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## Chapter 13

**Fashion, style and identity performances in time and space**

Julia Davies

The University of Sheffield, UK

(Talk presented live on January, 20, 2013)

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCay7UB8Mm5SpRnPy6Mx15Gg>

**Julia Davies:** Hello, thank you very much, for the very kind introduction. I really appreciate it. My title is (Im)Material girls living in (im)material worlds: Identity curation through time and space. These are some very slippery terms, and in this talk I think not only about materiality and space, but also about local and global contexts and identity. I'm going to talk about meaning making and the ways in which we can manipulate text in an ongoing project of the self. Of course, Anthony Giddens has also talked about the ways in which we construct narratives of our lives in an ongoing story of the self. I think Facebook allows us to present a narrative of the self but also to curate this narrative of the representation, so that a self appears online for scrutiny. Then that scrutiny is for us, as well as others. I use the phrase curation of the self, drawing on the work of John Potter who has written a book, just published.

There's often opportunity for Facebook users, especially prolific users, to see the self as partly constructed by the discourses within the Facebook space. I think that in Facebook, materiality is problematized, or the sense of what is material and what is not material becomes a moot point. Kevin Leander and Peggy Sheehy blew me away in 2004 with their edited

collection, Spatializing Literacy Research, because for the first time, I came across this idea about it being possible that discourse can actually produce space. They say ‘because discursive practices are located in space and actually produce space, we propose to disrupt folk notions of how literacies are simply situated’. They talk about an interpretive loss when we consider how practices occur in spaces, because what Leander and Sheehy do, is bring context to the fore as an ongoing process of creation so that we understand space as something that’s produced through our own discourses. In this way, I’d like to see Facebook as a space that has been constructed through the combined discourses of its participants, and that this space is invented and reinvented on a moment-by-moment basis. When I hear people talking about Facebook in dismissive terms saying, “Oh, I wouldn’t go on that,” ... well, it depends on what “that” is! Facebook is not a monolithic space. It’s dynamic, multifarious and constantly being reconstituted. Those aspects of Facebook mean that participants not only construct the Facebook space, but they jointly construct versions of themselves. This affects the way in which they regard their own identity and their way of being in the world.

In this talk, I deal with these concepts by thinking about specific data drawn from Facebook pages of just four female trainee hairdressers whom I came to know over a period of time, for just about over a year. These trainee hairdressers were based in a local college. They were taking a specialist module in hairdressing. It was about how to do bridal hair and what they called “*up do*”s; so it was for long hair, which they pile up on the top of their heads in very elaborate ways. That was the specialist course that they were doing. These young women had a great interest in fashion, as well as participating in training to beautify other people. They were extremely interested in styling their own body images and sharing images, pictures of themselves

**Comment [JD1]:** This is the correct quotation from L&S.

online. At the same time this was going on, in their training, they were really struggling financially, working in part-time jobs, paying for themselves to go through college. Represented in their Facebook pages was not just their home and their college life but also their social events, in pubs, and night clubs, work in the salons, and also part-time work in shops and so on. I was very privileged to see all that; to see their families; to see inside their homes; to see their friends' photographs; the insides of their workplaces, and to share in special moments in their lives.

Alexandra Kendall from the University of Birmingham talks about how researchers of young people's digital literacy practices might awkwardly appear as strangers viewing the exotic. She uses the analogy of the Victorian peep show with their massive bodies peeping into tiny spaces, who peer down, enormous and unwieldy, as they watch the activities of others. Certainly, the phrase lurk has been used of me, with people asking me if I'm a lurker. When I first met the young women who were part of my project, they did ask me, "Well, are you a weirdo, then? Are you a pedophile? What are you doing wanting to spy on young women?" I did have to work hard to gain their trust initially, and just four of them agreed that I could be their Facebook friend. So far, none of them have unfriended me, even though we're almost a year after the end of the project. There were things I found that I had in common with these young women, but probably far more things that **distanced** us. I seemed very 'other' to them, I think. I followed these young women on their Facebook pages. I met them in the college refectory, as well as in the hairdressing salon.

