describe physical and personality traits, but also provide a taxonomy of recognizable social 'types' in this community. This taxonomy of social types functions as both framework through which authors describe themselves and through which they interact with and interpret the displays of others, using the identity cues provided, for instance, as a means to search through and filter potential friends and partners.

What is 'displayed' at this site, then, is not just the individual body but the community's norms about what kind of bodies one can have and what kind of values and expectations about behavior go with these bodies, including what kinds of social resources these bodies are expected to have at their disposal.

Interactivity

What is perhaps most important about this site of display from the point of view of users, and what distinguishes it from similar genres rendered through old media (such as newspaper or magazine personal advertisements – Jones 2000) is the degree of interactivity the site affords, providing multiple ways for 'watchers' not just to interact with the author of the profile, but to interact with the profile itself in ways that alter the display. These various forms of interaction are managed through a toolbar which appears underneath the main picture in every profile (image 4). The most direct way for a watcher to interact with the display is to send a verbal message to the author, not so different from replying by letter to a personal ad in the newspaper. Other ways more unique to this medium include inviting them to be 'friends',

granting them access to one's 'photo vault' or requesting access to theirs, 'bookmarking' them, forwarding their profiles to other people, attaching notes to their profile, and 'sending hearts'.

Insert image 3 here.

Far and away the most popular form of interaction on this site is the practice of 'sending hearts'. In order to send a user a 'heart', one simply clicks the heart icon in the toolbar of the target's profile. Users are regularly alerted as to who has sent them hearts with a list that includes thumbnails of senders' pictures and links to their profiles. In physical practices of 'cruising', gay men rely heavily on a language of gestures and gazes (Jones 2002a), usually avoiding verbal interaction until a certain degree of interest has been negotiated non-verbally. In asynchronous virtual environments such as this, these real time, interactive bodily displays are unavailable. In many ways, forms of interaction such as 'sending hearts', 'inviting friends' and making one's private photos available, serve the same purpose, allowing users to avoid making the commitment to verbal interaction involved in sending a message. This function is hinted at in the site's introduction, which says:

Shy? Don't be. Fridae Personals is one of the friendliest personals sites around.

"Send a heart" is a quick and friendly way of saying "I like you, wanna chat?"

Like 'inviting friends', however, 'sending a heart' is not just an expression of interest. It is also an action which alters the display of the person to whom the heart is sent—the hearts one has received appear as tiny heart icons underneath one's picture (image 2, 15) along with a tally of the total. As stated above, the chief social goal of users of this site is to attract the attention of others. The ability the site offers to

'freeze' (Norris, 2004) the acts of attention one has received and to quantify them underlies the 'economy of attention' which dominates this practice. One of the main ways one attracts attention is to display the amount of attention one has already attracted.

Consequently, the motivation for sending hearts is not always to explicitly express interest in the target. More often than not it is to try to attract others to reciprocate, increasing the number of hearts that appear on one's own profile. Many users I interviewed send and receive hundreds of hearts a day using a function that automatically sends hearts to those who have sent them to the user. A kind of 'code of reciprocity' (Jones 2005) governs the exchange of hearts. As one 'user put it, 'I've stopped getting so excited when people send me hearts. Most people just send hearts to whoever sends hearts to them. That's how you get more hearts.'

Conclusion: The Body On-line

While the kinds of social actions users can take with this site of display in many ways echo the kinds of actions involved in more physical acts of seduction, at the same time, they also constitute new forms of social action and new ways of organizing the practice of 'cruising' which exploit the affordances of the medium. How does the screen alter the ways men can display their bodies for the purpose of attracting sexual partners, and, in so doing, alter the practice of attracting sexual partners itself? How is the body 'different' on the screen than it is in the context of other sites of display? I propose that on the screen the body changes in three key ways: it becomes more discursive, more negotiated and more reflexive, and these changes in the way the body is displayed have implications for the social practice these men are performing and the social identities available to them in this practice.

What I mean by the term ‘discursive’ is that one of the key features of this technology is that it allows users to use graphic displays of the body in ways that we normally use written or spoken text. Features of the site that allow users to be more selective in their display than they could be in other circumstances (like bars and saunas) both in terms of what is displayed and in terms of to who sees it, and features which allow them to alter the ‘permissions’ other users have to different parts of their display over time create more incremental displays of the body which exploit a the temporal orientation towards communication usually associated with text (Jones, 2005; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). Used strategically—this process of incrementally ‘showing/concealing’ is central to the nature of the social practice participants are engaging in—a practice that is essentially a discursive striptease (Jones 2005). This temporal orientation of the display gives to it the status of the ‘yet to be’—each image offered holding out the promise of what is to come—whether it be a more revealing image or a face to face meeting. It could be argued that it is this characteristic of ‘unfinished business’ that makes these images so engaging for viewers. These bodily displays never stand still but, rather, take their meaning from an infinite stream of future engagements wherein new desires and fascinations can be produced.

