

The Rhetoric of Facebook Icons: General Principles and Examples of How Icons
Impact and Form Identity in Social Networking

A Dissertation

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Sandford B. Weinberg, who didn't live long enough. Who never got to see me defend it.

Abstract

The visual rhetoric of icons plays a major role in the establishment of online identity. In many cases of online discourse, particularly social networking, the icon provides a first impression of a rhetor online. By examining the theories of identity and of (visual) rhetoric, I establish the ways the icon can be used in the establishment of online identity, on the creation of that first impression. Once that theory is laid as groundwork, I investigate several sets of specific examples on Facebook where icons have been chosen in order to better explain the rhetorical decisions behind those icons. The icons that are chosen with no knowledge of the audience who will form that first impression help to highlight the decisions behind the icon, behind the intended message sent by the rhetor. Icons that are chosen to create secondary identities, such as those of performers, help to highlight the intentional role of icons in establishing online identity. In this study, I investigated how identity online changes over time and the way icons always act as a first impression, even when an identity has been established for a long period of time. Finally, looking at the icons chosen for a different social network site, gendersociety.com, has allowed me to examine the icon selection process when the rhetor has a very clear and specific understanding of the audience who will be interacting with and receiving the first impression of that icon in social networking.

Contents

Contents.....	i
List of Figures	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
The Rhetoric of Identity Creation Online.....	5
Visual Rhetoric and Facebook: The icon	8
Methods: Social Networks, Facebook, and Icons	11
Limitations of this Study	17
How and why icons work	18
Research Questions: Choosing Icons	23
Issues of Significance (Chapter summary)	26
Chapter 2: Literature Review	30
Rhetoric and Identity	30
Social Networking and Embodiment	35
Visual Rhetoric and Icons.....	39
Nonverbal Communication Online	43
Chapter 3: Parts of the icon	50
The Intended Message.....	50
The Audience of/for (online) Identity	66
The Producer.....	78
Chapter 4: First Icons	82
Facebook and Social Networks	82
Icons of Convenience	90
Icons of Obfuscated Identity.....	92
Icons of Personal Meaning.....	96
The First Icon and Establishing Identity	102
Chapter 5: First Impressions Over Time.....	104

The Evolving Message: Veronica.....	105
Inference: What the Icons (seem to) mean	106
What Veronica Intended: The story behind the icons.....	114
Icons Over Time: What it means.....	119
Chapter 6: Comparative Online Identities	122
Different Identities Online	123
Barney Dale vs. Arthur	127
Estella Splits vs. Christie.....	131
Pouty Petals vs. Michelle	136
The Conscious Role of Icons in Identity	141
Chapter 7: Online Identity for a Specific Audience.....	144
Audience in Icon Selection.....	144
Transgender Identity Online: the 'NetGendered'	147
Gendersociety.com	151
Icons of New Members.....	152
Icons of Long-time Members	156
Icons of Deeper Meaning.....	159
How Predetermined Audience Affects Online Identity	162
Chapter 8: Conclusion	166
Non-Verbal Communication	166
More that Can be Learned.....	167
More than Establishing: What Else Icons Do	171
Future Research	173
Future Possibilities	176
Bibliography	179
Appendix I: CMC Forums	188
Appendix II: Veronica's Narrative	189
Appendix III: Survey	192
Appendix IV: The full text of Katie's letter:.....	198

List of Figures

Chapter 1

Figure 1.1	1
Figure 1.2	9
Figure 1.3	18
Figure 1.4	18
Figure 1.5	18
Figure 1.6	20
Figure 1.7	20

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1	51
Figure 3.2	52
Figure 3.3	53
Figure 3.4	54
Figure 3.5	55
Figure 3.6	58
Figure 3.7	58
Figure 3.8	61
Figure 3.9	63
Figure 3.10	63
Figure 3.11	64
Figure 3.12	65
Figure 3.13	65
Figure 3.14	69
Figure 3.15	74
Figure 3.16	74

Figure 3.17	75
Chapter 4	
Figure 4.1	83
Figure 4.2	84
Figure 4.3	84
Figure 4.4	85
Figure 4.5	88
Figure 4.6	88
Figure 4.7	90
Figure 4.8	91
Figure 4.9	91
Figure 4.10	92
Figure 4.11	93
Figure 4.12	95
Figure 4.13	95
Figure 4.14	95
Figure 4.15	95
Figure 4.16	97
Figure 4.17	98
Figure 4.18	99
Figure 4.19	100
Figure 4.20	102
Figure 4.21	103
Figure 4.22	104
Chapter 5	
Figure 5.1	105, 114, 192
Chapter 6	
Figure 6.1	124
Figure 6.2	124

Figure 6.3	128
Figure 6.4	128
Figure 6.5	130
Figure 6.6	130
Figure 6.7	132
Figure 6.8	133
Figure 6.9	134
Figure 6.10	134
Figure 6.11	134
Figure 6.12	137
Figure 6.13	137
Figure 6.14	138
Figure 6.15	138

Chapter 7

Figure 7.1	146
Figure 7.2	153
Figure 7.3	154
Figure 7.4	155
Figure 7.5	156
Figure 7.6	157
Figure 7.7	158
Figure 7.8	159
Figure 7.9	160
Figure 7.10	163

Chapter 1: Introduction



Figure 1.1: Screen capture of Barak Obama's actual facebook icon on October 31, 2013.

Icons are a rhetorical device frequently employed in online communication, but they are not universal. Online communication has a breadth of forms, contexts, and uses; it is a rhetorical space so large that it is impossible to generalize about, but in this study, I am focusing on the sub-space of social networks, where icons are ubiquitous, though their omnipresent nature has led to certain amount of acceptance rather than investigation as to their purpose and value. Icons are one of the ways that space is created between those who are communicating identity on social networking sites. As a subset of computer mediated communication (CMC), social networks present a digital discourse with more clearly defined boundaries. Within those boundaries, icons serve an important purpose for identity. The icon is the first presentation of who a rhetor is, providing cues before the first words are read, before the details can be seen. The icon provides a first

impression. Icons create a sort of visual language for social networks, facilitating and improving communication between users.

When using the term ‘icon,’ I am referring to one specific type of visual artifact. On a computer desktop, there are icons representing programs, images, files, or installed devices. These icons are not representing a facet of the user, though in the sense that a preview of a program or a document within that program can be considered a facet of that program, they *are*: an icon of a PDF represents a preview of the part of the file that is legible. An icon for a program like Firefox represents that program; essentially, all icons present a facet or preview of what they are representing. While these images on the computer desktop are icons, that is not how I am using the term; I am looking at the way identity is created online, and to present an identity, something (someone) must exist to both present and be represented. For my purposes, then, the icon is limited to the personal user icons, the image a person chooses to present himself in online space. That, then, is an icon, and the language of these icons is the focus of this investigation.

Language is a combination of words and pictures, and Scott McCloud writes “***Together***, of course, words and pictures can work miracles” (135, formatting preserved). This is because, as Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fioore write, “Most people find it difficult to understand purely verbal concepts. They suspect the ear; they don't trust it. In general we feel more secure when things are visible, when we can 'see for ourselves” (117, McLuhan's underline). Words by themselves, whether they are literally heard or

'heard' (by which I mean read) online, are less trustworthy than the image, which alone is less trustworthy than the combination. Images, like words, can make up language.

Ferdinand de Saussure suggested that language was a process of connecting the sign and the signifier, which Foucault says are linked “only in so far as they are (or have been or can be) represented, and in so far as the one actually represents the other” (67). Language is not *just* sign and signifier, but rather “language is an *analysis* of thought: not a simple patterning, but a profound establishment of order in space” (83, italics in original). Since communication is a process of exchanging ideas, and those ideas are represented in language, then it must be the case that communication is a method of analyzing thought.

Computers and social networks allow other forms of communication that are *not* available outside the medium, just as there are some forms of communication that are not available *within* the medium. An icon is a static image that serves as a sort of first impression in an online community. It is attached to any post made by a rhetor on a social network site or forum. It is attached to whatever a rhetor writes online, the image that a rhetor chooses to represent a facet of himself or herself, to identify his posts in a social network or on a forum. Icons serve a unique purpose in social networking in that they can provide cues that clothing cannot, and can easily produce or present an identity.

Identity, simply put, is who we are, or at least who we present ourselves as being. It literally refers to something (either an item or, in the examples I will be examining, a person) being the same at multiple points in time. Sydney Shoemaker writes that “...the

term ‘identity’ implies persistence, i.e., the existence of one and the same thing at different times” (2). So identity must, at the very least, be something that is maintained over time. While the icon presents the initial step of identity, that first impression, in order for an online persona to have the richness that personal identity demands, that identity must then be maintained over time.¹

Online identity can both shift (ending one identity and replacing it with another) and develop in parallel (thus creating multiple identities for the same person) with little difficulty.

When an identity is formed online, it is not complete. It is the 'best face forward,'² the chosen identity for that space. These identities are legitimate and real, but, as I said, not complete. They are constructed artificially in an artificial space, presenting only the parts of the person that are or seem relevant to the situation, community, or audience. In many ways, these icons reveal parts of the rhetor's³ identity that may not be intentionally revealed. The identities are trying to persuade others that the presented identity being performed is real; i.e., that there is someone in the real world who corresponds to the identity presented online. So the icon, in addition to being an integral part of online identity creation, must also be an example of persuasion.

1 Changing the icon prevents this re-use of the icon and disrupts the identity over time; however, since the icon is changed not only at the point where it is changed but also with every post in the past, it still serves this identity maintenance purpose even when it changes.

2 The definition of 'best' varying depending on the space in question and the desires of the rhetor and the intended audience.

3 In the case of internet space, it is difficult to see someone as a 'speaker.' Similarly, calling the person communicating the 'writer' is not appropriate either, as so much of the communication online is visual in nature. As such, I use the term 'rhetor' with much the same intention; the rhetor is online what the speaker would be in an oration or the writer would be in a text. Sometimes, when discussing multimodal discourse, I will also use the term 'producer,' or 'image-producer' where the producer is the creator of the content, much like the way the rhetor is the creator of the attempt to persuade.

The rhetorical strategies employed in the selection of icons change as the rhetor's position in relation to the social network changes. The first approach, first interaction, with the online space requires one set of strategies, while the evolution of identity requires another. When a rhetor wishes to produce more than one concurrent identity, essentially presenting more than one 'face' online in the way that a person offline might present different aspects of himself or herself (being one person at work and another at play, for example), different strategies are required. All of these strategies, applied to a very general social network such as Facebook, must be re-evaluated when the rhetor comes across a more specific network with a pre-defined and very specific audience, such as Gender Society.

The Rhetoric of Identity Creation Online

Creating an identity within a social network is a rhetorical action. David Bade writes that "Ancient rhetoric was based on three primary assumptions: (1) there is a speaker who (2) has something to say (3) to someone. Thus rhetorical theory from Aristotle to the twentieth century has distinguished three concepts of argumentation, the first concerning the facts (*logos*), the second the interpretation of the facts (*pathos*), and the third the legitimacy of the speaker (*ethos*)" (616). This categorization matches very closely what I am suggesting about icons. (1) The icon has a producer (2) who wishes to send a message (3) to those who encounter him online. The icon does not develop in a

vacuum, but rather with the understanding that there is an audience. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca write that “*it is in terms of an audience that argumentation develops*” (5, italics in original); argumentation, or rhetoric, develops in terms of an audience. Similarly, identities in social networks develop in terms of an audience (in different or unfamiliar forums where the rhetor is not aware of who makes up that audience).

Beth Kolko writes that “creating a virtual self is a rhetorical act because speaking through an avatar incorporates the realm of gestures and visual representation” (179-80); therefore, an avatar is a way to provide the non-verbal, visual elements that would otherwise be missing from CMC.

These identities are presented in a number of ways. In the early days of the internet, they were presented only through text, primarily on MUDs (Multi-User Domains) and MOOs (MUDs Object-Oriented).⁴ While these were an effective step, they were limited in their communication because there was nothing 'accidental' about them; any description was intentional, and there was no communication without words. Sherry Turkle wrote in 1995 that the internet was space where “one’s body is represented by one’s own textual description” (12). This lack of images prevented a feeling of embodiment within the CMC world; rhetors felt as if they existed in a vacuum, and they more or less did. Early studies in CMC saw this difficulty, such as when Benford et al. wrote in 1995 “without sufficient embodiment, users only become known to one another

⁴ Other websites and e-mails aside, as those were not as clearly spaces where an online identity would need or tend to develop.

through their (disembodied) actions; one might draw an analogy between such users and poltergeists, only visible through paranormal activity” (242).

As technology has advanced, rhetors have become more and more able to take advantage of the increasingly visual nature of computers. Rhetors can use photographs, drawings, animations, even full body constructs to present the identity or identities they wish to present. In other words, rhetors can use icons and avatars, allowing them to provide non-verbal communication, both intentionally and unintentionally. As the technology advanced, avatars developed. Avatars, as Nakamura wrote in 2002, “are the embodiment, in text and/or graphical images, of a user's online presence in social spaces” (31). Today, I assign a different meaning to the term avatar. A character in World of Warcraft, fully rendered in virtual 3D, able to move around, is an avatar. It is now a type of full body representation of a person. Yuki Sogabe et al. (2012) write that “The user is represented in the environment by an avatar, a graphic object chosen by the user. Depending on the environment, the avatar may be capable of movement, physical interactions with other users and objects in the environment, voice exchange, and so on” (69). This current view of the avatar is about as fully realized a 'body' as is possible in an online space.

But originally, the term was used as Nakamura described it. The avatar was just an image.⁵ That is, the term avatar was synonymous with the word icon as I am using it.

⁵ Kristine L. Nowak and Christian Rauh defined avatars as “computer generated visual representations of people or bots” (153). Visual representations are not the same as the kind of avatars Messinger et al. refer to when writing about avatars that can “bring back

Avatars are another useful place within the realm of CMC where identity can be studied, but to keep the scope of this study focused, the fully functional avatar, the virtual self, must be set aside. For my purposes, then, I focus on icons in social networking (primarily Facebook) as static images that serve the same purpose (the construction of identity) that an avatar does in a fully rendered form. As icons evolve beyond snapshots and video clips, creating a more robust and subtle space for online embodiment, the icon may lose some of its significance; for now, though, it is as good as or better than an avatar because of its relative consistency over time.

Visual Rhetoric and Facebook: The icon

Online communication provides a window into identity and a border to intimacy. Computer Mediated Communication is both communication with computers and communication with a space *between* those communicating.⁶ To investigate how identity is created online, I must first lay some groundwork about identity in general.

Visual rhetoric is the awareness of images as a means of persuasion. Visual rhetoric is used in advertising, be it billboards on the street or online banners on a website. It is used in photojournalism, on television, on business cards, on phones and tablets. Visual rhetoric and visual persuasion saturates the modern world, and there is a

some elements of social feedback, e.g., by showing head nods, smiles, eye contact, or changing interpersonal distance” (5).

⁶ Much as the way paper creates a space between, but the 'space between' created by computers is far more interactive than paper.

vast literature on the subject, from Roland Barthes to Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Sonja Foss to Gunther Kress; more will be discussed in chapter 2. The icon is visual rhetoric, attached to any post made by a rhetor on a social network site or forum. It should be noted that saying that all icons are static does not mean that they are images that cannot move. Some images, called gifs, are brief animations on a loop. The image in Figure 1.2, for example, blinks. That is, the person in the picture (Harley Quinn, from the Batman cartoon) closes and opens her eyes. The icon still doesn't change; the animation loops infinitely, but remains the same through every iteration.



It may not be possible to completely separate medium from message. As McLuhan and Fiorre claim, the two might be the same thing. That is, the information communicated visually within CMC (at least, the information that *requires* CMC to communicate it) might be inextricably connected to the medium itself. But for the purpose of discussing medium in the context of CMC, I have to separate them. Putting the telephone between the communicators was a start. But to really separate them, I must put them, more or less, in different worlds. In order to help investigate the spaces where Facebook separates between medium and message, I must put a device between the communicators that does not capture any part of the communication beyond the content.

In the case of CMC, this communication is sometimes synchronous, as in Chatting, Skype, FaceTime, which are functionally equivalent to talking on the phone or in person, at least in the sense of timing. Those spaces of CMC seem to be as inextricably linked with the medium as McLuhan suggests. In order to separate medium from message, I must therefore look not at the synchronous communication (including even the simultaneous chat on Facebook itself), but rather at the asynchronous parts of social networking, the space where the icon is the most prevalent. Computers can mediate communication asynchronously. When communication with a computer is only text (or only text plus emoticon), words that one person types and another reads, there are distinct limits to what can be communicated. The poster and the reader are not necessarily connected at the same time, meaning that not even timing is maintained; communication in this way does not require both parties to be present simultaneously. In these spaces, communication is analogous to letter writing, or if all telephone communication happened via voicemail phone-tag. But these spaces allow for something that letters and telephone communication do not have quite as easily: the visual rhetoric of the icon. While letters *can* include images, those images are usually an addendum. In asynchronous social networking, the image is a central part, which is why icons are so important. They are *part of* the communication, not an afterthought.

Methods: Social Networks, Facebook, and Icons

My own experience with social networking began in the early 1990s, when the only available space was forums (bulletin boards) where a person could post freely, or MOOs and MUDs as Sherry Turkle discussed. I had an online journal through livejournal from the early 2000s until around 2005. I came to the social media of Facebook around 2005, and have maintained a consistent presence in the intervening years. I have used social media for various purposes. It has been a way to keep in touch to old friends, to keep my mother updated about my life, and to meet new people. It has also been a place where I have built a professional identity for myself, a place to post musings on my research, and a space in which I have been able to engage in several of my hobbies. I have used social networking as part of role-playing games, at times literally creating new personae on Facebook where I was able to pretend to be a fictional character (and communicate with other fictional characters).

I have used social networking to learn about the ways people ask questions, to see what other people are doing with their lives, to express myself, to learn, and to teach. Sometimes I have been engaged with social network from a purely observer role, sometimes (such as with the role-playing games) in a facilitating role, but most often as a participant.

My interest in icons began almost as soon as they could be attached to my social networking. I discovered that I could add a picture to the posts I made on livejournal, and

took advantage of that in an attempt to assert my individuality. By the time I came to Facebook, I discovered that the icon has transformative power, and that I was able to not only present myself, but also present different *sides* of myself. When I was creating a fictional persona, I could use a different icon that would both create a sort of embodied identity and would make a clear separation between my real and my fictional self. The ability to do this led me to examine other ways that icons can be used to establish and transform identity online.

Since then, I began to keep track of not only my own icons but also those of people I interacted with, and I compiled about a dozen of the more interesting examples, those that showed more than the simplistic use of the same portrait on Facebook, e-mail, forum use, and other social network web spaces. I saw that different people chose icons for different reasons, and saw that some people used multiple icons for multiple spaces.

Of those that I tracked, some of them for several years, I noticed several trends in the messages that were sent. This led me to examine the roles icons play in social media, and on Facebook in particular. So I selected a few examples that illustrate the roles icons play in social media. These examples that I gathered and tracked over time are the basis of this dissertation.

I looked at two people who used the same icon for several years, as well as a few people who change icons rather frequently. I looked at the icons of three performers in the Minneapolis Burlesque scene, and watched the changes in their icons for both their

performance persona and their every-day selves over the course of several months. In some of the examples, I am a personal or professional acquaintance of the people who used those icons. I looked at the icons used by my friends as well as those by people I either had lost touch with or, sometimes, whom I had never met.⁷ I also looked at one person who used multiple icons through the years. I communicated with the people who used these icons, asking their reasoning behind choosing their images. In order to get an overview of the types of icons that are used generally, without any influence from my personal experience, I looked at a small sample of the most visible icons on a social network site (i.e., those that appear on the front page of the site). In the case of Gender Society, I looked at the icons used in their New Members forum, though I did not communicate with the users.

I have looked at icons that are attached to user (screen) names used in online social communities such as Facebook, Myspace, Gender Society, Friendster, etc.⁸ Each of these spaces has its own purpose and its own audience; as such, each is its own potential space for identity. I have primarily focused on Facebook, looking at icons with focus on specific visual elements, including the framing, facial features and expression, clothing, background, and so forth. Specific details about how and why these examples were chosen and developed can be found in Chapters 4 to 7.

⁷ In all cases, I made sure that those I investigated were aware that I was investigating their icons, and were consenting to have those investigations used in my research.

⁸ Information on these communication spaces is provided in Appendix I.

In determining the ethical responsibility of using these icons, images used by people to represent themselves, I was faced with a conundrum. While I made sure that the way I used these images protected the privacy of the research subjects, there was more to be considered. Daxton writes that “posting photos on social media does not make them public domain” (93), and while Facebook disagrees,⁹ I wanted to ensure that I was treating the rhetors behind the icons with the utmost respect and was acting as ethically as I could. From the legal side, I know that my use of these icons is protected under Fair Use because, with Daxton’s criteria, the use was for nonprofit educational purposes, the images were posted publicly, the images themselves make up a very small portion of the final work, and using these works does not harm the potential value for or value of these images (100). But legal protection is not the same as ethical correctness.

Therefore, I made certain that any rhetor whose icon I used in my research was either made fully aware of that use, and gave me specific permission to use it, or (in the case of Gender Society) I had a blanket permission to use the images on the site, and used only those that could be found and seen by non-members of the community. The question that remained, then, was whether or not to use pseudonyms. Laura Gurak, when faced with a similar question, wrote that “I easily could have made the case that the use of real names in Internet postings was justifiable and legal” (138), though in her case she decided to “take the additional step of using pseudonyms” (139). While there were many

⁹ Currently, all pictures posted on Facebook are considered public domain, according to their data use policy (<https://www.facebook.com/about/privacy/your-info>). By default, anything posted on the rhetor’s profile is available to all members of the public, regardless of their position within the rhetor’s personal social network.

examples where I was able to do so (and therefore did), there are a few examples where that specific name was an essential part of my analysis and discussion. The name is always a significant part of the icon, but for the most part what that name is was not essential. In the few examples where the name *was* a vital part of the icon, I maintained the integrity of that identity. In all other cases, real names were replaced with pseudonyms¹⁰ to protect the privacy of the rhetors.

While social networking may appear to have a singular purpose, namely the connection of people around the globe for social interaction, different networks have varying purposes. Facebook is different from MySpace, which is different from Gendersociety, from Twitter, etc. Each has its own purpose, with its own audience and its own rhetorical situation. These social networks are primarily asynchronous, with members posting status, ideas, or arguments and leaving them for others to see; but they frequently have synchronous possibilities with chat programs. The members of these sites know (or learn) the rules of situation, and use that knowledge in the creation, formation, and maintenance of their online identities.