I was interested in the research questions that I've displayed on the slide here: How are trainee hairdressers using Facebook? What kinds of discourses or narratives do these young women draw on/create in their Facebooks? How do Facebook narratives impact on/ express the

women's sense of themselves? I wanted to look at these young women who didn't see themselves as writers, but nevertheless, were involved daily in creating text about themselves and about people. I wanted to look at the kinds of texts these young women were producing and to consider the practices they were engaged in. However, as time went on, I became interested in Facebook as a space as well, which became an unbounded arena that seeped out, not just as a background to the women's lives but as part of the day-to-day way in which they represented themselves to each other, how they visualized themselves, and the way in which they conducted their discourses.

Dourish (2006) has written about how web-based practices challenge our understandings of time and space. There is a complicated relationship between the global and the local, which Barton in 2010 talked about. Jackie Marsh has talked about young people's interactions in the virtual world of Club Penguin and how the spatiality of learning points to the way in which online and offline spaces are mutually constituted in children's lives.

People like Kevin Leander and Kelly McKim have talked about the impossibility of separating online and offline spaces and about the importance of carrying out what they call connected research so that you don't just look at the online space. You need to move out of that space in order to see the dynamics that take place between those two spaces. This particular image that you see here on this slide is taken from Hannah, one of the trainee hairdresser's photo albums (Figure 13.1). **INSERT FIGURE 13.1 HERE**. She called the photo album Prom, and there were about 26 images of the prom at her school, an event on the last day of their school lives. Here, she is lying on a very elaborate ball gown. All these girls are looking like fairytale princesses or something, lying on the ground of the hotel, which hosted this great big social

event that they'd been planning and talking about for over a year before. While the event is in Sheffield in the UK, it is very much modeled on those which the girls have seen on American TV series, which are actually watched in the UK. The high school prom is something very new to the UK, and has been imported directly from TV programs that the young people have been watching. The young people dress up and attend an evening do with a disco. The materiality of the event is very important with these glamorous gowns, elaborate hairdos, and so on.

This particular set of images got lots of comments on Hannah's Facebook. One friend comments something like, "Gorgeous, baby girl" with gorgeous spelled g-a-w-j-u-s, "Gawjus baby girl." A whole series of comments from all kinds of people, including an aunt who says, "Me and Auntie Janine think you look beautiful, our Hannah." The dress she's wearing is sourced from eBay and sent to her from China; sent to Sheffield just in time for the event. The image and the comments represent a sort of coming together of discourses from global spaces but cited here as a kind of local medley. In some, this photograph, along with others evoking princess fairytale narratives in popular US television series, signified the highlight in the local life of the girls in this northern UK city. The photograph of the event comprises a new event, a Facebook event, providing the evidence to look back on, to talk about, and share across multiple Facebooks so that each participant who is tagged in every photo plays a part in building up the accumulated resources, forming a collaborative narrative, drawing on the comments from aunts, from friends, from people who only just about know them. This whole discourse is created within Hannah's Facebook page but of course leaches out into the Facebook pages of others. This is an event which was partly put together in order to be photographed. This idea of the creation of the fairytale setting and the fairytale dresses was partly about the photographs that

would be taken and that would inevitably be shared on Facebook. Even those who did not attend could comment as onlookers. After a series of comments on one of the photographs, Hannah wrote, “And yea, it was good actually, right posh, though,” with lots of smilies and hearts. All of this—the fairies, the dress with its fairytale nuances and its international prevalence, with the US derivations, the coming together of something from China—all these things are from global spaces that are given this very local flavor in the comments written underneath each other photographs.

The idea of online and offline boundaries was brought seriously into question when I took this screenshot of Josie’s Facebook here (Figure 13.2). **INSERT FIGURE 13.2 HERE**. You can see a map on the bottom left of that screenshot showing the geographic location of Josie over a nonspecific, but recent time span. There are a number of little dots showing where she’s been. Within this particular screenshot, you see represented, Josie’s life offline--but kind of kaleidoscoped into the Facebook wall. This image of where she’s been comes into the Facebook space itself. Also around this, you can see Josie’s social history with photographs of recent events, images of her friends, and things she likes so that you can click on and go and have a look and see what she likes. The hairdressers told me that they spent quite a lot of time culling their Facebook pages, deleting references to themselves if they didn’t like the image, so that those images would disappear from their walls. There’s a sense in which they live their lives sometimes in anticipation of being on Facebook. Moreover, not having an online presence is to be viewed as absent from the social scene. One of the girls said to me, “Pictures are everything. I can’t wear the same thing twice because of all the photos on Facebook, even if you’re going out with different groups of people.” She laughed and said, “It would be social suicide. You don’t

want people to think that you've not got many clothes, and you definitely want them to see you with all your friends." So, there is the sense that this kind of online party is something which not only is an album for them to look back on, but there's a very strong sense of audience, that other people are participating in all of this as well.