When I say that the body on-line is more ‘negotiated’, I am referring to how the same tools through which users manages incremental displays of their bodies over time also open up more aspects of embodiment itself to choice and to negotiation between spectacle and watcher. One of the main features of this negotiation is the ability of users to materially alter the displays of others by, for example, ‘sending hearts’ or requesting various ‘permissions’. In this regard, such sites reflect the development of new kinds of ‘economies of interaction’, economies in which

‘attention’ is the primary currency. Such economies are evident not just on dating sites like the one I have been considering here, but on nearly all of the popular social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter that have become so central to the social lives of so many. As people increasingly live their lives in the spaces of these technological sites of display, they must master new ways of getting and giving attention and of documenting and displaying the attention they have received from others. The ‘economies of interaction’ that develop at these sites of display have fundamentally altered the ways we organize social interaction and the ways we interpret and value the displays of others

Finally, what I mean when I say that the on-line body becomes more ‘reflexive’ refers to the fact that on sites such as these users fashion displays of their own bodies, which they can then monitor by taking on the role of spectator. The body is fashioned as a reflexive looking glass, with agents constantly turning back upon their embodiment, acting upon, maintaining it and modifying it in various ways. As Hayles (1999: xiii) puts it, ‘the overlay between . . . enacted and represented bodies becomes . . . a contingent production, mediated by a technology that has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject.’

The understanding of ‘sites of display’ which I have attempted to advance in this chapter goes beyond technological approaches which focus on material modes and media to see display as a form of social interaction. From this perspective, sites of display not only affect the kinds of meanings that we can make, but also the kinds of social actions we can perform and the kinds of social identities we can enact. In this regard, sites of display are sites of social and cultural reproduction at which we develop and rehearse community norms about what it means to be a displayer and

what it means to be a watcher, and display itself can be seen as a *literacy* practice (Jones and Hafner, 2012), one which is becoming more and more important as people increasing find themselves in situations both online and off in which they are called upon to 'entextualize' their bodies (Jones, 2013).

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Image 1



Image 1 (from Scollon 2005)

Image 2

friday personals 2

gw.nswimmerhk 1  3

<http://www.friday.com/personals/gwmswimmerhk>

My Profile **My Album (6)** **Photo Vault (0)** **Friends (29)** **Blog (0)**

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gwmswimmer in hk

My Album (6) 6

My Friends (29) 8

User Statistics

Last Online 20 Sep 2007 4

Last Update 25 May 2007

Member Since 25 May 2003

Page Views 801

Photo 5 

Basics

I'm/ We're Gay Male 10

Age 43

Ethnicity Caucasian

Height 103cm/0'0"

Weight 70kg/154lbs

Seeking Single Male

Looking For Friendship, Love/Relationship, Action/Sex, Conversation/Email

Status Single

Location Hong Kong

Horoscope Leo/Kam

Address gwmswimmer@yahoo.com

WHAT YOU SEE 11

Build Lean & Toned

Hair Color Blonde

Eye Color Green

Facial Hair None

Body Hair Smooth

My Look Prefer not to say

My Mannerism Neither

Tattoo No

Piercings No

"Shoe" / Bust size Extra large

Cut Cut

WHAT YOU DON'T 12

Religion Buddhist

Smoke Habit No

Role Top

How Out Are You Totally

Occupation Prefer not to say

My Personality Intellectual, Romantic

Languages Spoken Chinese, English

Best Attribute Sense of humor

Drink Habit No

HIV Status HIV-

I Live With Alone

INTERESTS 13

Activities: Activism, Books/Reading, Computers, Travel

Entertainment: Movies/Film, Symphony/Opera, Theater arts, Tv/Videos/DVDs, Wine Tasting

Music: Alternative, Classical, Dance, Rock, R&B

Health/Sports & Fitness: Martial Arts, Meditation, Swimming, Weight training, Yoga

Home/Family: Cooking, Pets

Scene: Suburban

Things I'm Into: Anal sex, Body contact, Kissing, One on one, Oral sex, Open to experimentation

My Hearts (1242) 15

My Agenda & Travel

My Blog (0)

No Diary

MORE ABOUT ME 14

Image 3