Facebook, the primary site of my inquiry, is the most popular social network at the time of this writing. Users of Facebook can limit their audiences to a certain extent, allowing only those they have selected as 'friends' to see their profile. They can also limit who reads each of the various posts they make on the site about their status (which can be

¹⁰ In an effort to maximize the privacy of these pseudonyms, the real names have been replaced by a randomly generated list of names provided by a program that generates random names found online (<http://random-name-generator.info/>)

anything they wish, but is generally limited to a few sentences). The social network can expand because the friends of the users' friends can also see what is posted. There are various privacy settings, allowing a rhetor to adjust what can be seen and by whom, allowing outsiders (those who are not 'friends') to see anything from the bare minimum (the name and icon) to the entirety of the rhetor's profile.

The samples investigated were selected because they represented pronounced differences in identity formation. As examples of the different types of icons and the different reasons behind selecting one icon over another, these samples are both suggestive and interesting. They highlighted the issues of significance to this study, and provided the most fodder for analysis.

This investigation includes a triangulation method of research. The subject exploration of the images made from my perspective as an academic observer, along with a more objective analysis of the framing, layout, and composition of the images are balanced by the self-reported intentions of the rhetors who used the icons. Triangulation allows me to, as Todd D. Jick writes, “uncover some unique variance which otherwise may have been neglected by single methods” (603). Additionally, the use of multiple overlapping methods helps to neutralize the inherent bias of subjective or self-reporting methods would have on their own. Jick writes that “The effectiveness of triangulation rests on the premise that the weakness in each single method will be compensated by the counter-balancing strengths of another” (604). My inferences come with a certain amount

of bias, as do the self-reported intentions of the rhetors involved. There are concerns of recall inaccuracies, social desirability bias, and other forms of information bias (Fadnes et al.); the overlapping triangulation is intended to minimize, if not adjust for, these biases.

Limitations of this Study

Though this study covered a cross section of different rhetors, from different walks of life and with different careers, ages, and interests, it could not be exhaustive. I was forced to select only a few examples to look at. The examples were selected on the basis of providing the best and most fruitful angle of investigation that will help the conversation of online identity move toward answers. But the fruitfulness of these few examples does not cover the entire potential range of types of icons.

I have investigated the creation of online identity through the method of choosing icons. But creating identity online is a process of many different steps. Some of those steps are ongoing, some are only first presentations. Some are static, others are dynamic. To try to gain a deeper understanding of online identity, I had focus on the icon itself because it is a static first presentation. It is a first impression, an initial face or mask that is put forward in the creation of social networking identity. This is why I focused on the icon rather than other methods of creating online identity.

Even with these limitations, and with the limited access I had to some of the examples (such as not knowing the person behind the icon at gendersociety.com), there is

a fair deal I learned about the role icons play in online identity. However, further study is still needed.

How and why icons work

The icon is not just the image, as the picture would suggest. An icon is usually a combination of both the picture *and* the user name, which is even more static than the icon. While I can change what icon I use, as long as I keep the same account on a given site, my user name will, in most cases, not change.¹¹ The significance of this may not be as obvious generally, but it becomes clear when looking at certain examples (Figures 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5).

aa



96 posts

Figure 1.3

D ...just D, for now



3 posts

Figure 1.4

polly pantyhoes



3 posts

Figure 1.5

These three icons, all taken from the same website (gendersociety.com), have the same image, the blank icon that is automatically assigned if no image is uploaded. But

¹¹ And even in the cases where the user name can be changed, all that is changed is the displayed name; there remains something that does not change, such as when an internet ID remains the same even though the visible user name changes.

each one remains unique, because each icon has a user name attached to it. The identity rhetoric of each user is then limited to the name, and that name/picture combination is the icon. And while 'a_a' (figure 1.3) or 'D ...just D, for now' (figure 1.4) may eventually add a personalized image, that would not change the username.¹² Polly Pantyhoes (figure 1.5) is also lacking an image, but the name she has chosen does present, at least, a gender, more of an identity than the other two names.

These icons provide the first impression, the clothing of the embodied online presence. It is not created without limitation, however. The rhetor does not have a completely free hand when choosing an icon. There are constraints imposed by the space in which the icon will be used, both in the amount of screen space taken up and in the amount of detail allowed, such as the animation in the image of Harley Quinn (figure 1.2).

Icon size is limited by the software of the site where it is used; these software limits are part of CMC, and while there is a specified size limit for the file, or a specified percentage of the screen for each given social network site, there is not (yet, at least) a universal standard. Therefore, nothing definitive can be determined about the size of the icon, nor about the size of the images that can be used.

¹² It is possible, even likely, that "D ...just D, for now" will eventually want to change her name. But when she does so, she will be creating a new identity, a new user name. She will then either be starting her work of online identity over again, or at best will be frequently telling people that she is the same person she was with the other user name. Either way, the icon she currently uses will remain static, at least insofar as the user name is concerned, which in turn means that at least some aspect of her identity will remain unchanged even with an image added.

Icons have a size limitation that varies for each social network. This limitation is affected both by the program used and by the size of the monitor/screen resolution. Some limit the size of the file, others the size of the image in pixels. Twitter limits the icon to 700kb in file size. Facebook has a *minimum* size of 180x180 pixels, which works out to 1.875 inches, such as the box shown as Figure 1.6, though the displayed icon is only 160x160 (regardless of the original image size), seen in Figure 1.7. Images that are larger than these limits are either cropped (cut) to fit, or are shrunk down and compressed into this space, lowering the clarity of the image. As icons are usually square, a wide-angle photo would not be acceptable as an icon. The difficulty with sizes and size limits of icons is that the size is partially based on the resolution and size of the screen on which these icons are being seen. A Facebook icon is 160x160 pixels, but it will take up less space on the screen of a smartphone than on a huge computer monitor; it will take the same percentage of the screen, but not the same actual space.



Figure 1.6

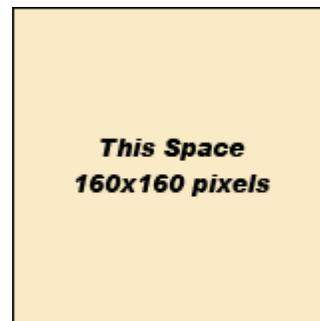


Figure 1.7

The icon, the image, is a way of presenting meaning, of communicating. And that communication happens only with an understanding of frame, the space in which the image is contained. In the case of icons, they frame in the literal sense, the space where the icon appears on the web page. Through its position on the page, often situated next to¹³ the rhetor's text represented by that icon, a message is sent about the rhetor's identity. The icon is its own element, its own unit of information. "The stronger the framing of an element, the more it is presented as a separate unit of information" (Kress and van Leeuwen 203).

Within that frame, meaning can be found by the way the icon is set up. Kress and van Leeuwen write that "the point of view of the subjective, perspectival image has been selected *for* the viewer. As a result there is a kind of symmetry between the way the image-producer relates to the represented participants, and the way the viewer must, willy-nilly, also relate to them" (131). So the selection of the icon helps the rhetor create meaning. Other studies of icons focus on the roles they play, such as their anthropomorphic qualities (Nowak and Ruah), rather than on the frame itself, or the connection between the appearance of the icon and the rhetor creating it (Dunn and Guadagno). Rarely are studies focused on the message intended by the icons, the semiotic role that they are playing.

¹³ Traditionally on the left, though that may differ depending on the programming decisions made when the social network was first created.

An icon persuades or tries to persuade either a specific audience (such as a faculty page on a university website), a non-specific audience (potential friends on Facebook), or multiple potential audiences (such as when looking for followers on Twitter). Each audience is different, a different rhetorical situation. Each online space is its own rhetorical space.

Once selected and presented for analysis, icons must be evaluated in the same manner as any other visual artifact. Icons are subject to visual rhetorical analysis because they can be made up of any image that will fit the size requirements. Even with the limitations of size inherent in the software that uses icons, there is nothing except space limits to prevent the use of one image or another.¹⁴ That said, my study is focused on the messages they present, not just the roles they play or the connections with the rhetor's offline appearance. Both are important. But for this study, the icon's role is the focus. These icons present a personality, an identity, to the audience.

Studying the motivations of rhetors within these social networks involves a certain amount of guesswork. In some of my examples, I asked the rhetor what she had in mind when she chose each icon, for the most part I have to try to reason backwards from the message to producer's intent. This means I approach the icon as its audience would, and attempt to understand the purpose without (usually) being able to check whether or not my psychological interpretations are in any way accurate.

¹⁴ Though the size limitation may make an image more difficult to interpret, thus making it less effective rhetorically.

Research Questions: Choosing Icons

Icons are one important visual element of CMC, particularly in social networking. That is what I have focused on: how they are selected, how they change over time, what they 'do' for people who are creating online identities, and how the awareness of a target audience can help the whole process. Essentially, I have answered four questions:

1. How do people choose an icon when first approaching a social network?
2. How does the selection of icons change over time as the person using them changes?
3. What does an icon *do*; what happens when a person has more than one icon (and more than one online identity)?
4. How does knowledge of the target audience affect the choice of icon?

When the rhetor approaches a social network, often times she has at least some knowledge of the network and the members therein. At the very least, there are assumptions about who the rhetor believes makes up the audience, and these assumptions influence the choice of the icon. Before she ever makes the choice of an icon, she knows—or believes she knows—something about who will be looking at it, a general idea of who her audience might be. Joining a social network such as Facebook, she knows at least on a general level what the network is used for, what kind of audience she can expect to encounter, and sometimes even what sorts of icons other members of the network are

already using. In the cases where she takes advantage of this knowledge, she can better formulate an icon that will send the message about her identity that she most desires.

When choosing/creating icons, the rhetor has an opportunity somewhat unique to the CMC of social networks: she gets to decide who is her audience, or who she expects/intends her audience to be. In other forms of media, the communication comes to the audience: television broadcasts to people's homes, newspapers distribute to the stores, movies distribute to theaters, etc.; these media must create an audience to be successful. But with a social network, the audience comes to the communication. It is already formed and already has expectations and an identity of its own. The social network is already established, and comes to the communication fully formed. While this sometimes happens with other forms of media (such as fans to a series of books), when it does happen those audiences have already been formed by the communication. Social networking does not create its audience so much as it is created *by* its audience; this is the nature of the social network.

Often, particularly outside of social networks, the rhetorical act takes place somewhat in a vacuum as far as the audience is concerned. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrecht-Tytecha write that "the universal audience never actually exists; it is an ideal audience, a mental construction of him who refers to it" ("Acts and Persons" 252). The rhetor in most situations knows she is trying to persuade an audience,¹⁵ but is not entirely

15 The rhetor in these cases is trying to persuade the audience of his identity, giving a first impression and letting that audience know what topics are of interest; essentially, he is persuading the audience to begin communicating with him.

aware of who that audience may include. Gorgias knew he was speaking to Athenians, but did not know their attitudes, their interests, or their positions before he started speaking.¹⁶

Facebook and sites like it allow the rhetor to speculate about the makeup of the audience in advance (because the audience comes to the communication). When choosing an icon for Facebook, the rhetor knows the audience he is choosing the icon *for*. He knows that he is joining a social network focused on advertising his personality, such as MySpace, or that he is joining a dating site for professional singles, like Match.com. This general idea of the audience allows the rhetor to make a best guess about the audience and tailor his online identity to what he believes will be best received by that group.

It must be noted that this awareness of audience brings with it additional complications. Most obviously, the rhetor may not know the *specific* makeup of the audience—he won't know who else has an account on the site. But he will know what kind of focus the members of that audience have. He will know their attitudes, the shared interest that drew them to that social network, and the subjects they are interested in speaking about before he ever encounters them as an audience and target for persuasion. More subtly, in CMC there is no way to be sure how widely information will circulate, and often times there isn't even a way to be aware of how widely it already has

¹⁶ While this may be argued, I am suggesting that Gorgias did not know the specifics of his audience because he often used the same speech (such as The Encomium of Helen) to advertise his abilities as a sophist regardless of the audience. That is to say, his communication was not tailored to a specific audience because it couldn't be; it HAD to be universal to an extent because he was performing the oration multiple times to multiple audiences, all of whom were Athenian.

circulated. This wide spreading out of information, and therefore identity, adds a layer of complication to the notions of audiences and assumptions of those audiences. When choosing an icon, a rhetor does so with a focus on the intended audience, but must also, on some level, be aware that the actual audience will be must more vast and varied.

While CMC scholarship often includes visual rhetoric as a matter of course, almost an addendum, it sometimes does not give the visual the attention that it deserves. Or rather, it does not always acknowledge the amount of impact visual rhetoric can have. Mary Hocks writes that “because modern information technologies construct meaning as simultaneously verbal, visual, and interactive hybrids, digital rhetoric simply assumes the use of visual rhetoric as well as other modalities” (631). This is not a case where the visual can be just one of the modalities; the visual must be the focus of the analysis. Analyzing icons and the role they play in online identity formation is a matter of visual rhetoric; it is visual analysis. Heer and Shneiderman suggest that the most important part of that analysis is specifying what exactly is being analyzed; that is, what data is examined and how that examination should be depicted (31).

Issues of Significance (Chapter summary)

After a literature review (Chapter Two) and an expansion of the theoretical grounding of this project (Chapter Three), I exemplified four examples of how icons are used in social networking, in order to highlight different roles of the icon.

Chapter Four focuses on the decision-making process in choosing icons for the first time. When a rhetor first comes to Facebook, he chooses an icon to represent himself to an audience that he has limited, if any, knowledge about. This presented an opportunity to get at the intended messages before the audience is exposed to them. I surveyed the rhetors in the examples about the images they chose to create their identities when first coming into contact with the online rhetorical space of a social network. By focusing on the reasons why they chose their icons, I highlight the rhetor's intentions as the first step of creating an online identity.

Chapter Five follows one person's icon choices on Facebook over the period of several years and how that selection changed as the person using the icons changed. “Veronica's” choice of icons, and her reasons for choosing each, were investigated. This allowed me to focus on the messages that were being received by the audience, and on the gap between that message received and the message that Veronica intended to send. Through objective description of the images, my own subjective evaluation given my acquaintance with Veronica, the subjective evaluations of others who have never had any contact with Veronica, and her own intentions, I investigate this gap between rhetor intention and audience inference, thus highlighting the significance of icon choice in social networking.

Chapter Six focuses on what an icon can actually do, and what happens when a person has more than one identity on Facebook, an opportunity with identity that is more

easily achieved in the space of social networking than it may be in most other forms of communication. Namely, it focuses on creating multiple, different identities, for different purposes, which exist concurrently. I looked at the Facebook icons chosen by performers in the Minneapolis area burlesque community to highlight the difference between the icons chosen for the on-stage character and those for the off-stage person behind the performer. By examining the focus of each set of choices, I show how the choice of icon influences and is influenced by the audience, setting the 'tone' of communication and presenting the topics that interest the rhetor to those who approach/come into contact with that rhetor by way of the icon.

Chapter Seven focuses more specifically on the role that audience awareness plays in the choice of icons. In it, I have investigated the choice of icons made by those approaching a community with a very specific and explicit makeup, an audience that is cued by the person who owns/started the site. This shows how knowing the audience in social networking both influences the choice of icon and assists in choosing an appropriate icon, one that is most likely to have a received message matching the rhetor's intentions. In order to do so, I have looked somewhere outside of Facebook, a community that focuses primarily on an issue that naturally focuses on identity. The community Gendersociety.com, focused explicitly on the transgender (and those interested in/supportive of the issues important to the transgender) presents a community and a basis from which CMC and social networking can begin. This, in effect, does part of the

rhetor's work for him or her, making the choice of an icon easier and more informed than it would be without knowledge of the audience. It shows how knowledge of the target audience affects the choice of an icon.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Rhetoric and Identity

The study of rhetoric is the study of persuasion, which puts its roots back in ancient Greece with Gorgias, Plato, Isocrates, and, of course Aristotle, who said that rhetoric is “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle 1.2.1). The orators, from the sophists to Cicero, studied, practiced, and taught others to persuade in a variety of contexts. Rhetoric has a long history, one that has been well documented elsewhere. For my purpose, I am focusing on rhetoric as it applies to identity and CMC.

Presenting online identity is a matter of identification, in the sense of Kenneth Burke's definition. He writes that identity requires uniqueness; identity being one-in-the-same, numerical identity. But identity is more than just being unique. Having an identity is about being part of a group. This seems contradictory, but Burke writes that “In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (21). So it is not as paradoxical as it seems, though the idea of identity remains a difficult one.

Kenneth Burke's version of identification suggests that people identify with one another, not in the sense of being literally identical, but in the sense of having joined

interests. If those interests are not joined, Burke writes, one person may *still* identify himself with another, if he assumes their interests are joined, or is convinced that they are (20). When identifying with another person, there remains the question of whether or not those interests are actually joined, whether or not they are speaking the same language (55). So long as the other party continues to act in such a way to support the assumption that the interests are shared, or continues to persuade the audience that they are, identification continues unabated. But should the person showing that similarity of interest show a lack of authenticity (i.e., should it appear that the interests are not *actually* shared), it throws that identification into question.

This is where the discussion leans into the realm of rhetoric, and visual rhetoric in particular. The images used as icons give that first impression to the audience, and presumably remains present during the ensuing discussions and communication, providing a consistent visual persuasion. Understanding an audience is an important part of persuasion. Knowing one's audience makes persuasion more effective, because it allows for an understanding of the needs of that audience, of that rhetorical situation.¹ Since the icon/avatar is a visual artifact, and since it provides an initial presentation, a first impression, in online identity, the rhetoric of images becomes important. An icon is one nonverbal communication of the online world; it is visual rhetoric being used to argue identification. That is, the icon is used to persuade members of an audience that the

¹ Lloyd Bitzer reminds us that “a rhetorical situation must exist as a necessary condition of a rhetorical discourse, just as a question must exist as a necessary condition of an answer” (6). Bitzer is focused on the rhetor, rather than the potential audience. But in order to persuade, someone must exist *to be persuaded*, so the audience therefore is a part of any rhetorical situation.

speaker is also a member of the community, that the speaker is identifying his interest with the cause of the community (Burke 24). And if he is identified with the community, then he would be a member of that community.

Membership in a community requires membership in that community. In any other space, that tautology would be so obvious as to be useless. But in online spaces, what we have is not a tautology, but rather a case of equivocation: the same word being used to mean two different things.² In online spaces, being accepted as a member of a community requires the rhetor being able to prove (or at least persuade) that he is a member of that community, that he belongs with the group and that his interests match up with the interests of the community. Membership requires *membership*. The rhetorical act of gaining that membership is often performed in the creation of an online identity.

Points of reference become important when discussing identity. Having a point of reference is only helpful if that point is authentic. That is to say, a false point of reference is not only unhelpful, but actively harmful; the point of reference allows assumptions to be made, which informs as to the intended audience. A false point of reference would suggest the wrong audience, thus making any attempt at persuasion that much less likely to be successful. The point of online identity is to add good points of reference, to show membership in the community.³

² Admittedly, equivocation is an example of fallacious reasoning. But for this example, that isn't entirely relevant.

³ And therefore awareness of audience.

In addition to adding points of reference, the nature of online identity also *removes* points of reference. As Andrew Brock writes, “The removal of physical signifiers of race from credible online articulations of racial identity highlights that race has always been more about the relation of the sign (locating differences in others) to the signifier (rationales for maintaining social structures) than it is to any particular physiognomic aspect” (32). Without certain points of reference, CMC allows more clarity than the real world. The lack of racial points of reference does not mean racial identity disappears. Lisa Nakamura says that “Though it is true that users' physical bodies are hidden from other users, race has a way of asserting its presence in the language users employ, in the kinds of identities they construct, and in the ways they depict themselves online, both through language and through graphical images” (31). Identity comes through language, regardless of points of reference.

In order to gain *membership* to a community, in order to establish authenticity, one of the requirements is to understand the language of the community. Kenneth Bruffee writes that “Mastery of a knowledge community's normal discourse is the basic qualification for acceptance into that community” (424). This is as true for groups online as it is for discourse communities and academic disciplines; knowing how to talk the talk is an important part of online identity.

But icons still have the effect of presenting that identity, of embodying the speaker as a member of a community. The icon is part of the language of the group, and

just as “the ritual speech acts of individual attestation in the material world are the sub-elements of group ritualized in performance in the construction of collective identity” (Macfadyan 11), so too are icons sub-elements of group ritualization, of establishing identity, online. The icon is where those points of reference most frequently lay, which is why it is such an important part of authenticity.

When identity is not presented and preserved, or done incorrectly, it destroys the illusion of the embodiment already established. Nakamura writes that “many users masquerading as racial minorities in chat spaces tend to depict themselves in ways that simply repeat and reenact old racial stereotypes” (107). This too-close following of stereotypes, then, becomes a false cue. That is to say, acting too much like the stereotypical member of a group *detracts* from identity.

There is value in acting like a member of the group. Messinger et al. write that “just as people who engage in mimicry of verbal and nonverbal cues of group members tend to be more likable than non-mimickers, mimicking avatars [icons] are more positively perceived by participants in a virtual environment than non-mimicking avatars. Furthermore, the fact that people prefer to talk to attractive or interesting looking people holds true in virtual environments where more attractive avatars are more sought after for communication” (4-5). The more the icon uses the same style as members of the group, the more the rhetor mimics the cues of the members of a group, the more likely the person using that icon is to be accepted as a *member* of said group.

Social Networking and Embodiment

While there is debate generally about the place of embodiment in CMC, the debate is best focused, for the purpose of this study, on social networks. While Facebook is the primary site of study for this investigation, there has been social networking before the term came into common parlance. Early days of CMC had social networks where users were able to communicate with each other for a variety of reasons (such as sharing a gaming experience or just chatting), and those spaces were limited to text.

There is little embodiment in text; all that exists is what shows up onto the screen; other situations have much more 'embodiment' available. Unlike the chatrooms, MUDs and MOOs of the 1990s, there are today possibilities including the addition of a picture or image to a poster's profile, or even the extreme example of the fully rendered avatar, which could be a way that the body is creeping its way back in to a non-embodied environment. The debate about embodiment has gone back and forth, with both possibilities given credence, without either one ever seeming to achieve consensus. Turkle (1995) suggested that the internet was a space on the other side of the 'looking glass' and that identities were constructed there separate from bodies (*Life on Screen* 12). Since then, Marisol Del-Teso Craviotto (2008) wrote that the lack of visual and aural cues in internet spaces make embodiment difficult, if not impossible (251). They argue that the internet is not embodied, that it is a place for exploration and experimentation. This gives users of the internet a disembodied freedom to create their own identities,

whether it be an icon representing just the face, head on, or of the full body. While some (Canny & Poulos, 2000) believe that the lack of haptic sensation, the lack of touch, reduces the effectiveness of any online embodiment, and indeed point out that the non-verbal cues presented by an icon are intentional, it seems that even a *reduced effectiveness* of the embodiment does not reduce the issue of there *being* embodiment in online spaces.