Now, I know that you can't read this [Facebook chat]. I'm going to show you the text on the next slide. I just wanted to comment to you that this is what a Facebook page looks like in case you are unfamiliar with it. I'm going to read the text to you so that you can get an idea of the local dialect and how they are using spelling to be a little creative with language.

The Star is the name of the local newspaper, and Josie and Deborah, whose name is written here as Deb, are really good friends. They see each other in college every day and call each other up all the time and text and Facebook and are very, very close friends. So, Josie starts talking, "Was in the Star last night shame I look vile"

Deb: "So you look no different then?"

Josie: Fuq u.

Deb: "Doin owt tonight?" (That means doing anything tonight).

Josie: "Nowt apart from dyin" (i.e., nothing apart from dying). "Yesterday I had to leave college early coz I didn't feel well and then I threw up ont tram. Then when I got home I were throwing up for 12 hours I couldn't even drink water :( so I don't really wanna do owt coz I feel like I might be sick again waaaaaah

Somebody else says, "You missed my steak and chips. Was epic."

Josie: "Ah no."

Someone else says, "Ah yerp."



Deb: “As if you threw up ont tram hahahahahaha.”

Josie: “I know i’m proper nastaaaay.”

Deb: “What happened haha?”

Josie: “Whaddya you mean wha happened?”

Deb: “Did you have to get off?”

Josie: “Well I’d just gone past city hall and I knew I were gonna be sick so I thought ill get off at west street so I can get some fresh air. so I went to the doors to get off but before they opened I threw up and just got off the tram and got on the next ‘un. Proper smooth move.”

Deb: “Hahah can I ring ya? Got something to tell you that you won’t be interested in but I wanna tell you.”

Deb: “Or you ring me please.”

Josie: “Orate but I gonna put you on loud speaker coz im gonna vom. Don’t get mad.”

So, there’s a real sense of Josie and Deborah creating a comedy text for their friends to read and enjoy.

Josie presents herself as a very comic character, but she works hard in her writing to evoke the sense of the local dialect. That’s quite a difficult thing to do, but she manages it quite well. They are playing here and insulting and swearing at each other. Deborah and Josie, saying you “look no different” when Josie says that she “looked vile.” What isn’t said is that Josie was in the newspaper because she had won an award for her hairdressing. Neither of them bothers to mention that because they are so busy showing the others what good fun they can have and what

good friends they are. As well as the local dialect that's in here, right in the center of it, we have Josie saying, "I know I'm proper nastaaaay." What she's trying to do there is mimicking a popular culture male rap style. She is being very brave, ventriloquizing other voices. All of this is just to entertain other people. That kind of dialect does something to reinforce their social ties with each other in ways that evoke what Nicole Ellison and danah boyd talked about, which is when we're in online spaces, particularly social networking sites, we are much less interested in the global opportunities that the internet offers us. Rather, we are much more interested in thickening existing social ties.

[In this Instant Message exchange] we've got Josie and Deborah creating themselves as particular types of character, but parodying themselves and almost present themselves as stereotypes for the entertainment of others. They do this quite often. We've got Deborah drawing on popular culture to try and get Josie's attention.

Deb: "Get your lesbian feet out of my shoes."

Josie: "I don't get it."

Deb: "Keira Knightley's mom says it on Bend it Like Beckham," (which is a popular UK film).

Deb: "Imfao"— (laughing my fucking ass off).

Josie: "No you say it when I try your shoes on."

Deb: "I would do [it] if you could fit your fat toe in them."

Josie: "Ohh gior, he's on a diet!"— my toe is on a diet.

Deb: "Omg," [Oh my god].