Arguments that see the internet (and specifically social networks) as embodied tend to focus around the problems that would occur if the internet were seen as disembodied. Steve Benford, John Bowers, Lennart E. Fahlen, Chris Greenhalgh and Dave Snowden (1995), for example, write that “without sufficient embodiment, users only become known to one another through their (disembodied) actions; one might draw an analogy between such users and poltergeists, only visible through paranormal activity” (242). This is important; it is difficult (if not impossible) for people to become members of a group without that group being aware that they even exist. Knowing audience is important, but the audience must also be aware that there is a speaker or rhetor. Without this awareness, the audience has no impetus to pay attention, no reason to become part of the process of persuasion. This lack of audience participation makes persuasion at best irrelevant (the speaker only trying to convince himself) and at worst impossible (because there is no one to be convinced). Without some form of embodiment, there can't be the kind of connection that exists in face-to-face communication; people online won't know

whom they are talking to, nor have any feeling that those they are communicating with are real people. This prevents the communities from forming, because no member can be certain that there are any other members. Hence, no one can be certain that they are not just talking into a vacuum.

Jeremy Kaye (2005) argues that assuming a lack of embodiment suggests certain ideologies, for instance the lack of intention for moving from online space to reality (159). Benford et al. believe that not only is embodiment extant, but is in a key issue in collaborative communication online (249). Others, such as Huffaker and Calvert (2005), suggest that embodiment exists, but is constructed in a flexible manner online (2).

Susan Paasonen (2005) asks whether or not it is even possible to leave the body completely behind (237), and suggests that identity is part performance and partially decided for us (235). Lisa Nakamura (2002) claims that even when the body is left behind, it (or at least, race) has a way of asserting itself through language and image (31). If the body cannot be completely left behind—if that is part of the identity decided for us—then there certainly cannot be disembodiment, and there are even limits to the variability of embodiment. While this question is significant, it seems that no matter how one slices it, there is still opportunity for at least some method of embodiment. Everything from screen names (that is to say, user names) to icons to avatars presents situations where users can create a pseudo body for themselves, an identity that has its own authenticity. Certainly, there are differences between the embodiment of the internet

and the body of the real world. Aspects of the body that exist in real life—such as the physical body itself—do not exist online. Similarly, there is a level of variability and performativity available online that cannot be easily reproduced in the real world.

Before there were graphical interfaces for online communication, the only options were screen names, along with written out descriptions of a person/character (Turkle *Life on Screen* 12). While these screen names presented any number of first impressions that could be seen as a form of embodiment—HotGirl99 and NietzscheLvr could be expected to be *very* different people with different goals in mind—icons allow much greater variability, allowing photographs, short animations, cartoons, pictures, and full body constructs to present the specific identity the rhetor wishes to embody. The medium of embodiment is expanded, making identity easier to see than to 'hear';⁴ using the visual to communicate (McLuhan and Fiore, Kress). Images, and specifically icons, can be calibrated to the needs of the audience.

The choice of icon depends on the intended audience, and while each is an expression of the 'real' person on the other side of the screen, they do not present that person as a whole; rather, only parts are presented (much in the same way that people present different aspects of themselves at work than they do relaxing with friends, or the way they pose for a photograph).

⁴ in the sense of screen names.

Visual Rhetoric and Icons

In 1995, Sherry Turkle talked about online identity in *Life on the Screen*. Others since have responded to Turkle, expanded on her views, and made suggestions for improvement. While Turkle made important discoveries and presented significant points, that particular work is now somewhat out of date in the specifics, though not in the general theory; the Internet has changed so much—adding images, animation and other options not available in 1995—that the current life on the screen has practically nothing in common with that former life. This is not to suggest that Turkle herself is behind the times; she has continued to study the field and continued to contribute to it. But *Life on the Screen* can be seen as a seminal work, a start of the conversation.

Because some connections can be ported to the present, the places Turkle examined in 1995 are analogously similar to places existing today. Turkle was primarily examining MUDs (Multi-User Domains) and MOOs (MUDs, Object Oriented), which were essentially text-based worlds built and inhabited by the people coming online, by the multiple users involved. These spaces are similar to the more visually rich MMORPGs (Massively Multi-player Online Role Playing Games) such as *World of Warcraft*, where people can come online and take up the roles of a variety of creatures, playing in the game world and interacting with other players along the way. But those spaces were also early social networks, where people could get together and communicate with one another, where they could socialize in the way that people now

socialize on Facebook. Naturally, there has been a fair amount of change in the social aspects of online communication over time. Turkle addresses this change in her more recent book *Alone Together* when she writes “In games where we expect to play an avatar, we end up being ourselves in the most revealing ways; on social-networking sites such as Facebook, we think we will be presenting ourselves, but our profile ends up as somebody else – often the fantasy of who we want to be” (153). Since MMORPGs allow more variety and (literally) more animation to the presented identities in avatars than MMOs could possibly create, there is more chance for identity work, which is why Turkle says that “In the course of a life, we never ‘graduate’ from working on identity; we simply rework it with the materials at hand” (158). This change in technology, these new possibilities for identity play, give new space for the debate about embodiment online. While the technology has moved so far since 1995, the debate about embodiment remains fractured, even as the theory demands to be updated.

Because of the additional space of visual rhetoric, this needs to be updated.⁵ There was not much that could be done visually speaking online in 1995. It used to be the case that semiological investigation was the 'best'⁶ way to understand the internet, but the vast array of possibilities now available online make any attempt at rhetoric all but demand the inclusion of the visual. Semiology is generally focused on text, the sign, which itself relies on the relation between the signifier and signified, as Saussure suggested in *Course*

5 There is a vast and lengthy corpus of literature covering the interactions of the visual and text (Baudrillard, Blair, Hill, Martinez, etc.).

6 'Best' here meaning most effective in the sense of most broadly applicable.

in General Linguistics: “I propose to retain the word *sign* [*signe*] to designate the whole and to replace the *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* [*signifié*] and *signifier* [*signifiant*]” (67, formatting preserved). Semiology, then, is focused on the relationship between what is actually being represented (signified) and how that thing is being presented (signifier); these two things together are the sign. This definition suggests that semiology is the discussion of language. But, as Gunther Kress writes, “‘Language’ isn’t a big enough receptacle for all the semiotic stuff we felt sure we could pour into it” (15).” There is more that can be communicated by more than just words and language; that is, there are more signifiers than just words. Icons are easily signifiers, but are images rather than text. Kress claims that “*Writing*, previously the canonical mode par excellence, is giving way to *image*” (133, formatting preserved). This is not to suggest that image has, or ever will, replace text entirely. Instead, Kress is suggesting that image is become more significant, a more focused mode of communication than it used to be. Essentially, Kress is claiming that the image is becoming more semantically relevant, and that the image (particularly when paired with the word, as Scott McCloud suggested) is more effective at communicating than the word. Visual rhetoric must be included.

Looking at icons on social networks is looking for visual communication, visual rhetoric. And, as Anthony Blair says, visual communication can be more efficient than verbal (53). This is because so much more can be communicated through an image than

through words. However, Regula Valérie Burri writes that “Images are unclear and can be misunderstood; they leave space for heterogeneous interpretations” (51), which suggests that there are problems with communication through purely visual means. Though there may be problems, visual artifacts cannot be ignored. Sonja Foss writes that “Visual artifacts constitute a major part of the rhetorical environment, and to ignore them to focus only on verbal discourse means we understand only a miniscule portion of the symbols that affect us daily” (303). This is more true in CMC than other situations, as the visual artifacts make up a larger part of the available communication than in other types of communication, making the image (the icon) a more important available means of persuasion.

Icons provide framing and the social activity of communication (Kress 51) as objects of visual rhetoric. Forming an identity on Facebook is often done with an icon. This allows users—or, more aptly, *rhetors*—to explore their identities by emphasizing one particular aspect of who they are, or presenting an image of what they wish they were; many icons are similar to the real person, but an idealized version of them, representing aspects they consider essential to their identities (Messinger et al. 3). It also allows users to experiment with other identities that they do not share, whether that be identities they are exploring with the hopes of adding to their existing identity (Daniels 111) or are just different identities allowing them to engage in a kind of identity tourism where they can experiment with genders (Del-Teso Craviotto 253). The choices made

when forming this online identity not only speak to the intended audience, but also combine to provide both intentional communication and subconscious persuasion.

Nonverbal Communication Online

In face-to-face conversation, less than half of the communication is in the actual words (Fabri et al.). The majority (60%) actually comes from nonverbal cues (Kirch 416) such as facial expressions (Benford et al. 244), tone of voice, or body language (Fast), all of which help to reduce the ambiguity of communication (Tanis and Postmes 678).⁷

Both the performance of gender and the relationship of authority can be presented without words. Butler writes that “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key senses, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well” (521). While part of that body performance may involve words, the performance and the embodiment are both saturated in the nonverbal. On the subject of authority and authenticity, Leah P. Macfadyen writes that “In cyberspace, bodily markers of ethnicity such as physical attributes and vocal accent are invisible,⁸ and bodily participation in gesture and ritual is impossible” (5). So CMC does not (so clearly) have these social cues, making it difficult to know if the reader will interpret the message the way the

⁷ While there has been a fair amount of research into the effectiveness of social cues in CMC and the difficulty in providing them/comparing them to the cues provided in f2f communication, as discussed by Tanis and Postmes, the focus here is to examine how/why those cues are used and presented, rather than to discuss what those cues may be.

⁸ While accents can be explicit in writing, such as “wassup?” or the dialect sometimes used in fiction, there is no authenticity to these accents, as anyone can choose to use any dialect they want, maintaining it through occasional use, as opposed to the somewhat constant attention needed to ‘fake it’ in real life.

writer intends it (Derks et al. 380), and so must find another way to fulfill the same purpose or requirement; namely, through icons.

“Language connects bodies to selves, even in cyberspace” (178) writes Leah P. Macfadyen. The very act of using language in a way provides embodiment, but the lack of non-verbal language means that there is a certain lack in online language. As Macfadyen writes, “determining precisely how the physical self is manifested in virtual space is more complicated than establishing a one-to-one correlation with the face-to-face world” (178). In other words, the rules of face-to-face communication cannot be used to determine the rules of communication online. They are different spaces, but it may be possible to compare the two spaces by analogy. If the creation of an icon as a rhetorical act (183) in the sense that the icon offers a way to establish identity online, that there is more to the communication than simply the text, as has been the primary way of looking at things in the past (Herring 115). As Domna Banakou and Konstantinos Chorianopoulos write, “Although the technologies of online virtual worlds have been progressing through the years, the main medium of communication has been mostly textual, which does not provide many clues for the physical appearance of others” (5); just because there is the capacity for the visual does not mean that the visual had been used to its full potential. One way to use that visual, to add to the communication online, is with the icon.

Icons show that there is more than just text to online communication. It brings back a certain amount of social feedback (Messinger et al. 5), something that makes communication easier, allowing some of the missing non-verbal communication back into CMC. Without that social feedback, it is difficult to tell if the message has been received as it was intended (Derks et al.). Embodiment, through icons, is one way of providing this important feature of non-verbal communication in the situations where that communication is not possible.⁹

If the space of the internet is embodied,¹⁰ then there are strictures placed on social networking and there are opportunities that would not be there otherwise. For example, embodiment allows a closer connection between parties because it gives a point of reference, which makes communication easier and more effective.

It isn't always possible to pinpoint and be aware of what are the cues of that communication may be. More importantly, people can't control the cues that they give off. It might be possible for someone to be able to control them a bit, muting nonverbal communication in order to hide thoughts when playing poker, but there are so many cues that people may never be able to hide them all. Hiding emotions is very difficult in face-to-face communication. Online, where there is no face visible,¹¹ it is much easier. This is

⁹ With Skype and other video communication, there is, essentially, the same non-verbal communication as in f2f communication. Other non-verbal communication, such as emoticons, do not provide the same depth of communication as an icon. Derks et al. write that "Emoticons are used more consciously than actual nonverbal behavior, which implies that there is more control over the message a person wants to convey" (380). Any form of non-verbal communication that is entirely conscious is suspect; icons only escape that suspicion because while they are chosen consciously, there are elements within that are not conscious, as discussed below.

¹⁰ And my contention is that it is.

¹¹ While it is specifically called *Facebook*, there is still not a consistently visible space, but rather a static image (an icon).

because “The face is directly connected to those areas of the brain involved in emotion, and words are not” (Ekman 84). When the nonverbal cues are visible, the emotions are much less controlled, much more on the surface. This is because they are less conscious.

There *is* nonverbal communication in an online environment, and those cues are learned when one becomes part of the online community. But conscious or not-nonverbal communication is still a learned behavior. Julius Fast writes that “all of our movements, if they are significant, are learned. We pick them up as a part of our society” (141). Any nonverbal communication, from facial expression to posture to body language, is a learned behavior.

The type of image chosen, the engagement with the 'camera,' the extro- or introverted nature of the icon; all of these are nonverbal cues. To learn what can be done with icons, the first step is to look at other icons. It is by examining other examples in the community that it can be seen that a photograph is not required, and that even if the rhetor *does* use a photograph, it need not be as simple as the straight on shot of head and shoulders that the default Facebook icon would suggest. As the rhetor becomes more and more a member of the community, she can learn the nonverbal cues, the movements online that are significant to that community.

This suggestion is supported by Walther et al., who write that “When most nonverbal cues are unavailable, as is the case in text-based CMC, users adapt their language, style, and other cues to such purposes” (37). That is to say, rhetors learn the

movements of the community. They gain the language and non-verbal cues of the audience, and hence are more able to persuade that audience.

The icon presents a first impression. The icon is a static presentation; once chosen, it is unchanging. As discussed above, any change to the icon is tantamount to choosing/creating a new icon. While not private, the icon takes on a very intimate position; it is the first thing people can see, producing a reaction that will then be either supported or undermined by the continued communication of the person behind the icon. A parallel to this might be the first day of school for a transfer student. Lacking any history or knowledge of the new student, other students are left only with the new student's clothing to make that first judgment. Once that judgment is made, the student might support that first impression. Or he might speak or act in such a way that goes against what the first impression suggested, which might bring a negative reaction from his new classmates. Just as this would be a source of stress and worry for the new student, the choosing of an icon may be a source of stress and worry for the (prospective) new member of an online community. Leah Macfayden suggests that this construction of an authentic identity in cyberspace (and whether or not the identities of those they come into contact with are authentic) is one of the greatest challenges for rhetors (5). In both cases, the goal is persuasion. And in both cases, the first impression plays a significant role.

An icon, presenting that impression, is made up of three parts. Or rather, it is presented in three different ways: the message, the audience, and the producer. Aristotle suggested that there are three types of artistic proof that are essential to "the proper study of rhetoric" (Herrick 87): ethos (ethical appeal), logos (logical appeal), and pathos (emotional appeal). While logos generally holds a privileged status as a means of persuasion, much of communication focuses on the other two legs of the rhetorical tripod. The three different ways the icon is presented follows these same appeals, in a very general sense. The message is the impression that is supposed to be given by the icon, the ethical appeal (ethos) that the person be treated as a member of that group. The audience is the group who receives that message, who makes inferences, an emotional process (pathos) about the person from the icon. The producer is the person who selects the icon, the person who is represented, the person *behind* the first impression, who is trying to send the message as clearly and logically as possible (logos).

The difficulty is that the intended message, the implied message, is not always the message that is received; the audience might infer a different meaning, might get the wrong impression about the person, as often happens to Veronica, discussed in Chapter 5. The icon is chosen to present a specific message, layered though it may be. And if that message does not get across properly, if the intended message isn't the one that is received, there is a dissonance. When this sort of dissonance happens off line, when someone gets the wrong impression, that impression can be changed relatively easily.

Sometimes it's as simple as saying "Sorry, you have me confused with someone else," which is something an icon can't do. Icons do help create and maintain identity, but once the message is sent out, it is static and cannot be expounded upon. When the dissonance happens online, when the icon has failed to send its intended message, the rhetor has no such opportunity, making it all the more important to send the right message, even when that message *is* one of dissonance, as in the case of Gender Society in Chapter Seven. For the producer, the person who chooses/creates the icon, it is therefore essential to make that message as clear as possible.

Chapter 3: Parts of the icon

While the primary theoretical focus of icons is through Kenneth Burke and his work on identification, there are a number of other theorists that bear mentioning. However, Burke's lens of a rhetor identifying himself with someone else in order to provide/create a community and membership in that community is the main focus. While identity and audience are covered by CMC scholars such as Turkle, by rhetorical theorists such as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, and by other theorists who contribute elements of the groundwork of this project, the overarching idea of the gap between what the rhetor intends and what the audience infers is a matter of identification, in the Burkean sense of the word.

This chapter focuses on this identification, and on the gap between the rhetor and the audience. To do so, I have examined the types of icons, the reasons a rhetor might choose one type of icon over another, and the effective nature of the different types of icon in the establishment of this identification.

The Intended Message

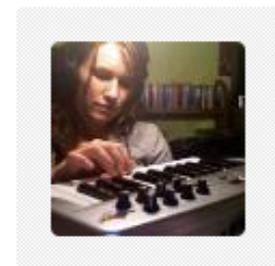
In many social network icons, there is the element of whether the image is a drawing or a photograph, and whether it is posed or candid.¹ This choice tells the audience many things about the rhetor on the other end of the icon. The icon serves the

¹ A picture of a location or inanimate object could not be candid or caught mid-action.

purpose of showing that the rhetor is a person similar to the audience. Kenneth Burke writes, “In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (21). An icon does (or is meant to) take the first step toward that identification with an audience while at the same time maintaining/presenting the individuality of the rhetor.

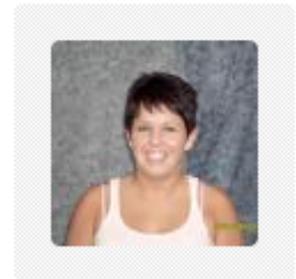
A candid photograph can show more spontaneity, more openness, and a desire to be social. A candid photograph (or image) can create an artificial intimacy with the audience, immediately bringing them in 'closer' and making them a part of an experience. Jeremy Kaye writes that “a person’s photograph, much more than actually able to *represent* reality, makes the viewer *believe* in its reality” (168, italics in original); the image in the photograph, and in the icon generally, does more than provide a clue toward a rhetor’s identity. Indeed, that photograph helps to convince the viewers, the audience, that the identity (and the rhetor) is real, is a person.

A posed photograph, on the other hand, can put up a kind of separation, a barrier between the subject of the photograph and the audience. It presents a more formal and set (i.e., posed) point of view. This can tell provide a fair amount of information (or an impression of information) about the person in the photograph, or at least about her priorities. For example, “Kathy” (Figure 3.1) is



presented as a lover of music, probably an artist herself, or at least someone who possesses the equipment to produce music, as can be seen by looking at the piano/synthesizer she has presented at the foreground of the picture. This image was selected for the viewer, which Kress and van Leeuwen say creates “a kind of symmetry between the way the image-producer relates to the represented participants, and the way the viewer must, willy-nilly, also relate to them” (131). By putting the synthesizer in the foreground the way she has, Kathy has decided to present it as important, and hence an important part of her identity (since the icon is her presentation of identity), one that her audience, as viewers of her icon, cannot ignore. So while the image may be a casual one, the decision to use it is not.

When a posed picture is informal, it can present a number of different messages. The image of “Lula” (Figure 3.2) may be intended to present her as friendly and straightforward, but it might also send the message of being overly simple, or might seem like a passport photograph. Given the neutral background (a backdrop intended for use with photography) and the relatively neutral clothing she is wearing, Lula is not clearly making much of an identity claim as an individual. Her short hair and open smile may present something about her, but overall, this is a somewhat neutral icon. The message it *does* provide is one of openness, of willingness to be a part of a group. She is not here defined, but she may be willing to *be* defined.



Contrasting to this idea would be the image of “♀♀SkYe♀♀” (figure 3.3). Although the picture in this icon is posed (most likely taken by her cell phone, held in her right hand, based on the picture itself), she is presenting herself in a faux-candid way. That is, she has created an image that *looks* candid, but that she clearly



♀♀SkYe♀♀

posed for. Her eyes looking off to the side allow her makeup to be seen more clearly, and her facial expression, the innocent smirk on her lips, present her as an outsider, but a friendly one. She has the tips of her hair dyed, a tattoo on her wrist, large piercings in her ear, and a piercing in her lip; all of these present her as a member of a specific subculture (in this case, likely some variation of ‘punk’). The image presents the message that she is her own person, unique and special in the way members of her subculture tend/want to be.

The name itself also suggests something important about her identity. The symbols flanking the name SkYe, the ♀, are symbols of femininity. But the picture itself is somewhat androgynous; it is possible that it is of a young man with eyeliner on. So what message do these symbols present (or are intended to present)? To some, they may present simply that SkYe is female. To others, it may be seen as a matter of insistence, showing that she has often been mistaken for a male, and wants to avoid those questions. Or it may be a representation of transgender feelings.

Some posed pictures are more formal, which may present the rhetor as someone respectful and ordered, who is willing to follow the rules. It may, like Shane Steven's icon (Figure 3.4), present the rhetor as a professional. Since it is used for his faculty profile, this particular image is how Shane Stevens wants to be presented to the visitors to his school's website.



However, this same image could also send the message that the rhetor is an outsider, an 'other' from the group (such as, for example, a group of Stevens' students in a class), and he is trying to make that separation clear. The pose can then either suggest an openness to new ideas or a judgmental stance, depending on other factors of the picture, such as facial expression, clothing, and background. As simple a thing as whether he is smiling or frowning, whether he keeps his face carefully neutral or not can all change the impression he makes. The personal photograph, particularly the face, is a more trusted way to communicate than with words. As Ekman et al. write, "Words are not trusted as much as faces, when it comes to emotions" (375).

Facial expressions play a large part in communication. They are one of the primary sources of nonverbal communication as Ekman et al. discuss, whether that be raising eyebrows that can give a similar emphasis as italics do in text (710) or just the rapid facial changes that convey emotions (210). The difficulty with facial expression

when it comes to icons is that icons are by nature static. Rather than the quick flash of emotion, then, an icon is an image that won't change. This may have the effect of making the expression less trustworthy. Ekman et al. writes that “the very long facial expressions are not genuine expressions of emotion, but *mock* expressions, in which the person is playing at showing an emotion in an exaggerated fashion” (287). If people subconsciously react to icons the same way they react to these mock expressions, they may take the expression in an icon to be more disingenuous the longer they look at it. These pictures of facial expressions (figure 3.5) at first glance show genuine emotion, but the longer they remain as they are, the more obvious it becomes that they are posed. So, while photographs and other images can present a non-verbal expression, that expression does not have the same impact as one that isn't static.



Figure 3.5

The second type of icon mentioned before was the cartoon, the drawing. While it may seem as though this image is an attempt by the rhetor to hide who he or she really is, this type of icon still says a fair amount about the rhetor. As Burri writes, “what can be seen in an image is thus the result of specific aesthetic decisions made during the production of the image” (50). The rhetor chooses the image, in this case the drawing, based on specific decisions, which in turn suggest information about the rhetor (namely, her aesthetic preferences). The drawing is immediately and clearly recognized as not being a literal representation, which itself says something about the rhetor's approach to identity online. This allows the rhetor to be more selective about what is and what is not presented. That is, the rhetor is given far more control over the level and type of embodiment with a drawing than he may be with a photograph.

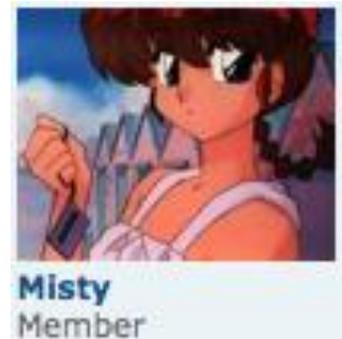
Within the realm of the drawing icon, there are both the sub-types and the meanings of choices made with the drawing. For example, drawings may have the same issues as photographs with regards to eye contact, facing toward the 'camera,' and whether the drawing is 'posed' or 'candid.' The question is slightly different with a drawing, as there is no literal camera, and the eyes are facing exactly where the artist wanted them to face. The posed/candid question must be on a certain level abstract, as any drawing is posed by the artist, even those that are of an active and moving subject. So while those decisions may have similar results and meanings in a drawing as they do with a photograph, it should be acknowledged that those decisions are *more* conscious with

drawings. Kress and van Leeuwen write “the point of view of the subjective, perspectival image has been selected *for* the viewer. As a result there is a kind of symmetry between the way the image-producer relates to the represented participants, and the way the viewer must, willy-nilly, also relate to them” (131). Drawings are even more perspectival, because the producer has that much more control of what kind of point of view has been chosen for the viewer. While photographs can be manipulated via programs such as Photoshop or with clever lighting and camera technique, a drawing is *entirely* in the control of the artist, and limited only by that artist’s vision and ability. A drawing can be of literally anything.

Drawings allow and even demand a substitution for the real body of the rhetor. The drawing puts in place a new body that may be similar to that body, but there is even less connection with the drawing than there is with the photograph. When the members of an audience see a photograph, they can assume that the photograph is of the person on the other end of the computer, a photograph of the rhetor.² But with the drawing, while there *may* be some connection with the actual rhetor, the first assumption should be that there is not; that is, the drawing is a representation of the rhetor as he wishes to present himself online, not as he actually exists offline.

² With the exception of such cases where the photograph is obviously of an idol or famous person that the rhetor identifies with.

Consider the image used by “Misty” (figure 3.6) as an example of a cartoon icon. Though it is an icon used by someone using the name “Misty,” the audience is not expected to assume that Misty³ *actually* looks like this. The picture is in fact from the Anime *Ranma ½*, in which the main character (Saotome Ranma) is a martial artist who becomes female when hit with cold water, and male (figure 3.7) when hit with hot. This alone suggests that the rhetoric using the name Misty does not look like the image. But it also tells a fair amount about Misty as a person. This icon was taken from a transgender forum, and is very appropriate to the audience Misty is trying to reach. The choice of using the female Saotome suggests that Misty identifies as female, even though there is part of her (likely, her biology) that is male.



Thus a fair amount can be inferred about Misty from her choice of a cartoon. The cartoon icon does not represent her as a body, but rather represents her as a statement of her identity. In addition to the reference to her transgender identity, this icon also suggests a more than passing familiarity with the style of Anime (Japanese Animation) itself, and likely says something about Misty's age. *Ranma ½* was a brief television show

³ Or whatever his/her real name may be.

that ran in 1989 with only 18 total episodes. It was not particularly popular,⁴ which suggests that Misty either found it while looking for a specific type of anime (in this case, transgender) or that Misty has a breadth of knowledge of the field, and hence was able to find this particularly salient example. Even if the icon is not recognized for what it is, it would still be recognized as a still from an Anime, which would imply that Misty is a fan of the genre.

The audience's knowledge will therefore affect message that it can infer. So while the image implies a great deal—Misty's knowledge of Anime, her likely position on the transgender spectrum, her age, etc.—how much can be inferred from that is dependent on the audience.

The significance of this cannot be overstressed. When an icon is chosen, a rhetor must remember that her audience may not infer everything she intends with the icon (and, indeed, may infer things she did *not* intend at all). Fabri et al. write that “Since each avatar [icon] is both part of the perceived environment and represents the user that is doing the perceiving, inhabitants potentially develop a strong sense of mutual awareness” (270). This mutual awareness ties into the identification Burke suggests above. That identification, however, is tempered by the knowledge of the members of a group. If the group does not share that awareness with the rhetor, then there will be no (or less) identification, and therefore less acceptance into the community.

⁴ According to IMDB on 11/12/12 (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096686/>), it had been rated by only 1,384 users. This can be compared to *InuYasha*, another anime series by the same creator (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0290223/>), which has 5454 ratings and is ten years younger (newer).

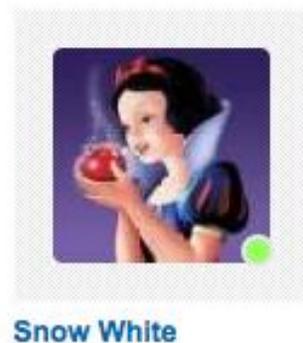
This is why it is so important to understand the way icons are and can be used. When a rhetor engages in the visual rhetoric of online identity, she must understand how much and how little can be presented in an image, and be aware of what might be inferred based on the knowledge of her intended audience. Sherry Turkle, in her more recent work, says that “When we perform a life through our avatars, we express our hopes, strengths, and vulnerabilities ... our lives on the screen may be play, but they are serious play” (*Alone Together* 213). The choice of icon expresses the identity of the rhetor; it is a serious game that is being played. Part of that play is knowing who else is involved, who makes up the intended audience. Misty's use of this same icon in an online community focused on animation will present a very different identity than it does on Gender Society, where Misty uses this icon.

That irreconcilability of the cartoon is an important factor when using a drawing or cartoon as an icon. When a rhetor uses a drawing he (or a friend) produced, there is very little chance of it being recognized by the audience. In such a case, the audience may be expected to assume that the drawing is either from an obscure source or is meant to be a closer representation of the actual rhetor than other drawings might. It might bring some connection to other images or characters, but these connections would then be something that the person wanted to emphasize about his identity. For example, if the drawing presents the person as having some kind of super power, that might suggest that the person sees himself as either being heroic or at the very least wanting to present

himself that way. In so far as the drawing reminds the audience of other drawings, people, or situations, the unique drawing is presenting those aspects of identity while maintaining the separation of having the drawing be *of* the rhetor.

Alternately, a rhetor might choose to use an extremely recognizable drawing or cartoon. Using a well-known and established cartoon, a recognizable drawing, puts that character into the mind of the audience, inviting comparison between that character and the rhetor. Take, for example, an icon (figure 3.8) that uses

a famous image. While the user name matches the icon, it seems safe to assume that the person using the icon is not claiming to *actually* be Snow White from the 1937 Disney movie.⁵ Far more reasonable to expect that the person identifies with Snow White, and has chosen this image from the cartoon to represent herself. This icon might be meant to



suggest that “Snow White” is innocent, or it might suggest that she is on the edge of losing that innocence; the apple in her hand brings that into question, as does whether or not the apple has already had a bite taken out. Whatever the intent, anyone who looks at this icon who is familiar with the cartoon, which likely includes a vast majority of people, will know certain things about how the person behind the icon, the producer, wants to be presented.

⁵ This is a case of the rhetor using an idol that he or she identifies with, as discussed above.

Contrast this with Misty. Misty's image has far more meaning to those who are fans of that particular cartoon than it would to those who are not. Similarly, anyone who is completely unaware of Snow White may infer a different message than would be inferred by those who know the movie.⁶ That said, Misty's icon gives a much more nuanced message to those who know where it comes from; Misty is focused far more on a specific audience.

It is important to acknowledge that there are some drawings and cartoons that will also fall into other categories. I have already discussed how a drawing might be of a real person, thus similar to a photograph. But the drawing may also be of a landscape, or of an object that does not actually exist. An image of a science fiction cityscape or a drawing of a mythical creature may have a fair amount in common with pictures of other landscapes or of animals, but will still technically be drawings. Those cases will have some aspects of the drawing, but also some aspects of the photograph when determining what that icon presents of the rhetor's identity.

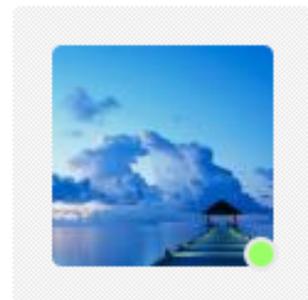
Another category of icon is the picture; not the picture of a person, but rather the picture of something that is significant to the person, that represents the personality of the rhetor without representing his physical appearance. This category can be seen as the most potentially inclusive of the categories, though it should be noted that it is *not* a catch-all category; that is, pictures are more than just anything that isn't a photograph or a

⁶ Snow White, of course, is far more popular and well known, so it is unlikely that this message will face the same difficulty in understanding as Misty might face with the more obscure image.

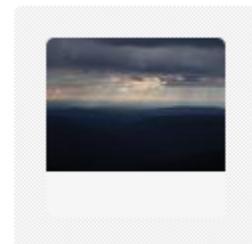
drawing. Pictures do come in many varieties, but each of these varieties presents a different type of identity, and these varieties are significant in their own right.

One important factor of the picture is that it is *not* of a specific person (real or imagined). The picture does not represent a character in a video game, nor does it represent a real person, nor the idolized version of one. An identity presented by picture is presented with the immediate understanding of the Other. That is to say, the picture icon is always the icon of the Other. When a rhetor chooses to use a picture as an icon, he is choosing therefore to present himself as external to the group, separate from the audience. He may choose to present himself as being simply outside, or as being all inclusive, or above or below; whatever choice is made for this presentation of identity, however, it is always presented as being Other.

Sometimes, a landscape is an icon. Each landscape icon presents a different message. The icon of “J.” (figure 3.9) is peaceful, an image often associated with vacation and relaxation: a pier with a pagoda, presumably somewhere tropical. This sends, not surprisingly, a peaceful message. Compare this with the much darker Susie Lee icon (figure 3.10), a stormy sky over the ocean. This gives a much darker message, presenting her as being potentially a troubled soul,

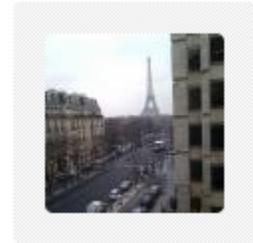


J.



having a stormy identity, and may suggest a gloomy disposition or a specific interest, depending on the audience that interprets that icon.

The icon of “Ms.” (figure 3.11) presents a third option: the landscape of a city; a cityscape. The centrality of the Eiffel Tower makes it clear that this image is of Paris. Whether this means that “Ms.” is herself Parisian, or if it is just an image of a city where she would like to be is unknowable without further

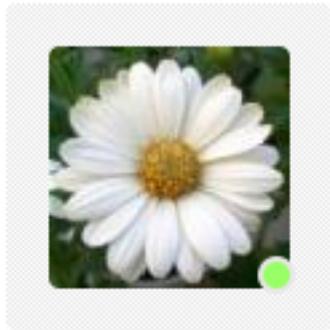


Ms. [redacted]

interaction with Ms. or her writing. Either way, she is presenting herself as someone who identifies with the city. By choosing an image with the Eiffel Tower so prominently displayed, she makes it clear that it is important *what* city she is presenting, not just that she is presenting *a* city. The Eiffel Tower is so iconic that it likely is not in the picture ‘accidentally.’ Without it, those who knew Paris would still recognize the city, but others might just see it as a city (possibly recognizing it at least as a city in Europe), but not be able to identify specifically which one. The Tower, then, must be significant, must be an important part of the message she is sending. This is further supported by the centrality of the Tower in the picture: the eye is drawn first to the Eiffel Tower, then to the rest of the photograph. Clearly, then, the Tower is intended to be a significant part of the icon.

A picture may also be of something smaller than a land- or cityscape. It might be, for example, of a flower, such as the one of “Spicy Ginger” (figure 3.12). Whoever “Spicy Ginger” is, the choice of the flower, and specifically of a daisy, must mean

something. Flowers are often seen as being pretty and delicate, which might be the message that Ginger is trying to send. But there is also a certain amount of dissonance here; the picture directly conflicts with the name she has given herself. Generally, ginger is taken to mean the spice, a flavor which can sometimes be very sharp. A daisy is not a ginger, though there are ginger flowers (3.13). So the intent of just having a flower is not the reason for the choice of the daisy. A ginger flower is more colorful than a daisy, so the decision was not based on color. Perhaps the message is one of innocence, as the daisy is mostly white where the ginger is mostly red. Perhaps it was chosen *because* of this dissonance, intending to intrigue other people into asking the same questions I ask when I wonder why she chose a daisy instead of a ginger.



Spicy Ginger

Figure 3.12



Figure 3.13

Whatever the case, each of these pictures present the person behind it in an abstract way, as both other and as distinctly not reliant on the image of a body. The identity being created by these rhetors is therefore *not* an embodied identity. Lisa Nakamura writes that “coherent discourse demands that one is able to conceptualize a

self that is *different* from its interlocutors” (40). These icons, though they do not create embodiment, still produce a space for identity, a difference from the other members of a group; there is still a thing that is Ginger in that it (the icon) is definitely not not-Ginger. In the case of these icons, there is a sort of embodiment; not a literal body, but rather a claiming of space online.

The Audience of/for (online) Identity

Whatever type of icon is used, the purpose of the icon remains the same: to suggest identification with the group. To be accepted as part of a group, a rhetor must be able to show that he belongs with the group. As Kenneth Burke writes, “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (55). So persuading members of a group that a rhetor is part of that group—when he is presenting his identity—requires knowing the ‘lingo,’⁷ being able to show that we can identify our ways with theirs. While most of the performance will be done after the first impression is made, after the icon is chosen, the icon will continue to play an important role. Initially, the icon plays the role of the first impression. But what impression is given will depend on whom is seeing the icon. That is, the audience. So knowing who makes up the intended audience and being able to analyze that group is an essential part of the icon choosing process.

⁷ While ‘lingo’ is generally seen as referring to language, it is possible to see it also as a selection of specific types of images. It is the ‘lingo’ of a group that focuses on specific video games to only use images from those games, for example. Using the same type of image, just like using the same type of language, helps a rhetor establish identification with a group.

Audience analysis is a basic social skill, one most people use without even realizing it. Rhetors are making choices such as what icon to use through their understanding of their audience. When people are among different groups, they act differently, often without even realizing it. Most people have learned to do so by learning the laws, the conventions, and the rules that govern social circumstances. Churchland writes “explanations presuppose laws—rough and ready ones, at least—that connect the explanatory conditions with the behavior explained” (2).

These laws are present in any social situation, and in most cases where people have found acceptance, where they are comfortable that they 'fit in,' it is because they have analyzed their audience and shifted their actions in such a way that those actions will be more accepted and approved by the members of that audience.

Saying that is all well and good, but it is important to be able to see *how* an audience might be analyzed by a rhetor putting together an online identity. This is part of the rhetoric of online identity, if seen through the correct lens: “rhetoric and everyday practices can be defined as internal manipulations of a system – that of language or that of an established order” (de Certeau 24). This view of rhetoric shows that analyzing audience is part of manipulating that internal system of identity within any given online space. Each system has its own rules, its own laws, and part of being able to perform that manipulation is knowing what those rules are. Those rules can be discovered because, as de Certeau writes, “Every society always manifests somewhere the formal rules which its

practices obey” (21-22). Different situations require different techniques for finding those rules.

When a rhetor chooses an icon, he is doing so in order to present himself to a group. That group is sometimes represented as a general public, or as a 'limited public' such as Facebook, Myspace, Google+, or Friendster. But frequently, the groups are select and focused, even if they are publicly available and publicly visible.

In order to know the audience that a group consists of, the rhetor must learn what he can of the group itself. Knowing about the group will allow him to find the laws that de Certeau says we need to manipulate.

If an icon is not recognizable by members of a group, that icon will lose much of the communicative power it initially has. This is the difficulty of images in general. As Burri writes, “Images are unclear and can be misunderstood; they leave space for heterogeneous interpretations” (51). This space of uncertainty is a space in which a misinterpretation can be made, which will undercut the effectiveness of the rhetor’s attempt at identification.

Consider the cartoon image of the man with the black hair (figure 3.14).⁸ Someone unfamiliar with the image might have a very different reaction than someone who recognizes it would have. Leaving aside the user name for a moment, someone seeing this image who didn't recognize it might assume that it is meant to represent someone with strong features, someone of wealth and of traditional 'all American' values. It would be expected that the rhetor using this icon identifies himself along these lines.



These assumptions would cause a level of dissonance when the audience sees the user name, José. José does *not* look like the person in this picture. A traditionally Spanish/Mexican name, José is not a name that would match this image. For an audience that does not recognize the source of the image, this dissonance might cause them to infer that José has a willingness to poke fun at himself or a sense of humor about his ethnicity. But they might also infer that he is ashamed of that ethnicity, or that he is angry that people assume certain things about him based on his name, and is presenting the picture of a stereotypical Anglo-European to try to allay those assumptions.

On the other hand, an audience who recognizes the image will have a very different reaction. An audience who knows that this is a still of Sterling Archer from the cartoon *Archer* will know that José is a fan of the show, and will likely make inferences

⁸ Used as an icon on Google+.

and assumptions about him based on that. The character on the show is a ridiculous parody of all the worst parts of the classic spies from cinema. Sterling Archer is a sexist, racist womanizer who can't keep a secret, overreacts to everything, and is constantly belittling the people around him. However, since the show clearly presents these faults for comedic purposes, it is unlikely that a fan of the show will think that José identifies with and is advertising himself as possessing these qualities. Rather, fans of the show might assume a certain level and certain type of sense of humor, possibly even (again) a willingness to poke fun at himself.⁹

Speaking generally, whenever a rhetor is faced with a new audience, she must learn as much as she can about that audience in order to be more persuasive. The idea of audience awareness is all well and good, and it is helpful to know that a rhetor must either create an audience or adapt to one. But how is that done? How does one learn about an audience? The easy answer is through lurking or direct inquiry, which I will discuss presently. Examining an audience in terms of the community that forms it can be complicated.¹⁰

Cicero knew the importance of audience. He wrote that “nothing in oratory ... is more important than to win for the orator the favor of his hearer...” (328). As for how it is done, Cicero wrote “I engage wholeheartedly in a consideration so careful, that I scent

9 While the reaction *may* be the same if an audience is aware of the image and if it is not, those situations are likely to be coincidence. Those who recognize the image will be able to make deeper and more accurate inferences than those who do not.

10 Discussed in Chapter 7, when examining Gender Society.

out with all possible keenness their thoughts, judgments, anticipations, and wishes, and the direction in which they seem likely to be led away most easily by eloquence” (329). He is talking about persuading a tribunal, but this application to the legal situation does not make the method any less significant or any less effective. Audience analysis is this engagement, this scenting out of thoughts, judgments, wishes, and so on. And one does this by reading and looking at members’ icons; knowing what will persuade the audience is the first step in being able to do so.

Part of understanding that audience is knowing the audience itself. What, or perhaps whom, makes up the audience? Is audience the same as a knowledge community, which is “a group of people who accept, and whose work is guided by, the same paradigms and the same code of values and assumptions” (Bruffee 423)? In order to analyze the audience, the rhetor must know as much as possible about that audience. It is not enough to know how *she* would respond as part of that audience; that would be tantamount to asking what it would be like for her to be a bat, rather than asking what it is like for *a bat* to be a bat (Nagel 423). This is a very subtle pitfall. The rhetor may be tempted to determine the way an audience will react by thinking how she would react were she a part of that audience. But as an outsider, she is *not* part of that audience. So asking how *she* would react is unhelpful. The rhetor might think that her audience is changing as her icon changes. But assumptions she makes about the audience, or assumptions others assume she makes, do not show how the audience will/did *actually*

react. The rhetor must know how a member of the audience will react, not how he himself would react *as a member* of that audience. He must know the way the audience *itself* thinks and reacts to various stimuli. As for how that is done, there are two main methods: lurking and direct inquiry.

Lurking is when someone observes interaction, reads what others have said, and generally investigates the community without becoming a part of it. While the term has some negative connotations to it, the practice itself has great value. Aside from giving those too shy to take direct part in a conversation a way of still participating, lurking also allows people to learn about those having the conversation. That is, lurking allows a rhetor the opportunity to learn about an audience *before* attempting to persuade it.

Lurking is an important and valuable part of the life cycle of participation in an online community (Nonnecke and Preece 127). In fact, many people online spend time lurking, because it “enables them to decide if the group is right for them, learn, and gain confidence about the best way to engage with its members” (Preece et al. 211). That is to say, lurking is a way of learning about an audience, of analyzing that audience, before making the attempt to engage with that audience. Lurking allows a rhetor to learn as much as possible about the group before presenting himself as (potential) part of it. This allows him to better understand what the group values, and therefore to choose an icon that represents what he intends it to represent; this is an opportunity that is not available

offline.¹¹ When a rhetor wants to investigate a community offline, such as the way an anthropologist would, she must (or, at least, *should*) always keep in mind the observation bias. That is, people in a group might act differently when they know that they are observed. And if the rhetor observes from far enough away and in subtle enough ways to ensure that the audience is *not* aware that they are being observed, he by necessity will miss a fair amount of the communication and activity of the community, because he cannot get too close (or else risk them knowing they are being observed). And even then, it is difficult to be *certain* that the group is unaware of the observer's presence

Online, as a lurker, the rhetor can *know* that she is invisible. Much of a community can be visited and examined without joining it, which means that a lurker can at any time read conversations, see icons, and find out a fair amount about the community without ever announcing her presence.¹² So while the lurker is an outsider, she becomes privy to the communication of the insiders, allowing her to better understand who the members of the community are, what kind of audience they form.¹³

That is the crux of audience analysis. Knowing the audience allows the rhetor to limit the gap between what he, the producer, intends to imply and what is inferred by the audience. When choosing an icon, the producer makes the choice to imply certain things

11 While there is some similarity between lurking online and auditing a class, when we lurk, no one knows we are there. Someone auditing a class is always in some way present and visible to the other members of the class, even if she never speaks or does anything to draw attention to herself. Other classmates might not know that she is auditing, but they do know that she is *there*.