So here we've got these girls just playing all the time online. You might feel like this is like "Well, so what?" But actually, one of the things I think is quite interesting about this is that this display of verbal dexterity is a display. They could have gone on the instant messaging part of Facebook, or they could have been texting on their mobile phones, but what they've done is chosen to put this here, as something for other people to read. Also, to put that down on their Facebook walls is part of their curation of their own identity. Our personal and cultural histories not only mean that, – as Bakhtin tells us - we experience, use and interpret language and literacy in ways that reflect accumulations of meanings from the past, but that these provenances influence how we define and redefine space and place. We recursively and reflexively define and redefine our relationships, as well. And we adjust our sense of who we are and where we are in the world on a moment- by-moment basis through the discourses we are involved in. And the fact that these stay in the online space for Josie and Deborah to look at later, as well as their Facebook friends, can look at them and think about them in terms of identity.

Let's just jump for a moment to a series of photographs here (Figure 13.3). **INSERT FIGURE 13.3 HERE**. The multimodal landscape of Facebook means that such ventriloquizing or intertextual referencing can happen through images. The video of Britney Spears, "Hit me baby one more time," dancing in school uniform is evoked here in these images of Hannah. There's this one here with very local space outside her house. You can see the camper van in the house opposite, and the high hedge. She's not taking much notice of the background though. She's kind of representing Britney here in this pose.

Roberta Taylor has referred to something called postural intertextuality. Often the poses that the young women stand in for their photographs to be taken on their Facebook, are imbued

with the styles from elsewhere. Some photograph albums have features in common with celebrity magazines, showing lifestyles of well-dressed people against a range of domestic and social backgrounds such as kitchens, nightclubs and bars and so on. We saw Hannah standing in a particular pose and she said to me, “Oh I just stand how it feels right, or what I think looks good. It’s partly to show off your clothes. I like to look back on what I were wearing and things. I stand so the photo looks nice.”

I’m just going to very quickly take you through this series of photos, as well, that shows Hannah and her friends. If you look at the bottom there, Hannah and her friends are getting ready for a night out. It is the night before Halloween. This is them getting dressed up in bandages ‘blood-stained’ with red lipstick and so on, and posing for the camera in Hannah’s house. In fact, Hannah told me that in the end they didn’t go out because they had such fun getting ready to go out. The whole thing, anyway, was getting the pictures on Facebook and posing. Hannah picked one of those pictures for her profile so that would be predominant for quite a while. This postural intertextuality, I think, is an interesting thing whereby consciously or unconsciously, the young people are imitating what they are seeing in the media and drawing on those image based-discourses and reinterpreting them in their Facebook pages.

Very commonly I saw updates from the friends where it was clear that they were using Facebook as part of their socializing and the Facebook space was an intrinsic part of a social event. Elizabeth narrating an event that she had organized. She narrates it simultaneously with the living out of the event. For her statement she writes, “Treating my fabulous start to dinner. I love my girlies.”--with Hannah and Terrie. Elizabeth tags Hannah and Terrie. Now, such an update where somebody puts names with people who are co-present, will immediately alert those

people that they've been tagged in a photograph - because their mobile phones will buzz or vibrate. Both Hannah and Terrie immediately responded within Facebook to an event that they were actually also attending at that restaurant, at that moment in time. So, they will have been facing each other at a table in the restaurant, and then writing about what's happening on their mobile phones and texting each other, as well as talking to each other face-to-face. There is a kind of layering of information with each medium endorsing the other. In that way, the event takes place across multiple platforms at the same time. The girls are also able to broadcast their voices, while also within that particular geographical space. In fact, thirteen other people immediately liked the comment. It's almost as if those people are occupying the same kind of space, whether that's at the restaurant or in the Facebook world, if you like.

While Facebook has again the potential to become a backchannel for transgressive commentary, there's a sense in which the girls are performing as if on a backchannel, in a way that endorses their friendship, so that their friendship is kind of doubly endorsed. Quite a strange thing to happen, I think.