12 Members of the community must be aware of this on some level, but since there is no tangible difference between there being a thousand lurkers and there being none, it is fair to say that the members of the community, the audience, is acting the same regardless of the presence or absence of lurkers.

13 While private messages remain an exception, those messages, by their very nature, exclude the majority of people *in* the community as well as those on the outside. Being a member or being a lurker makes little if any difference as far as access to these private messages.

about his identity. But he can never be certain how others will interpret that icon. In the worst case, the message inferred will be the opposite of what the rhetor intended to imply. In the best case, there will be no meaning lost whatsoever, and the received message will be exactly what the producer intended. Sometimes, the message is clear and easy to interpret. It is unlikely that someone seeing the icon chosen by “Paulette Silva” (Figure 3.15) is going to think that she is trying to present an identity as a swimming aficionado or as really anything other than a young woman trying to get attention by being sexual in her dress and her pose, and therefore she will attract the sort of attention she is seeking. Similarly, this Friendster image of “Joanne” (Figure 3.16) seems pretty clear in what message she is trying to send. Like Paulette, Joanne seems to be seeking attention for her physical appearance, in particular her breasts. Given that the purpose of both Myspace and Friendster is to meet new people, these could be considered successful icons; they will almost certainly draw the attention of those that Paulette and Joanne are seeking to meet (assuming they are seeking to meet potential sexual partners).

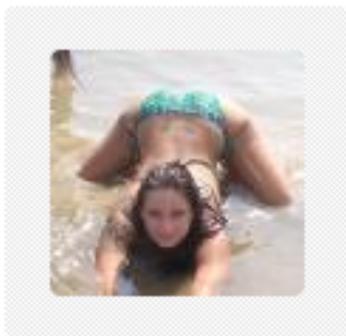


Figure 3.15



Figure 3.16

But consider “Betty” and her icon, also from Friendster (Figure 3.17). A picture of a smiling face, this icon might be intended simply to present her as inviting friendship and conversation. But when presented along with Paulette and Joanna, that smile might be misinterpreted to be inviting a different kind of attention, one that Betty is not looking for. The message she has intended to imply may end up being different from the message others infer, based solely on the icons of other members of Friendster. There may be nothing at all to be done about that; it may be a case of 'luck of the draw,' no different from when someone is assumed to be a part of a group because she was walking nearby to that group when entering a building. Some things cannot be helped; this just makes the things that *can* be helped all the more important.



Figure 3.17

Ideally, the implication and inference will be identical; realistically, though, this will almost never happen. Lurking can help a rhetor close this gap. The more he knows about the group and its social mores, the way people within the group communicate and the things those group members consider important, the better he will be able to present what he thinks he is presenting. And if lurking isn't enough, there's always the other method: direct inquiry. That is, directly asking about the audience.

It seems like it should be fairly obvious, but one of the oft-forgotten methods of learning about a group is to just come out and ask about it. That is, to ask members of the group what they are like, who they are, and what kind of things they respect.¹⁴ Some sites do not promote their 'rules' so much as they present an idea of how they want the members of the community to ask by setting a friendly tone to the conversation before that conversation begins. In the case of a site like gendersociety.com, for example, it can be seen on the front page¹⁵ where Katie (the site owner) establishes the audience. “Established in 1999, The Gender Society is one of the largest online communities for transvestites, crossdressers, transsexuals and transgender people in the world today, with members right around the globe. We also cater for the families and friends of transgender people and for their admirers.” Investigating what the 'coin of the realm' is in any given situation allows rhetors to discover and analyze the audience. With an online community, this sort of thing is sometimes encouraged with a 'New Member' forum, where a person can ask those direct questions about a group.¹⁶ By asking about the group, and the group members, a rhetor can present himself as willing to learn, as wanting to be a part of the group, as seeking *membership*. Bruffee writes that “Mastery of a knowledge community’s normal discourse is the basic qualification for acceptance into that community” (424). Lurking allows the rhetor to not only gain that mastery of knowledge,

14 This will be different for any given community, and often times the rules are not laid out ahead of time so much as they are presented via a sort of osmosis, where members of a community gently prod new members to change their behaviors when those behaviors break with the existing conventions.

15 Discussed in detail in chapter 7.

16 Or, as frequently happens, lurk in these conversations.

but also to express the *desire* to do so. And while this often requires him to identify himself as an outsider, a non-member of the group, he can re-create his identity once his questions are answered, either by choosing a new icon or by starting completely over with a new account and new user name.

This is a major difference between online and off. Once the questions have been answered, the rhetor can leave the identity of the questioner behind and make a new identity as a member of the group. He can choose an icon, a user name, and whatever identifiers the group may allow/require and come in with a new identity, one that is not even connected to the original question asker. Not only is there no reason for him to acknowledge that he is the same person who asked that question, but there is also no reason for any member of the group to even think to ask him if he is that same person. The identity of the question asker is not only abandoned, but that abandonment is accepted and an understood part of the online community. When someone is ready to be a part of the group, she will become part of that group.

That is one of the primary benefits of online communication: the inclusion of newcomers to a conversation. Heidi McKee writes that “In a f2f discussion, newcomers either do not hear what was said by those who have already left or they hear what was said mediated through others, which often results in a condensation and, of course, rephrasing ... which is potentially much less powerful than the person’s original words” (325). In addition to keeping the words there to be seen rather than rephrased, the online

environment also allows feedback and more focus to the communication (333). This record of old conversations allows someone to 'lurk' through a conversation that is no longer being held. That is, she can look back at what the group has said in the past, and through that learn what sorts of things the group talks about, what they don't talk about, and what values they have.

This capability is vital to analyzing the audience of the online group. By looking at what has been said in the past, a potential member of a group can see how the group has reacted to certain types of actions and comments. Does the group encourage people asking questions, or are those who ask questions derided for their ignorance? Is flaming permitted, ignored, shunned, or encouraged?¹⁷ Are conversations all focused around the topic of the group, or do people go off on tangents? How much personal information do people share? Knowing the answers to these questions will tell the potential member a lot about the group, and help her both decide whether or not to join that group and help her figure out what identity she wishes to present and how to do so (i.e., what kind of icon to choose).

The Producer

Identity is performed in any given community, whether online or off. This is what Susanna Paasonen means when she writes that “Identities are not only what we decide or

¹⁷ By 'flame' I mean when people write intentionally hurtful and rude comments for the purpose of either 'shouting down' an opposing position or of excluding someone from the community by showing that he or she doesn't belong.

desire them to be, but are, to a high degree, also *decided for us*” and “are inscribed in our bodies, internalized, read, and performed” (235, italics in original). Someone who grows up as a member of a group is likely to develop an identity as part of that group, whether the group be as broadly defined as “woman” or as specific as “orthodox Jew.” This identity may not resonate with the person, but having been raised that way, it *is* decided for that person in the sense that Paasonen suggests. An attempt to change identity in the offline world can be as simple as a self-examination, or a change of clothing style, or it might be as extensive as a complete change in lifestyle, even gender reassignment surgery, or a lengthy religious conversion process. It may lead to ostracism from the original group, particularly in cases where the rhetor has made the decision to take on a new identity *instead of* the old one.

Online, a person is able to develop a separate identity *without* abandoning the old one. Choosing the icon is part of developing this identity; as one of the initial steps, choosing the icon allows a rhetor to escape from the pressures of having that identity (at least to an extent) determined for her. At the same time, a rhetor is able to take on different identities in different groups. To follow the orthodox Jew example, he can keep his Keepah and Talleet on, *and* still join a group of Buddhists and a group of Hindi. Assuming he knows enough about those religions and their philosophies, he can present himself as a legitimate member of that group. That is to say, as long as he is aware of the *audience*, he can help ensure that his message is received as closely as possible to its

intended meaning. Online, he can do this without losing or compromising his initial identity.¹⁸

Online, the rhetor is able to determine what body she wishes to show, to at least a limited degree. Kolko writes that “determining precisely how the physical self is manifested in virtual space is more complicated than establishing a one-to-one correlation with the face-to-face world” (178). This complication is double edged; in some ways it limits the possibilities, but in others, it provides more. Del-Taso Craviotta writes that “Given the lack of visual and aural cues in the medium, the range of personal images people can create has fewer limitations than in face-to-face encounters” (258). So while it is difficult to determine how identity is manifested, this difficulty comes both from the limitations and, paradoxically, from the lack of some of those same limitations.

Offline, a rhetor is able (or forced) to continuously perform her identity, letting nonverbal communication play a large role. It is easy to change clothing, posture, and facial expression in real time. While icons *can* be changed, the change is not as quick, nor does it maintain the kind of continuity face to face communication allows. When talking offline, a rhetor can smile at one comment and then frown at the next. When an icon is changed, that icon is (usually) changed for all posts, including those in the past.¹⁹ So if the rhetor approves of one post, and it changes her mood so much that she changes her icon to one with a smile (instead of just using a smiling emoticon such as ☺ in the

¹⁸ Discussion of the way that multiple identities are developed, and the way icons are chosen for those identities, is discussed in Chapter 6.

¹⁹ Which supports the idea that icons are static by nature.

comment), she is also changing her icon on the post where she was angry, which may change the meaning of the communication. So while there are opportunities with icons that are not present offline, there are also limits. Every icon (even a blank one) sends a message, and every audience infers a message from that icon.

Knowing what audience an icon is being presented to helps produce the best icon possible. It helps to eliminate or at least minimize misunderstandings and misinterpretations. It is the producer of the message who communicates with the audience. The message passes from producer to audience, maintaining as much purity to the original intent as possible.

Chapter 4: First Icons

To begin my investigation of icons, I looked at the icons people used when they first approached a social network (again, primarily Facebook). I chose these samples because I had the opportunity to ask the users of these icons to explain their reasoning for their choices. These were provided with the full knowledge and acceptance that the icons and their descriptions would be used in this dissertation. Many of these examples are people I know personally, though some of them were referred to me for the purpose of this investigation. Looking at the icons, and reading the self-reported reasons why those icons were chosen, helped me get a better understanding of how a rhetor selects an icon when approaching a social network, often times doing so with very little or no foreknowledge of the audience that will receive the icon.

Facebook and Social Networks

In 2013, Facebook was one of if not the single most popular social network sites available online. Membership was free, requiring only a unique e-mail account. Once the account was created, members could set up their profiles, including facts such as where they lived, where they worked, what television shows they watched, or what their hobbies were along with pictures of themselves or friends.

Other connections across the social network were established as 'friends,' which required both a request sent by one member and the acceptance of the other member.

After that, any 'updates' or comments made by one friend would be visible to the other (unless certain settings were changed). The front page of Facebook (Such as Claus E.'s in Figs 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4) included a banner, an icon, some basic information about the user, and their most recent activity (such as status updates). While all of this is available to those the member has given access to, only one part remains visible when the member posts on other pages, or along with the updates that their friends see. That part is the icon, which is visible both in the upper left of the main page, and next to the name in the status updates in the center of the page. The banner at the top, where the member can express additional individuality, is important to the member's online identity, but is not 'carried along' the way the icon is.

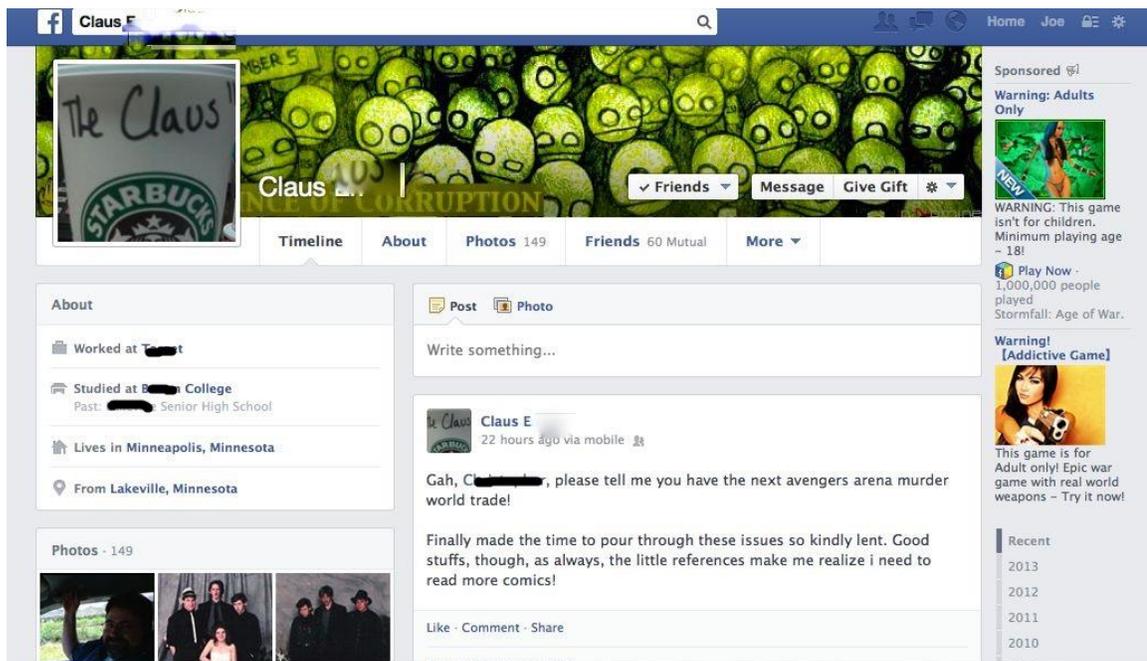


Figure 4.1



Figure 4.2



Figure 4.3



Figure 4.4

The consistent icon, being the only part of the profile visible no matter where the member posts and no matter how connected the member is on the social network, is a vital part of online identity specifically because it is omnipresent. Looking at Claus's profile will also show some of his friends, presenting them only as their icons. Their icons, like Claus's, are always visible. Even if someone is not a friend on Facebook, he can still see Claus's icon, either when searching randomly or if he sees Claus comment on something a mutual friend wrote. With no direct connection to Claus, that icon may be the only hint he has about who Claus is.

The reasons people set up Facebook pages are generally varied. Some people set them up to be able to stay in contact with friends who are no longer geographically

convenient, or to renew friendships from the past (such as connections with those a member went to high school with). Others use the site as a way to make new friends across the world, friends that may never actually meet face to face. Facebook can also be used potentially as a dating site, either to find potential partners or to find out about those potential partners (at least the identity they present online). The site can also be used to find other fans of various activities. Some join Facebook to play games, which are usually free. Whatever the initial purpose, the site is generally used as a way to present an online identity, making available information about the members to anyone, personal or professional, who might want to learn about the member.

The identity created on Facebook is created with an audience in mind. That audience is usually determined or at least influenced by the reason a member joined Facebook. If the member joined for the purpose of dating, his profile might reflect that, highlighting both the qualities he believes he has to offer and those he is interested in. If the member joined to make new friends, she might be focused on her interests in order to attract those with similar interest. Other audiences may form as well, such as old friends looking a member up to see what he is doing with his life, but these unintended audiences will not be the focus of the identity the member creates on his or her Facebook page.

Other social networking sites, such as MySpace or Friendster, work very similarly to Facebook. Their profile pages are set up differently, but the consistent presence of the icon remains across platforms. The icon is always attached to everything the members

post on any social networking site; that is why the icon is such a significant visual artifact to examine.

When a rhetor chooses an icon for the first time, she does so with little or no idea about the community she is choosing that icon for; as discussed above, there are many reasons for joining a social network, reasons that need not include much information about the community as a whole. Sometimes she has learned a bit about the community, via lurking or direct inquiry. In many cases, though, she is coming into that community completely fresh, with no audience awareness to speak of. This was particularly the case as social networks were first beginning to develop.

As rhetors first came into contact with social networks, when they first chose an icon to represent themselves, they had to do so without the opportunity to lurk or to ask the audience about the site. They had to choose the icon blind, so to speak, with no basis for comparison.

When a rhetor first joins a social networking site, at least at the time of this writing, he is not technically required to choose an icon. He could maintain the blank image provided by that social network, though he would still have to choose a user name, thus making even that combination unique, as discussed in Chapter 1.

When joining a social network, assuming the rhetor does not keep the blank icon, he must choose an image to use as more developed icon, one that has an intended message.

I chose a picture of myself as an icon (Figure 4.5) for Facebook because that is a social network with a general audience. Anyone can look at my profile from any walk of life. Knowing that, I wanted to choose an icon with the least likelihood of being misinterpreted. That is the primary reason I went with a picture of me, rather than an image of the TARDIS (Fig 4.6) or of Doctor Who, which I might choose in other circumstances. I am presenting myself as a human being,¹ as a social member of public society, and so I choose a picture to match that purpose. The choice is made more difficult because I don't like having my picture taken; there are not many to choose from, certainly not many that I think look any good. But that is the first criterion I have for a picture of myself: I must think the picture looks good. If I don't like the way I look in the photograph, I will choose one of the other types of icons.



Figure 4.5



Figure 4.6

The shirt with rolled up sleeves lets me present a casual image, and the lack of slogan on the shirt allows the image to be taken as professional or informal, depending on the audience. The half-smile and closed eye (i.e., winking) are meant to imply a friendly

¹ There *are* cases where I may not be presenting myself as a human being. In a forum, I may present myself as a disembodied voice in the internet; in a MMORPG, I might present myself as an Orc, or an Elf, etc.

nature and a sense of humor. The hand on my head is meant to both represent that I spend my time thinking and to show off the wedding ring, thus making it clear to any who are trolling² through pictures that I am not interested in dating or finding a partner.

The message I want to send with my icon is that I am casual, friendly, intellectually minded, and married. Those are my intentions; that is the message I wish to imply.

That may not be the message that is inferred by the audience. Facebook, being a very general audience, is likely to take the picture on face value. This means there are certain inferences I can count on. I can reasonably count on those who see my icon recognizing that I am male, open to communication, and not overly formal. Hopefully, this will make people feel comfortable enough to make contact. Since that is the purpose of this social networking site, I can consider this icon appropriate for the audience.

However, there are some audiences this same image would not work for. And, being aware of my potential audience, presumably I would know not to use the same image in all situations. Other groups, other audiences such as those found on a dating site or those found on an online gaming forum, will have different standards and different expectations.

Similarly, others who approach social networks for the first time will come to that network with different goals and different understandings. As such, they will choose

² “Trolling” being a term referring to the act of examining large groups and messaging multiple people in the hopes of getting some kind of reaction. It is the internet equivalent of a mass mailing (and sometimes literally takes that form with e-mail).

different images to use as their first icons. They choose different types of icons for different reasons.

Icons of Convenience

Sometimes, when a rhetor joins a social network, he has no plan for an icon. Based purely on its convenience, he reaches, then, for the nearest, or the easiest, picture he can find. He may do so because he wants to give an impression of being casual, or because it was nearby.

The first icon of Sam (Fig 4.7) was chosen, in his words, “When I was setting up Facebook, I snapped a few quick photos using my web cam because it was close at hand, then I chose this one for my first profile pic.” There are any number of reasons



why this image, as opposed to one of the others he took, was the one he chose. Perhaps he chose it because of the wistful look on his face, or because it was the clearest of the images his camera took. I can't know why he chose this item over others.

Sometimes, the rhetor chooses an image that she already has, one that is easily available. Debbie chose for her icon (Figure 4.8) a picture of her when she was twenty (At the time of this writing, she is 28). Presumably, she chose the image because she likes the way she looks in it, because it presents herself in a way that she prefers. She is facing

directly to the camera, making eye contact, and smiling. As Burri writes, “the visual dimensions of images are shaping social practices” (55). The image that Debbie chose shapes the social practices she will inspire in others and can affect the way others approach her.



Any choice of an initial icon, even when it is chosen just for convenience, has meaning. It may be a picture that was simply aesthetically pleasing, such as the one of Kendra (Fig 4.9), which she used for Myspace specifically because “I thought I looked pretty and skinny.” Her choice of

an icon that she felt was attractive, gives a strong first impression. Though difficult to make out any detail of who it might be, there is another person in the wider shot (the forehead is visible on the right). Kendra is smiling, which only shows that she is happy in *this* picture, but the fact that she chose to use this picture suggests that she wants her audience to see her as a happy person. If she wanted her audience to see



her as a more wistful, introspective person, she likely would have chosen an image more like the Sam’s. But she chose this picture, even though it was just a convenient image she happened to have at hand. She chose it because it presented the kind of initial impression she wanted to provide in a social network setting; it sent the message she meant for it to

send. This icon showed who Kendra wants—or wanted—to be, sent the impression of her identity to those who first came into contact with her.

Icons of Obfuscated Identity

Jeremy Kaye writes that “cyber-subjects are free to become different versions of themselves because online, one is no longer empirically bound to one’s corporeal body, and identity-play is the norm” (162). A rhetor may choose to *exclude* some aspects of his identity. Some people choose icons that hide who they are, or to show a side of themselves, to present an identity, without exposing themselves too much. Some people do not wish to present themselves the way a current picture may allow. A rhetor may choose an icon that performs the specific purpose of hiding, or at least obfuscating, the identity that he holds offline. The icon then serves the purpose of presenting a first impression for the identity that the rhetor has chosen to provide in an online setting only.

Sometimes, this exclusion is done out of insecurity. The rhetor known as “AgentSD” used this icon (Figure 4.10) as his initial icon when joining Facebook. Even his user name is obfuscating; it is not a name like Debbie, Sam, or Kendra., but rather a



moniker he has chosen for himself, one that may or may not have any connection to who he is as a person. According to him, “I chose this because I wanted to use a picture of

myself, but being insecure and unhappy with the way I currently looked at my age, I decided to use a cute photo of myself when I was little.” He chose this image not to present himself as a child, nor to pretend to be someone else. He chose this image because it is clearly not a contemporary picture, but it still represents him.³ It gives the impression of a certain amount of childlike aloofness, along with a definitive level of nostalgia. Along with his comments about himself “at my age,” and his desire to still “use a picture of myself,” it would be a reasonable inference to assume that his past is obviously both important to him and something about which he is comfortable discussing.

Another reason to choose a more obscured icon is for anonymity. Rhetors may choose an icon that suggests something about who they are as people—about the identity they wish to establish online—without 'giving away' too much. The icon



(Figure 4.11) from Martha, for example, suggests a great many things about the identity she is creating (such as her favorite holiday being Halloween or her positive outlook on life from the smiling face on the pumpkin) but it doesn't provide much about who she is as a person. She chose her first profile picture for the anonymity. As she said, “At that time, I was concerned with sharing too much info to anyone who looks.” That concern,

³ This is similar to the way photos in the obituary pages of a newspaper or presented at a funeral represent a person not as they currently look (or looked most recently prior to death) but rather as others wish to remember them.

be it based on a fear of someone from the internet trying to track her down or just a desire to not have her face connected with the things she might say or post online after her identity online was established, led her to choose an icon, to create an identity, that was visually distinct from who she was as a person away from the online world.

A rhetor may also choose anonymity on a slightly less complete scale, such as Claus E., whose Facebook page is visible (Figures 4.1-4.4). Claus has chosen icons for multiple sites, creating identities for each of those sites.⁴ Claus chose the icon for Facebook (Fig. 4.12) because “I needed to have a picture, and it wasn't going to be a picture of me, and anyone who knew me knew I liked Starbucks...and if they were on my Facebook, they already knew my name was Claus.” Though he was not concerned with people knowing who he was, he did not want people to know what he looked like. On Google+, Claus chose a different icon (Figure 4.13). In his words “I used the picture for the Transpacific Socialist Alliance ... a terrorist-ish group in the gurps [Generic Universal Role Playing System] game ‘Transhuman Space’ that believes all information should be free.” While being the same person, this identity he created was distinctly different, and hence he felt he needed a different icon. But the icon choice still includes his desire to remain anonymous, or at least to obscure who he is as a person offline. His first icon on Livejournal, the jumping red fish (Fig 4.14), was chosen “because my name was *exactly* tied to the account, so I wanted to be 'mysterious'...also, I was dating [...] at

⁴ Much like the individuals who create multiple identities online discussed in chapter 6.

the time, and her icon was a squirrel, and I wanted my icon to be similar to hers.” So Claus chose an icon that still obscured his real identity, that allowed him to have that level of mystery that he wanted, but also created an online identity that was linked with that of his significant other at the time. In all three cases, Claus was choosing an icon that obscured his identity, that separated his online identity from that of his offline world. Each of these icons established a certain aspect of his character (liking coffee, familiarity with and enjoyment of roleplaying games, and the mystery of a red fish, respectively), and none of them was an identity that was *not* Claus, though all three managed to hide who he was.

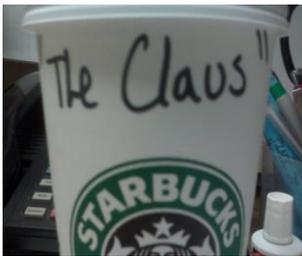


Figure 4.12



Figure 4.13



Figure 4.14

Another reason for an obscuring icon is to distance oneself from other people.

Sometimes, rhetors are establishing an identity online that does not entirely mesh with

their identity offline. Brad chose his icon (Fig 4.15) because

his Facebook profile had a specific purpose that he was

aware of from the start. He knew he “was creating [it] solely

so that when I applied for a job people could google my

name, see that I did have a Facebook page, and it wasn't full



of crazy political rants or pictures of me committing crimes. Penguins were the least offensive thing I could think of to use as an icon, and that was the first penguin picture I found.” He was creating his online identity with a specific audience (prospective employers) in mind, and wanted something inoffensive. He wanted to present his identity as that of a well-adjusted person who would make a model—or at least acceptable—employee. Whether or not he is the type of person offline who would do either or both of those things only comes up because his explanation specifically pointed out that he was avoiding that appearance. Whatever he is like as a person offline, the identity Brad created online is a version of himself that is very socially acceptable, though there remains some question of whether or not the use of an animal in a professional setting would be appropriate for that audience. His choice to obscure his identity, then, is based on a desire to present only one aspect of who he is, and to very much control that aspect. At the same time, he was avoiding a picture of himself, which may be because he simply wants to avoid random searchers to know what he looks like, because a picture of him may present an impression he doesn't want to present, or, most likely (considering his explanation for why he chose the icon/created the account), to ensure that no prospective employers could judge him based on his appearance.

Icons of Personal Meaning

Sometimes an icon is chosen for deep personal reasons. Even though the icon may appear to have been chosen randomly or chosen specifically to obscure identity, there

may be a level of meaning more significant, one that is very consciously presented by the rhetor. Sometimes this is done with the intent of sending a message, of presenting a very specific impression, to all those who come across it, sometimes it is chosen just as a representation of the rhetor's interests, recognizable primarily to those who share that interest.⁵

Some icons are chosen to present a specific impression, such as the one for Georgia (Fig 4.16). Georgia said that “The first icon I used on Facebook was a photo of myself making a silly face with a 'LAWL'⁶ caption on it. I was imitating the LOLcat pictures.⁷ There wasn't much more reason than that. I



just wanted something funny for my profile picture.” Georgia wanted a picture that presented the image of her as someone with a sense of humor, something funny. And so her choice of a first icon was designed with that in mind. Though it may seem like a conveniently available image, the added text (LAWL) makes it clear that she put some work into the icon, that she designed it with a specific purpose in mind. It was not meant to hide her identity; clearly it shows people what she looks like. But it was also meant to

5 As with Misty or José in chapter 3.

6 'LAWL' being a reference to (and the assumed pronunciation of) the acronym 'LOL,' which stands for 'Laugh Out Loud.'

7 The 'LOLcat' is a series of images of cats that appear to be laughing (hence the LOL) that gained some popularity online as a 'meme' (an element of culture that is passed around and imitated, often through images combined with captions).

give a specific impression, chosen not because of base appeal (such as those of Sam, Debbie, or Kendra, above) but because of that specific impression.

Frequently, when an icon is chosen for personal meaning, that meaning is not immediately clear, making it a bit less effective at

sending the message the rhetor intends it to send. This

icon (Figure 4.17) used by Lawrence presents him as

open (looking directly at the camera) and from a

perspective of shared power and authority with the

viewer, as Kress and van Leeuwen would say (140). He

has a half smile on his face, and the way he clutches his

coat suggests an air of formality, of putting on airs. This



gives an impression of cocky arrogance, but Lawrence looks so young that it feels a bit

forced, as if he is trying to look older. And, indeed, he was. According to him, he was

attending college at 16 years old, through PSEO (Post-Secondary Enrollment Option).

“This picture was taken during my first social event with other classmates, a Murder

Mystery Dinner in a modern fantasy setting not dissimilar to the Dresden books.⁸ It was

the first time I felt like I was on the same social setting as the others, and the first time I

felt like an actual college student as opposed to an outsider sitting in on classes.” This

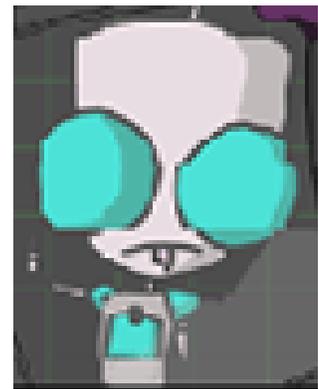
image was the first one that made Lawrence feel as if he was a part of a group, the first

⁸ The Dresden Files, a series of novels by Jim Butcher.

time he was accepted within a social circle. Interestingly, Lawrence's social network offline (as an 'actual college student') also made up the connections he had online. In his words “Since my fellow college students were the only social circle I was interacting with via Facebook at the time, ... I chose this picture to remind both myself and others of the first time I felt like I was 'part of the group.'”

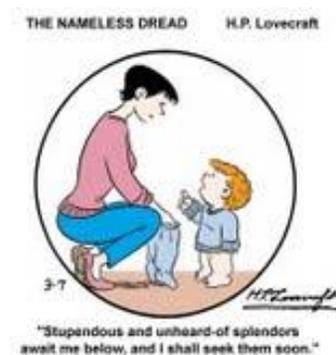
Knowing the story, that this image was the first time Lawrence felt like he belonged to a group made up of people much older than him—two years, but at a time in life when two years makes a world of difference—helps make clear why he chose the image. The image seemed to be intended to make him look older than he was; that was exactly his purpose. The image sends a message of a certain aloofness, but also an openness. And as people get to know Lawrence, the rhetoric behind the image, they will learn the nuance of him as a person just as they may learn the nuance of the image he chose. As an icon, as a message providing a first impression, this icon may not send the message he intends, but the personal meaning allows it to be effective over time.

Sometimes the message the rhetoric intends to present, when filtered through the personal meaning of the icon, misfires, presenting more confusion than information. The icon by Cameron (Fig. 4.18), will likely produce that confusion. The image is of GIR, the “insane, hyperactive robotic assistant/sidekick of Zim, and the closest thing he has to a friend,



having been constructed from scrap parts and given to Zim by the Almighty Tallest instead of a regular SIR (Standard-issue Information Retrieval unit).”⁹ While *Invader Zim* is a cartoon that Cameron liked, and GIR was his favorite character, there is little about him as a person in the image. The message he sends is dependent on his audience. If those he is communicating with are fans of the show *Invader Zim*, they will recognize the image for what it is, and that will send certain messages to them about the identity that Cameron is trying to establish, having what they know of the character as the only potential source for knowing about him. They might assume that he is insane, hyperactive, or someone who sees himself as a sidekick. Or, more accurately, they may just infer that Cameron is a fan. Either way, it tells a potential audience very little about him as a person and a rhetor, though it did have at least some personal meaning to him as a person.

Some images with personal meaning do present a depth of identity. There are cases where the rhetor chooses an image with personal attachment, without being a picture of him. If done right, that icon can fulfill its intended purpose and present the identity the rhetor intends. This icon from Jake, (Fig. 4.19), combines many elements in order to create a very distinct impression. The image at the center is easily recognizable



⁹ From Zimwiki (<http://zim.wikia.com/wiki/GIR>).

as being an image from *Family Circus* by Bill Keane. The quote, from H.P. Lovecraft's novella *A Shadow Over Insmouth*, clearly does not fit the family-focused and inoffensive nature of *Family Circus*. In fact, given the genteel nature of *Family Circus*, there is little that could be more different from H.P. Lovecraft's macabre stylings and dark imagery. This presents Jake as a rhetor interested in contrast, as someone who is well read, who has a dark sense of humor, but also is friendly. It suggests to those who see it exactly what kind of person he is. Jake chose this particular image because “it is one of my favorite Lovecraft quotes, and because it reminded me of Dysfunctional *Family Circus*.” He chose it because it represented some of his interests, but also because it represented him. He felt the quote, being his favorite, was a representation of who he is as a person, and would make a good first impression for others. Those who do not recognize Lovecraft's work will not get the full depth of the message,¹⁰ but even those completely unaware will recognize that “Stupendous and unheard-of splendors await me below, and I shall seek them soon” does not match the image of the young boy half dressed in pajamas speaking to his mother. Even with no recognition of either source material, the impression of the disjointed, of the strangeness that is this particular icon, will survive in the message. So even with no base knowledge to bring to bear, this icon succeeds in sending the message Jake was trying to send.

¹⁰ Though, as in the case with ‘Jack’ in chapter 7, they will get *some* meaning.

The First Icon and Establishing Identity

Presumably, an online identity is the goal—or at least *a* goal—of any rhetor in online space. When first creating that identity, when first coming into contact with a social network space, the rhetor must approach with a certain amount of guesswork, depending on his reasoning for joining the community. When the rhetor chooses his icon for the first time, he must do so without the benefit of being fully aware of his audience. The message is entirely in his hands, and so he must be extra careful in choosing.

Frequently the rhetor chooses the icon with little forethought, there is still significant reason behind these apparently random choices. Whether it be a case of wanting a picture that is visually appealing, one that intentionally obfuscates the rhetor's identity, or one that has personal meaning, they are sending a message. It is a rhetorical choice that creates their identity independent of any knowledge of their audience.

Once the rhetor learns more about the social network, once she becomes more aware of her audience, she will be able to choose icons that do a better job of sending the message she intends to send. For example, Sam is, as of August 2013, using a different icon (Figure 4.20) that shows a direct awareness of the audience and is clearly staged, no longer an icon of convenience; in fact, it may now be



considered an obfuscation, as most of his face is out of the frame. Lawrence, as of August

2013, is using an icon that shows his connection to his family (Fig 4.21), still an image of personal meaning, but with a very different message than that above. Kendra, (Fig 4.22) uses an image with her son and her dog, a personal meaning rather than an icon of convenience. Others, such as Debbie or Claus E., are still using their first icons.



Figure 4.21



Figure 4.22

The first icon is just a first try. The more experience the rhetor has, the more the rhetor is able to refine the message being sent by his icon. As time passes, as he chooses one icon after another, his skill at selecting icons will increase, and his ability to send messages will refine.

I now turn to a case where that happens, an example where I could follow one person's icons, and what messages she sends as compared to those the audience receives, over multiple icons.

Chapter 5: First Impressions Over Time

Having examined the first choices that people make with their icons, I thought it useful to be able to investigate a single person's story, via her Facebook icons, over time. Veronica, who I know socially, was willing to show me a series of icons she has used, and to provide me with a narrative of her choices for each of these icons. The icons were used over a period of five years (2008-2012). I chose Veronica's story because of the shifts in identity that she went through over this time, and because my knowledge of these changes to her offline life would help provide me with a deeper understanding of the meanings in the changes in her icons.

Thanks to an informal narrative written by Veronica, where she described her intentions, I have not only the message that I received (tempered by my knowledge of her offline life), but also the message that she intended to send. By seeing both what I infer and what she implied, I can explore that gap between the two. However, the narrative that she supplied and my own understanding of her are both biased by our knowledge of her outside of Facebook, and so our reactions to the icons are necessarily more subjective than those that might be coming into contact with those icons without that foreknowledge. Rather than seeing this as a hindrance to my investigation, this knowledge allows an additional level of interpretation. Aside from an objective visual analysis of the images, I also present my interpretation from a subjective point of view.

And since “all images are regarded as having many possible meanings” (Martinez 11), the ability to get at different possible meanings will be a boon to this analysis.

To add an additional level of this subjective interpretation, and to adjust for my own pre-existing knowledge bias, I also surveyed a number of people, none of whom have ever had contact with Veronica online or off, and asked for their subjective interpretations of the images Veronica used as an icon;¹ the respondents provided their own interpretations, thus providing a third perspective that did not have that same bias.

The Evolving Message: Veronica



Figure 5.1

As examples of online identity, icons provide a good first impression. And icons are by their nature static. Any change is a replacement. A new icon creates a new first impression. Those who come into contact with a rhetor for the first time see their most recent icon, not every icon they have ever used.² A person changes over time, and her identity can evolve as time passes, the identity she presents on social networks will change as well, though likely at a much slower pace (due to the nature of being able to

¹ The results of the survey are available in Appendix II.

² Though often times these are available with a bit of a search.

change clothing, present different nonverbal communication, and other real-time actions that simply aren't available in an online space). Consider this set of icons (Figure 5.1) used by Veronica.³

Inference: What the Icons (seem to) mean

The timing of these icons is very specific. The first was used in 2008. Number 2 in early 2010, number 3 a bit later in 2010, number 4 later still in 2010, number 5 in early 2012, and number 6 in late 2012. These icons show not only Veronica growing up, but also present a very important narrative for Veronica's life. Kress and van Leeuwen write that “the point of view of the subjective, perspectival image has been selected for the viewer. As a result there is a kind of symmetry between the way the image-producer relates to the represented participants, and the way the viewer must, willy-nilly, also relate to them” (131). Thus, the choice of the images Veronica used, aside from just their makeup as pictures, is important because of the perspectives she chose for others (as viewers of her icons and those receiving the first impression) to have as they approached and came into contact with her.

In picture 1, she is off center of the frame, looking bored and in an open space.

This openness, along with her bored expression, shows a certain amount of loneliness.

Being off center of the frame suggests that Veronica did not at this time feel confident in

³ All icons are (still) publicly visible on Facebook on Veronica's profile in her photo albums (though only the current icon is visible to non-friends). In the interest of full disclosure, I have known Veronica for several years. Her last name is withheld, and all other names involved in her story have been omitted. Veronica sent these images to me with the full awareness that they would be used in my dissertation, and has given permission that her story be shared.

herself. And yet, she is making eye contact with the camera, suggesting that she at least *wants* to engage.

Subjectively, I know that at the time of the first picture, Veronica identified herself as a lesbian. She was very defensive about her sexuality, as she grew up partially on an Indian reservation, in a community that did not accept homosexuality as a viable life choice.⁴ Forced to hide who she was, Veronica was under rather constant stress, feeling trapped and exhausted by the life she felt she was being forced into. I see this exhaustion and this feeling of being ostracized in the first picture. She was also very confused about her sexuality, and we can see this confusion evident in her being off center in the photograph.

Alexander, an attorney in his early 30s, thought that the girl in the icon (Veronica) was around 22 years old (she was actually 21), and was “trying hard to look bored,” sending the message “Entertain me (though they don't want to have to ask).” He thought the image was clearly of a young woman, and the primary message he received was that she was young. Between my analyses, both objective and subjective, and Matt’s subjective view, it seems that icon 1 is indeed sending a message of boredom and loneliness.

Picture number 2, a much tighter close up, shows Veronica as somewhat more confident, maybe even a bit angry, but no happier. The expression on her face is carefully

⁴ Sexuality, it should be noted, is not a 'choice'; the fact that others did not accept Veronica's 'choice' does not mean to imply otherwise.

blank, almost guarded. Along with the camouflage jacket she is wearing, this presents her as distinctly separate as well as defensive. However, she is still making eye contact with the camera, suggesting a desire to engage with the audience; almost as if she is defensive and off putting, but still wants people to try to approach her.

To my awareness, by the time she was using picture 2, Veronica had come to terms with her sexuality, and was proudly defiant of it. She had begun to date a MtF transsexual person, and was ready, almost eager, to defend her choices to anyone who questioned them. This would account for the somewhat aggressive and defensive nature of the photograph. Unfortunately, Veronica's relationship was not a healthy one, the stress of which is reflected in the sad and tired look in her eyes.

Mark, a senior research specialist in lighting design, looked at icon 2 and received a very specific message. He said that "She really likes this part of her life, since this was the picture she presumably chose for the interaction. Her demeanor is pleasant, and her attitude is confident. Her lack of makeup days [sic] that she is not preoccupied with her image, and that it is what she does that most interests her." He also said that "I think she is showing a photo that she thinks makes her look good. To her, looking good means going to do something that he [sic] really likes, without any frills." This is similar to my conjecture that Veronica looks more confident. As for my claim that Veronica was both defensive and aggressive, Mark said that "Maybe it's the time at which the photo was taken, but she looks a bit confrontational, as if to say 'I haven't had my coffee and don't

mess with me'." While Mark sees a more positive message than I did, he still received many of the same basic points of the message.

Natalie, a PhD in rhetoric who teaches (among other things) visual communication, did not see the confidence that Mark saw, but did see the serious attitude and a lack of happiness. Natalie said that "The person portrayed is in a place where it gets quite cold, and s/he is somewhat serious in relation to the photograph being taken (no smile in either the eyes or the lips)." Interestingly, Natalie never specified whether she thought the icon was of a man or a woman, supporting Veronica's androgyny, while Mark thought it clear that the picture was of a young woman. Both of them, though, thought she was at most in her early twenties (she was 23).

In picture number 3, there is a slight smile on her face. Though she is hiding under a hat, the aggressive defensiveness of the earlier picture is gone. She is more engaging with the audience, offering her friendship. She is still defensive, in that she is hiding under the hat, but it is no longer as angry as it was before.

To my knowledge, during the time she used picture 3, Veronica and her partner broke up, and Veronica started to come out of the shell that the abusive nature of the relationship had forced her into. She was still very defensive (again, hiding under the hat), but was trying to be more open and was, clearly, much happier.

Irene, who describes herself as a "freelance writer, graphic designer, artist, jewelry designer, musician" and who is an early adopter of social networking, described

her first impression of the person in picture 3 as “nervous, reserved, not very adventurous. Would not like to be thought of this way. Takes pictures of self wearing hats in the department store, but will likely never actually buy one.” She believes that Veronica was trying to send the message “look at me! I’m funky and adventurous! Look at my cute little hat!” Irene does not see any anger in this image, which fits with my perception. She also sees the nervousness, the hiding and defensiveness that Veronica was projecting.

Picture number 4 shows Veronica starting to accept herself as a woman, presenting herself for the first time in a specifically gendered way. The picture she selected for the first time shows herself below the neck, and she is displaying herself in a more confident way. She maintains the eye contact she has consistently maintained, and while the smile is now absent, her expression is not as guarded as it was in picture 2.

By picture 4 Veronica was starting to regain her confidence, to develop and present herself as a woman, rather than hiding herself beneath bulky androgynous clothing. Free of an abusive relationship and finding friends who accepted her for who and what she was, Veronica began 'coming out of her shell' and living a happier life.

Jared, a Professor in his early 40s who is also an early adopter (generally speaking), thought that icon 4 says a fair bit. He said “This pose says, 'I am trying to look sexy and confident,' not just 'You may find this picture sexy, and you may think I am confident.' Her arm up, head tilted, and cleavage, especially since it’s highlighted by

jewelry, tells me this person is trying to look alluring.” Just as I suggested that Veronica was coming out of her shell and trying to present herself as a woman, Jared saw this image as being specifically focused on that idea, to the point of trying too hard. As for her age, he believed the picture to be of a young woman “Between 27 and 32.” When she used this icon, in 2011, she was 24. So not only was she trying too hard to look sexy and confident, the picture also made her, at least to Jared's impression, look significantly older.

Picture 5 shows Veronica as the ultimate expression of woman hood: as a mother. The picture is wider shot like picture 4, but she is turned full on to the camera this time. She is not hiding anything, and the slight smile on her face suggests a more contented attitude. She still makes eye contact, still allowing people into her world and inviting her audience to engage.

To me, picture 5 represents a tremendous change. Between 4 and 5, Veronica began to date a friend of hers, a man, in an attempt to explore her sexuality and find out if she really did identify as a lesbian. It turned out that while she had identified as a lesbian in the past, she no longer does. She and the young man had a child together, and subsequently married.

Brad, an archivist, thought that picture 5 was not terribly expressive. The only message he received from the icon, in fact, was “I am a person with a pleasing appearance and a young child.” He saw her in only the most general terms, describing the

picture as “A young woman with dark hair and glasses is holding a small child. She is smiling slightly and looking up into the camera, possibly to make her jaw line appear more firm. Furniture and a door are partially visible in the background.” Very little actual message came across to him from the icon by itself. Icon 5 is not in itself as useful of an icon, but rather useful as it exists within the sequence, as a change from prior icons.