This whole thing about texting people and wanting a response in the immediate time, we see in this update here. We've got Jadie here saying, "Getting our boarding tickets ready to go back to Sheffield :( hope you all ain't missed my loud self to much :)." She adds the smile and she tags the people that she's with at Mallorca Airport in Spain. It's almost as if she's sending a postcard here to others who are not with them. Now Stacy and three others who are in Spain with her, they 'like' it, but the people who are reading that back in the UK comment and talk about how much they are missing her: "Well ya mom and Channelle were like lost souls yesterday and it was like a 'Miss Jade Wright Day'... ha ha." Someone says, "Laugh out loud, Kerry. It's too

quiet here.... Love you, Jadie.” So it’s an interesting thing that’s happening where, in this particular update, there’s a very strong sense of people being separated in geographical space and time. The words that we see here are intended to draw people closer together, but actually what we see is that they are a long way apart.

I’m afraid that this picture of the chat is not particularly clear and I really didn’t want to read this particular one out loud to you, but I will! Deborah has an update on here where she says, “I’m still dying when that boy asked me for my lips ha ha ha. What shit choice in words. He’s a slimy c-u-n-t. I can’t get the blood off me still for fucks sake.” So, she’s using very, very taboo language here. She’s just putting that out there, not addressing a particular person at all. She’s actually being ‘very unfeminine’, some would say, being very transgressive, in what she’s saying. Lower on that screenshot you can see things that she’d said earlier while pretending to be a man with a penis. She says, “Shall I draw with a penis? Shall I sculpt the penis? Should I conduct with my penis? I’m dying.” When I later spoke to Deborah, she said she was really drunk when she updated at that particular time. So, what I think has happened here is that she’s not just being transgressive and involved in parody, but she’s sort of peeping behind the veneer of femininity that most of the time they try very hard to set up for themselves. It’s as if she’s wanting to challenge others to comment, but there’s a resounding silence as you can see. Nobody wants to involve themselves in that.

I wanted to also briefly show the multimodal representation of other worlds through images. Here we can see a series of images of the hairdressing salon that one of the girls works in.

That’s the inside of the salon.

I did notice that there was a real continuity of these kinds of salons that the girls worked in, with the ways in which their bedrooms were decorated, and also the bathrooms of the nightclubs where they adjusted their makeup and so on. There were many pictures of the nightclub bathrooms with the girls doing each other's lipstick and hair.

Now I did share some writing with my Facebook informants who, very true to form, responded online. They seemed to have been flattered and mystified to see how their words had appeared in an academic context. [In this exchange], Deborah and Josie are talking together. So that I could see that they were talking in private messaging, they pasted onto their Facebook wall a screenshot of their private text message:

Deborah: "I've got a degree in conducting with my penis."

Josie: "Innit? Degree in being sick on the tram."

Deborah: "Degree in watching porn."

Josie: "A degree in eyelashes not fitting over my glasses."

Deborah: "A degree in being a slut and a hoe."

Here I feel they are replying back to me, teasing me, about being academic. There is this kind of scary moment where I thought, "They hate me. They are totally ridiculing the way in which I've written about them." I met them and talked to them about this. They were both very happy with what I'd written and very happy, still, to have been involved in the project. They were very interested in how I had talked about their language; how I hadn't been shocked, and hadn't been too frightened to include it in my project. That's just to share with you something around what

can sometimes be a little bit uncomfortable in academic research, particularly when you are getting very close to your participants in this way.

I'm going to close this talk, before we open up for questions, to say that digital texts, I think, have reawakened us to question the nature of what you might call the actual and the virtual world, or the material and immaterial. The term virtual or online world has popularly been used to imply that there's a kind of parallel or alternative social space that we can choose to inhabit or go into. It's used as a metaphor of real space or of being like the material world. Others have seen it as an escape from real space, making it clear that there's some kind of reality, which we might like to leave behind sometimes. While others see 'online' as an extension of material reality or the material world, I think Facebook has properties of uncertainty and it's multi-dimensional and dynamic. The site is variously bounded and sometimes unbounded, and perceived through different subjectivities. It changes according to the meanings of the discourses that we build it out of. I think Facebook is designed as a space for interactions, as a space for display, but it seems to exist in both a material and an immaterial way, an ever-shifting context that we inhabit together but make meanings within, where we each interpret things differently. I'm going to stop there. I couldn't end up giving you a definition of materiality or immateriality, but I can tell you this is an interesting area to think about.

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