Picture 6 is the only time Veronica is not looking at the camera. She and her daughter are looking at the fish tank. This suggests that Veronica sees her daughter as very important, and is more concerned with sharing her life with her child than she is with making new friends. This suggests a shift in what is important to Veronica, a shift beginning in the last picture. There is a level of confidence here that is such an extreme difference from picture 1 that it is almost difficult to believe that they are of the same person. Picture 6 shows Veronica as she is now; happily married with a child, part of a family on her own terms.

The path of Veronica's life, from being a closeted lesbian through being an open lesbian dating a transsexual to being a happily married (practicing) heterosexual woman with a child, is somewhat evident in her choices of icons. The changes in her life influenced her choice of icons; as the producer of those icons, the messages she intended to send changed, and so she chose new icons. Each of these icons is a slice-of-life for Veronica, showing how she felt at one particular point. They are presented without context, and are chosen by a variety of methods. Some of them are chosen the same way

as icons of convenience in chapter 4 were chosen. While none of them successfully obfuscated her identity (and it does not seem that was ever the intention), there are also examples of icons with deep personal meaning, more so the later in the sequence they get. This might suggest that the longer a rhetor engages in social networking, the more icons take on that personal meaning, though further research would need to be done to see if this is truly a trend, or just unique to Veronica.

These icons that Veronica used send specific messages about who she is, about what is important to her, and about how she feels about meeting new people. What is included above is purely interpretation of the pictures themselves, leaving out where they were posted and what was actually happening in her life at the time the pictures were taken and used. Icons create impressions and send messages, but unless there is access to the rhetor who chose/created those icons, the intended message may not match the inferred message, and even if it did, there would be no way to be certain. Thankfully, Veronica was kind enough to present her side of the story in her own words;⁵ she was willing to tell me the message she intended. The limitation should be acknowledged that this context was provided after the fact, written specifically for use in a scholarly writing. Given that, there is still value in what Veronica wrote about her choices.

⁵ Full text of Veronica's explanations is available in appendix III.

What Veronica Intended: The story behind the icons

When discussing these images before, I spoke only of the interpretations I and others made about the pictures. Veronica's side of the story wasn't something that was available to me when I made these interpretations, just as it would not be available to those first coming into contact with her through the social network she was using. Seeing as most people would be faced only with the icon until they were accepted into her social network, any amount of Veronica expressing her thoughts (that she is happy with her child, what she thinks the icon means, etc.) would not be available to those forming that first impression.



Figure 5.1

Her intentions are significant, and so I will go through the images again, this time with her intentions rather than what I and the survey respondents who looked at her icons assumed she was trying to say.

Picture 1, which Alexander and I interpreted as sending a message of bored loneliness, had a completely different meaning to Veronica. She said that “I was feeling pretty happy with myself.” and that she was comfortable with who she was, a “lesbian living on my own while going to college for graphic design.” She chose the icon because

“I thoughts [sic] for the first time in a while that I liked the way I looked. It became my icon because I liked how I looked. I thought it made me seem pretty with a side of badass.” Like many first icons discussed above, she chose this as her first because it was convenient. That is quite a contrast to the message that Matt and I received with that icon. Whereas she was intending to send a message of confidence and attractive (with a side of 'badass'), the interpretation, the message that I received, was one of stress, exhaustion, and defensiveness. Alexander thought that she wanted to be entertained, but did not want to have to ask to be entertained.

Image 2 seemed to be more confident, but very guarded and just as unhappy as the first image suggested. In Veronica's life at the time, she had just gone through some very difficult times. She “had dropped out of college after being sexually assaulted on my way home from class.” Because of this, she was feeling very defensive and guarded. She was making it a point to dress in ways that “didn’t show off much if anything about myself.” She had begun having panic attacks when uncomfortable, and was seeking escapism (through gaming, Sci-Fi, anime, and fantasy) whenever possible. She was also very confused, because she met B, and “I started to find myself attracted to her, which confused and bewildered me (as she was transgender). I had known I was a Lesbian since I was 10 watching Titanic for the first time. I had no idea what being attracted to someone who did not fit on the gender binary meant and there was little help to be had trying to look up terms.” She was confused, uncertain, and her identity (at least sexually)

was being called into question for the first time since she was 10. I saw the image as one of defiance, of pride in who she was and a willingness (even an eagerness) to defend her life choices. Mark saw her as confident and with a pleasant demeanor. Natalie did not see the pride, but rather a seriousness, at least in relation to the photographer. None of us saw the defensiveness and confusion that Veronica was intending to present. Again, a very different message received than implied.

Picture 3 still seemed defensive, but less angry and more engaging with her audience. According to Veronica, “I changed icons here as I was tired of the old one.” She had been dating her partner for a while at that point, and had just come out of the closet to her family about her transgender partner. Unfortunately, “Telling my family I was Lesbian plus⁶ for lack of a better term had not gone well. My very Christian family I think would have preferred the plain lesbian bit, I think.” The picture, which was taken because her partner “insisted I did not know how to dress myself,” was used as an icon “because my mother had complained that I didn’t have any pictures online where I was happy looking.” The picture was therefore constrained by a fair amount of pressure from both her partner and her family, which meshes with the defensive impression that was given by the icon. It does not entirely mesh with Irene’s perception of Veronica being reserved, but her read of Veronica being uncomfortable and pressured seems to fit rather

⁶ Here Veronica is explicitly suggesting “lesbian plus” as a term meaning that she was identifying as a lesbian who also liked the transgender MTF.

well with what Veronica wrote, meaning that the gap between Veronica's intent and what her audience inferred had by this point gotten smaller.

I suggested that Picture 4 showed her to be more confident, more openly feminine, along with being less guarded and happier. And this message I received is very similar to the one she was trying to send. She said that when she chose this icon, "I had started to fully embrace myself as well, myself." She was more outgoing. Veronica said that "I started larping⁷ and making some more friends." She was coming out of her shell, less guarded and more confident. As for this specific image, Veronica told me that "I agreed to do a photoshoot with one of the people from larp. I was still pretty nervous and not sure how I felt about being pretty but it made me feel really good about myself. It used to be one of my favorite pictures of myself." So while she was still a bit uncertain and unsure, she was absolutely feeling more confident. Her preference for this image suggests that (at the time, at least) she enjoyed seeing herself in this more feminine way. As Jared suggested, the pose is intentionally sexy, intentionally alluring; he also saw the increase in Veronica's confidence. The message that Veronica was trying to send with Picture 4 and the message that was received are closer to the same than any of the prior images had been.

Picture 5's message was inferred as being incredibly feminine, confident, open, engaging, and content. When asked why she chose this image, Veronica said that "I

⁷ 'larping' is the gerund form of LARP, which stands for "Live Action Role Play."

changed to it as it was the beginning of the newest chapter in my life.” She was indeed confident, content, and happy. She had gone through some incredible change. In her words, “I had gone from being a lesbian to being suddenly and madly in love with a man and had a baby.” These changes were difficult, but for the best. Veronica said that “It was hard to deal with the third redefine [sic] of my sexuality but I had really started being happy, I was embracing everything about myself. Even when I thought I couldn’t love anyone more there came this little person who was just the best bits of me and him. It was amazing.” Her life had taken a dramatic shift, but she was not only handling it well, but was enjoying it and loving the new direction life had taken her. While the idea that she was enjoying her life and the direction it was taking came across, Brad did not get any sense of the dramatic shift or the significance of that change. This makes sense; the first exposure to Veronica does not include knowledge of past icons. The second part of the message gets across even to a new audience; the first part (the dramatic shift) comes across only with an awareness of what has come before. Even still, she was very successful in sending that message.

Image 6 suggested that Veronica was more interested in her child, in her family, than in others. The fact that she was, for the first time, not looking directly at the camera suggests that. And Veronica's interpretation of the image follows this line of thought. She wrote that “I think it just shows how far everything has changed for me in the past years. I have a family and it makes everything just kinda amazing.” The message she was trying

to send was that her family had made everything in her life amazing, that her family was more important to her than other people. In other words, the message she was trying to send was more or less identical to the message that was received.

Icons Over Time: What it means

This analysis shows that the more experience Veronica had with the visual elements of Facebook, the better she was at using them. That is to say, the more practice she had, the closer the message that she sent matched what was received. Presumably, there was no expert⁸ 'coaching' her along to help her make this change, nothing that explicitly told her whether or not her audience was responding to her icons the way she wanted it to. She was on her own trying to shrink the gap between her intention and the received message. How, then, was she able to improve so much?

Partially, it's a matter of experience. The more interaction she has with social media, the more understanding she has of the community and of the inherent rules therein. Kostalnick writes that “Visual rhetoric is an intensely social process that entails convention building within discourse communities and a process of enculturation that fosters visual literacy among group members” (239). By engaging in the visual rhetoric that is inherent to the selection of icons, Veronica involved herself in that social process, in the building of those conventions, and as a member of the discourse community. As she grew through her life experiences, and as the discourse community itself grew,

⁸ Though there were suggestions both from her mother and from the friend who took the pictures and (presumably) approved of it.

increased in complexity, and developed its own visual literacy, her ability to use images to send the message she intended to send grew as well.

Partially, it's a matter of growing up just generally. The older Veronica has gotten, the more she has examined her life, the more time she has spent on her own identity. Shoemaker writes that "...the term 'identity' implies persistence, i.e., the existence of one and the same thing at different times" (2). Identity is more than just existence and persistence over time. It is a constantly evolving thing.

It might be argued that not all of this identity construction is in Veronica's hands. As Paasonen writes, "Identities are not only what we decide or desire them to be, but are, to a high degree, also *decided for us*" and "are inscribed in our bodies, internalized, read, and performed" (235, formatting preserved). This performance of identity, this enforced construction, does not change the amount of awareness that Veronica will or will not have about her identity. In fact, knowing that she is not entirely responsible for the creation of that identity makes it even more likely that Veronica, and people like her, will better understand the role of icons in social networking; she will be more aware of both the longevity and the changing nature of media such as Facebook, and the longer she participates in social networking, the better equipped she will be to send the message she intends. Her identity will be, at least in part, decided for her, and the more it is, the more she will be able to find ways of performing that identity, and hence presenting it anew as

people first come into contact with her icon and form their initial impression of her as a person.

Whether it be something she decides entirely, or something that is decided—in part or in full—by others, the more experience Veronica has with choosing her icon, the more chances she gets at matching the message she is intending to send with the message that others receive, the better she gets at it. While this is only one case, and therefore not a representation of a trend statistically, it follows logically that this sort of ability increase with experience would show itself as a trend. If time has passed between the choice of icons, time spent participating in a social network, the rhetor will be better equipped to select an icon that sends a clearer message. The more she becomes a part of the discourse community, the better she will be at communicating within it.

Chapter 6: Comparative Online Identities

To help answer the previously stated research question about how multiple separate identities might be formed simultaneously and in the same space, I looked at people who actively maintain multiple identities on Facebook. While I might have chosen those who create social network space for the fictional characters they play in a game, much like the characters on MUDs and MOOs Sherry Turkle discussed (1995), I was concerned that there might not be the same amount of effort made at maintaining these characters; there is no impetus, no external force, that motivates a rhetor to maintain this additional social identity.

Instead, I looked at those for whom the second identity was directly related to an aspect of their career. I focused on people for whom the creation and maintenance of this second identity was held to task by not just others involved in the game (as might be the case for a roleplaying character), but also by fans, potential employers, and contemporaries around the globe. These people have a vested interest in maintaining a second identity, and so by necessity put extra effort into not only maintaining that identity, but also in specifically differentiating this second identity from their first. That is, people who had a desire to create an online persona that was distinctly *not* them, so that they could maintain their own persona that *is*. I looked at performers, both the identity they formed for who they were on stage and the identities they formed for themselves when ‘out of character.’ Their real names were replaced with pseudonyms, as

discussed in chapter 1, but the stage names, being such public portions of these identities, were not. Once again, I looked at these examples with the permission of those I studied, making sure they were aware of the purpose and intent of this examination.

Different Identities Online

The identities that a rhetor creates online show only specific aspects of the rhetor behind those identities. In terms of Facebook, these identities allow the rhetor to make clear the rhetorical situation they are intending to approach, an anchor to help provide the nonverbal cues that otherwise are lacking in CMC. Each of these identities is a form of embodiment, a way for the rhetor to create for himself an online 'body.' While Nakamura wrote that the internet was a *disembodied* space, a “pure Cartesian cogito that detaches qualities of identity from the physical body” (67), the detachment from the physical body actually allows a rhetor to have *more* freedom of embodiment. The rhetor can create a new ‘body’ of sorts, based on the identity that he creates. Sometimes the rhetor chooses to show a specific side of himself, creating an identity focused on that aspect of himself in a conscious, intentional way.¹ Online, a rhetor is able to focus on a single aspect (or a few aspects) of himself to the exclusion of all others, where those others are not only out of the focus of the rhetor, but left behind entirely. In these cases, an identity is formed that is separate from any other online identity that rhetor creates.

¹ As compared to a less conscious way, such as the identity that people present in their everyday lives when ‘rolling out of bed’ or running errands or really any situation where they are not specifically paying attention to what they present, or to a single aspect of who they are.



Figure 6.1



Figure 6.2

Online, a rhetor is not as limited to a single identity as he may be in the real world; there is less worry about various social circles having to mix. He can have multiple identities in multiple spaces, taking on a persona for a social network like Facebook while simultaneously creating a different persona for a forum on ice fishing or for a dating site. I used one icon for myself (Figure 6.1) when I created my Facebook account (using my real name), but wanted a different icon for gendersociety.com.² I chose a different image (Figure 6.2) because I wanted to present myself as someone who would argue, who would share opinions, but I also wanted to have a certain amount of humor, an amicable distance with the user name “supportivefriend.” I was intentionally establishing myself as separate from the other members of the forums,³ but in a friendly way. The still from Calvin and Hobbes as the image has both a male and a female arguing with one another, a literal debate between the genders, was not accidental. Gendersociety.com is a community that focuses on not just identity but specifically on

² Gendersociety.com will feature more prevalently in the chapter 7.

³ Forums are a type of CMC social network, a set of conversations organized by topic and timing, allowing one person to make a post, starting a 'conversation' and others to respond to it in an asynchronous fashion, either responding to the initial post or to the responses of others who have already responded. Forums remain visible for others to read, allowing them to see the conversation in its full form (if it has ended) or to join that conversation.

gender. Often, the transgender feel that there is conflict between the gender they perform/identify with and the one they were assigned with their genetic sex. Therefore, I chose the argument between a boy and a girl to represent my awareness of that conflict, and chose to use a cartoon to make sure to present that I am aware of the conflict in a friendly and supportive way (a message that was reinforced in the user name). Benford et al. write “user embodiment is a key issue for collaborative virtual environments” (249); without any kind of embodiment, it is difficult, if not impossible, to communicate online. While I was not limited to my actual body in these cases, I still needed to present a virtual body, to take up a stance of embodiment to establish myself as one person, if only so to limit myself as *not* being other people.

These two identities were created for two different spaces; a social network (Facebook) and a set of forums (gendersociety.com). Sometimes, a rhetor chooses to create more than one identity in the *same* space. The reasons for doing this vary. For example, rhetors may create multiple identities in order to present different sides of the same debate, or to experiment with different aspects of their identities. What matters isn't why a single rhetor would create multiple identities. What matters is how he does it and what it means. That is to say, it is significant to investigate how a rhetor creates a primary or dominant identity (the embodiment of who he 'really is') and how he creates a secondary identity, one that embodies a distinctly separate (and usually less fully developed) identity. The rhetor likely creates these secondary identities in order to

maintain a distance from those he does not feel as directly connected to (fans, professional contacts) those he 'lets in' to his inner circle, who have direct access to the primary identity.

To investigate this, I have examined both the primary and secondary identities of multiple performers in the Minneapolis burlesque circuit, as they exist on Facebook. These performers work with multiple troupes in the area, working in different venues and according to different themes as the situation arises. Three examples illustrate the vast differences between the performer and the personae they adopt, and because of what these differences tell us about the creation of their distinctly different secondary online identities. These online identities are the embodiment that the character (the secondary identity) has off stage or outside of a professional setting.

Performance, generally speaking, is a large part of identity. When discussing gender identity, it has often been argued that all gender is performance. Judith Butler writes that “gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (526). More than just gender, though, all identity is performance. And all performance is identity. MacFayden writes that “the ritual speech acts of individual attestation in the material world are the sub-elements of group ritualized in performance in the construction of collective identity” (11). The discourse of any group, the membership in any group, relies on the performance as a member of that

group. The performers in this chapter are creating identities for the characters they play, but they also perform in other roles of their lives. People perform as friend, or as mother, or as father. These roles are so ubiquitous in real life that we rarely even consider them to be ‘performance.’ Online, and on stage, this aspect of identity becomes more visible. This is why I examine actual performers and their existing identities online.

The two identities are both of the same rhetor, and that they are consciously and intentionally constructed, and are intentionally made *different* from one another. The pictures all three people use vary enough to make the two identities distinct from one another. The two identities are constructed for different audiences (the personal page for the primary identity's friends and family, the persona page for the secondary identity's connections and fans), and the awareness of these different audiences leads the rhetors to make different decisions about what icons they choose.⁴

Barney Dale vs. Arthur

While burlesque is currently, generally speaking, very sexual in nature, focusing on the tease and the promise rather than the actual act of nudity, historically burlesque has a long tradition of humor and satire. Even today, some burlesque acts focus on a more comedic tone than others. Barney Dale, a male performer and part of a duo, focuses on that comedic aspect. His on stage persona is based loosely on the persona Chris Farley

⁴ While it would be helpful to know exactly when each image was used as the performer's icon, so as to correlate with off-line changes in their lives, it was not feasible in this circumstance. The performers have used icons at multiple points in time, changing them based on time of year, on what act they were currently performing most frequently, etc. As such, the timing of these icons was not considered for this part of the investigation. Timing plays a more critical role in Chapter 5.

took for himself during a skit on Saturday Night Live with Patrick Swayze, where the two were auditioning to be Chippendale⁵ dancers (hence the name Barney Dale, and his partner, whose surname is Chip).



Figure 6.3



Figure 6.4

Barney Dale used a shot from a performance for his icon (Figure 6.3). It shows a bit of his ability as a dancer, but mostly it shows off part of what makes his performance of burlesque humorous: the fact that he is overweight, just as it was funny that Chris Farley was consistently chosen over the much more physically fit Patrick Swayze as a dancer for Chippendale. In fact, the other icon (Figure 6.4) used by Barney Dale, which also shows the other member of his duo, makes it clear that the joke from that skit remains as part of the origin of the duo's performing. Of course, Barney Dale does more performances than simply recreating a sketch, but the inspiration for the duo is pretty clear. Barney Dale uses his physique, and the fact that it is not what many would call 'ideal,' for comedic effect. These images suggest a certain confidence, a willingness to put himself out there specifically as a source of humor, potentially as a target for ridicule.

⁵ Chippendales is a touring dance troupe specializing in male erotic dancing, established in 1979. It is best known by its distinctive upper body costume of shirt cuffs and bow tie collar with nothing else.

The confidence these icons radiate suggest that he is not a target for ridicule, but rather that he is an inspiration for comedic situations. People don't laugh at him; he leads the laughter with his performance. Barney is confident, is funny, and very, very open about his body. This icon, producing a body online (i.e., embodiment) is also very open. He is presenting himself for Facebook as a performer, inviting communication primarily about that aspect of his identity. As Foss writes, "Visual elements are arranged and modified by a rhetor not simply for the purpose of emotional discharge but for communication with an audience" (305). Barney is presenting this visual element of the icon as a way to inform those who come into contact with him (his audience) what the rhetorical situation he inhabits is focused on. He is not presenting other issues, other ideas, or other topics of conversation to those who approach him. Instead, his icon is focused purely on performer *as* performer.

Arthur, the person behind Barney Dale, chooses icons that tell different story. Where Barney's icon is essentially a publicity still for what he does on stage, Arthur seems to have many other interests. Barney is naturally focused on dancing and performing, on the attitude he brings to the stage. Arthur is the identity he wears most of his life. Literally all the time when he is not on stage, when he is not Barney, he is Arthur. So naturally Arthur is a more nuanced identity.

While Barney uses images of himself performing, Arthur uses images with more focus on him as a person. In one of his icons (Figure 6.5) he is smiling, sending a

message that he is an open, somewhat goofy person, someone looking for friends and open to new experiences. He is providing those he will be communicating with information about his interests and his personality. The lunchbox he is holding in his hand is stylized after a police box. Specifically, it is the police box used by Dr. Who, the TARDIS (Time And Relative Dimensions In Space) that allows The Doctor to travel through time and space. The lunchbox Arthur is holding shows his interest in the British television show, and a general connection with the subculture of the fans, a group that has been following the show and the various Doctors since the show's inception in 1963. In Great Britain, Doctor Who has a status of popularity equivalent to the most famous American actor at any given time. The 50th anniversary show in November of 2013 will have along with it a three convention with thousands of fans. The subculture of Dr. Who is massive, and Arthur is announcing his membership in that 'nerdy' subculture.



Figure 6.5



Figure 6.6

Another icon Arthur has used on Facebook (Figure 6.6) shows a more serious side of himself. This image has Arthur dressed in a business-casual style, not smiling in the open goofy way he was before. On the table is a plate of muffins and a lit candle; by all appearance, Arthur is eating. He is either pursing his lips or chewing, but either way is

presenting a more serious side of himself, of his identity, than either the other icon he used or the icons of Barney Dale. He is presenting more of the minutiae of his life, as seems to be one of the purposes of Facebook.⁶ When this was his primary icon, Arthur was sending a message that was very different from the message sent by Barney. Arthur may very well have used this icon while developing the secondary identity of Barney Dale, as this icon shows distinctive difference between Barney Dale and Arthur, setting them apart as very different people, very different identities.

Sometimes, it is a major goal of the rhetor to create the (off stage) performer's identity as being distinct and separate from the personae's identity can be a major goal of the rhetor. Estella Splits highlights this intentional separation.

Estella Splits vs. Christie

Estella Splits is a performer who usually works with the group Cirque du Pole (in the same way that Barney Dale works with the group Chip and Dale). She performs acrobatic aerial feats while pole dancing—without stripping—in front of crowds all over the country. But Christie is a mother of two, and doesn't want her children necessarily being connected to a pole dancing burlesque performer.⁷ She does not actively hide who she is or what she does, but she does not draw attention to the fact that she (Christie) and Estella are the same person. There are cross references between the two (they are 'friends'

⁶ See Appendix I.

⁷ According to an informal interview May, 2012.

on Facebook), but this cross referencing just shows that the two are embodied as separate people (though Christie is the primary identity).

Estella uses as her icon a picture (Figure 6.7), which is posed, has Estella around a pole and dressed up as Harley Quinn from the Batman (comic book) universe;⁸ this presents a very distinct identity. Estella is presenting herself here as not just an entertainer, but explicitly as a fictional character. She is dressed in



clearly recognizable costume, and the costume includes a mask; Estella is literally hiding her identity, obfuscating it the same way AgentSD (Figure 4.10) obfuscated his or how Martha (Figure 4.11) obfuscated hers. This icon of Estella still allows her to present herself as someone who uses a pole in her performance, and still has both an element of playfulness (the clown-themed outfit) and an element of sexuality (the amount and placement of bare skin). The message sent is that this is not a person interested in making contact as a person, but rather as a performer, as a presence on stage. Like Barney Dale, Estella is not making eye contact with the camera;⁹ that is, she is not actively engaging with her audience. She is remaining separate, distanced, and guarded, which can be seen both with the pole she is wrapped around (placed between her and the viewer) and more subtly by the pistol in her right hand, resting on her knee.

⁸ Like the icon discussed in chapter 1 (Figure 1.2) with the blinking eyes.

⁹ And hence with the viewer.

Another icon Estella Splits has used (Figure 6.8) is from her actual performance. The image shows her performing her act in a hoop hanging from the ceiling. It is fair to assume that she is up in the air, as the lights running across the image are lights from the ceiling of the venue where she was



performing. And indeed, she is an aerial performer. Once again, her icon does not directly interact with the audience, and her face is obscured. She is not as actively hiding it as she was with the mask, but her face is still hidden. Her identity once again is focused not on who she is but on what she *does* as a performer. She has created Estella Splits as a stage persona in the purest sense; she exists *only* as a performer, and has no identity outside of that performance. Like Barney, Estella approaches Facebook from the professional context, interested only in an audience that comes to her communication as a performer or about being a performer. There are no direct suggestions for how to book Estella for a performance, though there is a link to the e-mail one should use for such a thing (Figure 6.9). She may be interested in having fans, or making contact with people who can help her perform, but she does not present an identity that wants to make friends.

About Estella

Estella Splits performs enticing combinations of pole dance, aerial arts, acrobatics, circus and burlesque around the Twin Cities area and abroad. She can be found performing as a solo artist and also as 1/3rd of the performance troupe Cirque du Pole.

YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/VivaceSamsara>

Email:

CirqueDuPole@gmail.com



Figure 6.10



Figure 6.11

Figure 6.9

Christie, on the other hand, is very open to contact with people and to engaging with her audience, as can be seen in the icons she chooses. Her approach to online contact, to CMC, is open and presents topics of conversation beyond that of performing. Many of the icons she chooses (such as Figure 6.10), are family photos as much as they are images. Christie is looking directly at the viewer, and hence the audience, and is smiling. She is holding her daughter to show how her daughter's importance, but the daughter is slightly behind and to the left (from the point of view of the audience), making it clear that the daughter is not the focus of the icon. Christie is bent down, which might come across as condescending (as she is literally lowering herself to be able to

make eye contact with the viewer and to be level with her daughter, thus showing that her daughter is important to her). The smile on her face is open and friendly, and the direct eye contact suggests an openness and willingness to make friends, something distinctly different from the icons chosen for Estella Splits.

In another of Christie's icons (Figure 6.11), she remains smiling and friendly, and continues to make it clear that her family is her priority by using a family style photograph. In addition to her daughter from the last icon, her son is now also in the image (as is her dog). This image also allows further contrasting from Estella in that her body is not prominently featured. In both of Estella Splits' icons, her body is very clearly presented, somewhat sexualized. She is dressed in revealing and/or skin tight clothing and is presented with her body as open and visible as possible. She is, literally, showing off. In Christie's other icon, her body is hidden in the sense that it is clearly not the focus of the image, but the lines are still available to see the shape of her body. In this second picture, those lines are changed, hidden, and disguised; there is no way to tell that the woman in Christie's second icon is the same woman that is in Estella Splits' second icon. Christie manages to keep her performance identity very distinct and separate from her personal identity, using the same space (Facebook) to present both identities without the two crossing.¹⁰ Her method of separating the two is direct obfuscation,¹¹ literally hiding her face as a performer. It is, likely, not a matter of shame so much as a matter of wanting

10 Though, as noted above, the two do 'cross' in the sense of the connection between them as Facebook friends. However, this interaction serves to further establish the primary and secondary identity as being separate from one another.

11 As discussed in Chapter 4.

to keep separate. Just as Arthur set himself as separate from Barney Dale through his icons by focusing on different aspects, so too does Christie separate herself from Estella Splits through what she chooses to show of herself in each case. Christie's presented identity on Facebook invites a different kind of contact than Estella, and begins the mediation of communication from a distinct point of view.

Pouty Petals vs. Michelle

The third case to look at is that of Pouty Petals, another burlesque performer. Pouty is really Michelle, and the two are very distinct from one another. Her method of separation is very different from Christie's or Arthur's. Where the two of them focused on showing only certain parts of themselves in their on stage persona, of approaching Facebook only *as performer*, Michelle has created a completely different and new identity in Pouty Petals. Pouty is a person in her own right. As her icon (Figure 6.12) suggests, Pouty is open to meeting people (making direct eye contact), and is presented as a full picture of elegance. Her long blonde hair, feather boa, and slinky gloves create an image akin to the golden age of Hollywood, bringing to mind such performers as Marilyn Monroe or Jayne Russel. It is an image reminiscent of the Femme Fatale, and gives that impression about who Pouty Petals is *as a person*, not just as someone on stage. Unlike the two online personae above, Pouty Petals, through her icon, is suggested as existing off the stage, more complete and more developed. Pouty Petals, by what can be seen in this icon, has her own personality. She is approaching computer mediated communication

in character, willing to engage with people as Pouty Petals the *person*, not just Pouty Petals the *performer*.



Figure 6.12



Figure 6.13

An icon of her on stage (Figure 6.13) supports this image of her as a *Femme Fatale*. She is wearing pink, but the makeup on her eyes gives her a dark quality. Her body shape, the feather boa (again) and the gloves (again) harken back to a specific era, and puts the audience in the mindset of that era. Pouty as a person can be expected to act like one of the Hollywood starlets of that era. And while this second icon is not as welcoming as one with direct eye contact would be, it *is* still open in that her arms are spread wide, she is not looking away from the audience (indeed, her eyes are closed), and the image of her is itself pouting, as one would expect someone named Pouty Petals to do.

Michelle approaches Facebook with a much different goal. Where Pouty is beginning the communication by providing other rhetors with her identity as a formal, *femme-fatale* type (and not just a performer), Michelle presents herself much more casually, beginning Facebook interactions from a position of informality. For her icon, Michelle chose an image of her with her cat (Figure 6.14). With a gentle and comfortable

smile with eye contact to the viewer, this icon suggests an openness similar to Pouty, but the soft smile and the presence of the pet suggests a much more down-to-earth personality, much less formal than Pouty Petals, particularly in the publicity shot (the first icon), but still less formal than the performance icon. Michelle is dressed casually, in a way that the icons of Pouty Petals suggest Pouty would never dress. Interestingly, Michelle is a red head, where Pouty Petals is clearly blond.



Figure 6.14



Figure 6.15

A second icon Michelle has used (Figure 6.15) shows us this last distinction even more clearly. The image is very clear that Michelle has red hair. It looks to be relatively straight and wavy, with bangs in the front covering up her forehead. The wide and broad smile shows off the slight gap in her teeth, and the slight tilt of her head suggests an informality that Pouty Petals would never have. Fairly nerdy eyeglasses, too.

The hair is one of the biggest differences between the two. Pouty Petals has long, flowing, luscious blond hair (though it is clearly a wig), the hair of the femme fatale, the movie starlet. Even when she is active (as in her second icon), her hair remains perfectly placed, not a strand out of place. Michelle has wavy, possibly curly hair that is often disheveled; clearly she does not need her hair to be as perfect as Pouty does. Michelle's

icon is likely meant to suggest that she is open, supportive, friendly, and casual. She can be messy. Pouty must be perfect on stage.

Looking at the icons of Pouty Petals and Michelle, most people (myself included) would do a double take upon knowing that they are the same person. While many performers in costume with makeup look different from their appearance at home, these differences are very sharply pronounced in this particular case. The two look different in everything from the obvious hair color and body posture to the more subtle way she engages with the audience and the things that the icons suggest are important to her. It leaves one almost unable to believe that these are the same person. And that is somewhat the point. These two identities are *distinct* from one another in a way that the others are not. Both personae have their own personalities, and both of them are as fully realized as one can reasonably expect an online identity to be. The icons chosen by the primary identity (Michelle) and the secondary identity (Pouty) send specific messages about the type and topics of communication that are of interest to her. The icon in each case is serving to provide a starting place for others to begin communicating. They are expressing the identity she wishes to produce, and in a way informing others what audience she expects to be communicating with.

The fact that they are so markedly different from one another is also very suggestive. While there may be temptation to assume that this is caused by some psychological rift within Michelle, allowing Pouty Petals to form as its own personality,

such an assumption would be unfair at best, and would miss the whole point of online identity. When using an icon to create an online identity, a rhetor can show the world an extremely limited single facet¹² of her life (such as how Christie shows the facet that is Estella Splits), or a rhetor can show the world an entirely formed identity that *focuses* on some aspects of her personality more than others. This is what is happening with Pouty Petals. Michelle is a casual, friendly person. She is beautiful, and clearly takes care of herself, but the 'killer instinct' of her appearance isn't all that significant a part of her. She isn't showing pictures of herself that hide her appearance the way Christie and Arthur did, but she isn't highlighting the physical much either.

Pouty Petals is simply a side of Michelle, a different online embodiment, that *does* use her appearance in any way she can. Her Facebook page, while still containing the elements of a professional page that would be expected from a performer (such as what acts she is performing, her schedule, what troupe or troupes she is affiliated with, etc.), can also be expected to contain elements of a personality, of Pouty as more than *just* performer. Pouty is the sex bomb, the woman who will manipulate others with her appearance, and sees no harm in doing so. She is a woman of elegance, closer to the Renaissance Courtesan than the mundane lady of the evening, but she still uses sex as a weapon. She is a femme fatale. But she is more than just a figure on stage. She is presented as a woman with refined tastes, with interests in non-sexual activities (like

¹² All icons show 'a single facet' by their very nature. But the depth of that facet changes when the identity is more fully developed *outside* of the icon; by limiting this discussion to the icon alone, these additional aspects provided by text are necessarily absent.

smoking a pipe), and is interested in jewelry and that maintained elegance not only on stage, but throughout her life. The icons of Pouty Petals suggest a full life off the stage, a fully developed identity. It is a far more extensive identity than those of Barney Dale or Estella Splits.

The Conscious Role of Icons in Identity

These performers, and the identities of the characters that they create, illustrate the way a conscious choice of icons can affect online identity. Choosing one icon instead of another allows a rhetor to develop his identity, presenting either a specific aspect of his personality or even a fully developed persona. The icon does not complete this identity; icons are snapshots, starting points for communication. But the icon choice allows the rhetor to begin the process of identity online. The more focused an icon is on one aspect of personality or another, the more the focus of CMC with that rhetor will center on that aspect. Icons that are purely of performance create the impression that the rhetor is only interested in communication *as performer*, whereas icons that present more or different activities and situations send the message that the rhetor is open to other topics and other purposes. The choice of the icon is the first step, and the icon has the capacity to send a variety of messages not just about the rhetor, but also from which directions and in what ways that rhetor is interested in approaching social networking. In the case of these performers, they are demonstrating an awareness of the rhetorical situations they are actively engaging in, whether it be the situation of other performers/fans or the situation

of friends and family outside of their performer identity. This awareness of the rhetorical situation they are engaging in has led each of them to choose icons in order to make clear to others who and how they were representing themselves.

This capacity opens wide the possibilities of online identity. It is most easily seen with performers and their on stage personae, but only because they are specific examples of one person offline developing multiple online identities. Any rhetor can choose to develop multiple online identities, and can do so through the choice of different icons.

A rhetor may want to develop those multiple identities for a number of reasons. As part of a troupe, Estella is performing between one and three acts (of about 5-10 minutes long) over the course of the night; in between, other performers do their own acts, sometimes related to a central theme of the show (like “Heroes and Villains” for the Harley Quinn outfit) and sometimes just presented as an individual act. She may want to present different identities to different audiences, such as a performer and a stage personality, where she is actively separating the two identities for those audiences, even when there is some overlap of those audiences.

While the identities that these three performers have created, these secondary identities, are well formed with varying degrees of depth, performers are not the only people who may find use in the creation of secondary or tertiary identities. Rhetors (i.e., not just performers) may want to present different identities for the purpose of exploration, essentially 'trying on' one identity or another in order to better understand

herself. Sometimes this is a general 'identity tourism,' but sometimes, it is far more significant.

A rhetor may be exploring a deeply personal question of identity, such as a question of gender identity. This exploration, far from being limited to the online situation, is deeply entwined with the life of the rhetor off line. He or she may be wrestling with gender all the time, uncertain about the deepest and most important parts of identity. Online, there is a space where this exploration is possible, where a rhetor can experiment and develop identity along multiple lines.

By choosing the right icon, by developing identity through conscious effort and choice, and through awareness of the audience, a rhetor can explore and understand identity in entirely new ways.

It is to one of these that I turn now, a space where online identity can be developed specifically along the line of exploration or transition of gender.

Chapter 7: Online Identity for a Specific Audience

Though I had thus far limited myself primarily to Facebook, I felt it important, in order to investigate the effect audience awareness has on the selection of icon, to examine another space, one that has a very specific and very focused audience. I also wanted to investigate a space where I had no personal connection, where none of my analysis could be tempered or biased by my knowledge of the rhetors who chose those icons. For this reason, I did not make contact with any of those whose icons I examined, and only looked at those icons that are available to those who are *not* members of the site. That is to say, I looked only at the icons that are publicly visible to anyone online. I did contact the site owner and made her aware that I was doing this, and gained her permission to use both the icons and the user names attached to them, with the understanding that these things would be used for research in a dissertation.

Audience in Icon Selection

The audience is a significant part of online identity. Knowing who will be responding to an icon, who will be receiving a message, is often a vital part of the decision making process when choosing that icon. When a rhetor approaches an online space without any knowledge of that space, he must choose his icon with very little—if any—consideration for the community and audience he is potentially joining.

On the other hand, a rhetor who knows his audience, who is aware of the community he is joining, can tailor his icon to the needs, desires, and interests of that community. In Chapter 3 I discussed the use of techniques such as lurking and direct inquiry to learn about the makeup of a community, about the rules and practices it follows. Once those are known, a rhetor is able to choose an icon, to create an identity, that fits within that community and that follows its rules. This allows a rhetor to become a member of the community more quickly, and allows her to better select an icon where the message that is received is closest to the one that is intended. In other words, knowing the community allows the rhetor to quickly gain an understanding of how her messages will be received, and how to choose an icon that best creates the identity she is trying to create.

In the case of Gender Society, those who approach the community do so with an awareness of the audience. Gender Society is very clear about who makes up the group and what sort of audience the members of the group produce. The front matter for the site (Fig 7.1) makes it very clear who makes up the community and what sort of audience the community purports to be, essentially informing any potential members what their audience will be like *before* they choose their icons.¹ This initial assistance to learn who the audience will be will help the rhetors choose their initial icons, which they will be able to further refine as they take a place within that community.

¹ Full text of this page is available in Appendix IV.

Transgender Identity Online: the 'NetGendered'

Gender is not a guaranteed feature of identity. A gender is performed. Judith Butler writes that “Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (“Performative Acts” 531). Biological sex is not the same as gender.

As a person develops his identity, as he grows and comes to really experiment with who he is, he might find a dissonance between his gender and his sex. The gender he was assigned at birth, whether it matched his biological sex (in the case of XY or XX) or not (in the case of XXY or other possible combinations), may not match the gender identity he feels would best fit who he actually is. And once he realizes that, once he begins to find himself performing a different gender identity, he may begin changing his gender.

People moving from one gender to a gender that they feel more comfortable in, whether it be male-to-female or female-to-male,² could have a great deal of identity experimentation they need to do as part of the process. They may want to learn to act as the gender they are moving to, to speak like them, etc. They may change their physical

² Or some other gender beyond the heteronormative male/female binary.

bodies, but while changing the body, the mind has always been of a different gender (and hence does not need to change). And one of the only places, early on in the process, they can go to have the embodiment they long for online, where changing the body is relatively easy, until such time as the body catches up with the mind. As Patricia Gagne, Richard Tewksbury, Deanna McGaughey (1997) write, “transgenderists must recognize, tolerate, and learn to accept an alternative gender identity; develop a repertoire of coping strategies to manage *public presentations of gender*; and, in some cases, manage the actual transformation of permanent identity and anatomy” (482). This alternate gender identity does not form immediately, and the coping strategies must be learned. Identity must be explored, preferably in a safe environment. And no environment is safer than that of the internet, where embodiment is, unlike in face-to-face communication, debatable. Online, a rhetor creates his identity, adopting for himself an online 'body' (often in the form of an icon).

The significance of this ability to create and adapt new identities, new online 'bodies' is particularly important in the case of gender identity. If a man wants to be a woman in the real world, he must, as Turkle suggests, shave various parts of his body, wear makeup, different clothing, different hair, different shoes; he must walk differently, talk differently, and have different mannerisms if he wants even a chance at 'passing'; online, swapping gender is as easy as clicking the “female” box instead of the “male” box (Turkle *Alone* 212); at least, this is how easy it is to begin; the legitimacy question still

comes into play, as we saw from the non-physical ways of making difference above. Nevertheless, it is far easier, and far less risky, to swap genders online. It is also less time-consuming and less likely to result in physical violence. These factors together make it more attractive to experiment with different gender identities, and different identities in general. While the legitimation still needs to occur, if people fail to prove their legitimacy online, they face non-physical violence in the form of shunning and potentially insulting messages; far easier to handle and easier to risk than the potential of physical violence that exists in similar situations in the real world (Richmond et. al 114).

The development of gender identity may be easier to begin online, but it is a continuing process. As Rodino writes, “gender construction is never done, never finalized” (10), and that the inherent nature of Computer Mediated Communication reduces visual and aural cues, thus democratizing communication (7), which makes it easier, again, to present a different gender, though still more difficult to maintain that persona. This is why Susan C. Herring and Anna Martinson (2004) write “Although people might take on a nickname of the opposite gender, for example, it was rare for them to maintain behaviors consistent with that gender over time, due to the strain of having to maintain an artificial persona” (427). CMC is democratized, but gender identity is a continued performance, something that must constantly be worked at in order to maintain. While this is true in real life as well—a cross dresser must 'act the part' to continue passing—online that performance is far more constant, as Del-Tesso Craviotta

pointed out: “In chat rooms, the issue of authenticity has often been raised in regards to the truthfulness of identities displayed in the rooms, taking ‘true identity’ as a match between the ‘real’ offline identity and the ‘virtual’ online one” (252). Rodino also writes that “...to continue to appear as a woman, one must continue displaying cues that signify woman” (10), meaning that to maintain authenticity online, the identity must be continuously displayed and performed

This need for continued reinforcement suggests that others online are looking for false cues, trying to find holes in the gender performance. In real life, those holes need to be glaring and draw attention; online, those holes are searched for. Gagne et al. write that “gender—and we would argue, gender identity—is learned and achieved at the interactional level, reified at the cultural level, and institutionally enforced via the family, law, religion, politics, economy, medicine, and the media” (479). While many of these factors are not immediately visible online, the transgenderist must understand all of these factors—particularly the gender-specific issues within medicine, politics, and the media—and be able to pay attention to the gender binaries, so as to provide the right cues for the gender that they identify with.

It's not that the transgender are any 'better' or 'worse' at creating identity than anyone else; transgenderism just focuses more explicitly on identity, especially gender identity. A community structured around this search for identity (such as gendersociety.com) must therefore directly wrestle with these issues, and how these

issues effect online identity. Which in turn gives them some experience with identity, a 'leg up' in the identity creation game. They are actually doing it, consciously and actively, rather than the way it is often done through social networking.

The performative nature of gender identity makes it a difficult thing to maintain; it is very difficult to perform a different gender, due to the need to constantly present cues, as Rodino suggested above. Gender Society is explicitly a space where mistakes are accepted and even expected; in forum posts, newcomers are corrected but assured that their mistakes are okay. Essays and blog posts by members are posted to help people avoid mistakes both on the transgender board and on thousands of other support sites. Cues that reveal someone to be male when presenting as female in many online settings may result in aggressive or even strident responses, but in the transgender community, such missteps are seen more as an opportunity for learning. The cues must be learned, or the transgenderist will present as the wrong gender without realizing it.

Gendersociety.com

I had no access to the people behind the icons in this setting.³ The setting itself is a public CMC, available for any to view. Membership is required to post, but all the icons presented herein were gathered without membership access.⁴ I investigated primarily the 'New Members' forum, as that seemed to be the place where I would most likely be able

³ All names with icons from Gender Society are assumed to already be pseudonyms, and the names, knowingly chosen as part of the identity created for Gender Society, are an integral part of the icon. As such, as discussed in Chapter 1, none have been changed.

⁴ As the site is publicly accessible and visible without joining the site, it is considered public access CMC. That said, I *do* have permission to use information on the site.

to find both those who were newly forming their online identity that was focused on gender experimentation (those with fewer than 100 posts), and those who had long since done this work, and were now welcoming new members (those with more than 1000 posts).

The following examples present those two groups, to show ways in which those who are choosing their icons pay distinct attention to gender identity, and through doing so show how the knowledge of the audience influences the ability to create those identities more easily and successfully.

Icons of New Members

Upon first signing up for membership to this community and choosing a 'screen name' to use, a rhetor is prompted to fill out a 'profile,' which includes basic details such as name, location, marital status, and birthday, along with any personal details the rhetor wishes to provide in an 'about me' section. He is provided an opportunity to share contact information ranging from personal websites to various social networking sites, and then is asked to provide a picture, which will be his icon.

Once the community is joined, often the rhetor will begin by posting in the 'New Members' forum. This space is explicitly set aside as a place of first contact, a place where people can begin interacting with the audience. Whether or not the rhetor has spent time lurking, this is where she most often first makes her presence known.

Though these members are new to the community, they have a much better understanding of their intended audience than they would for most social networks. The audience is very explicit here, and that knowledge, and the knowledge of the community's purpose, can help new members choose the best possible icon to establish themselves in this situation.

Sometimes, that establishing of identity is explicitly one of hiding. The icon of this user, “*_*” (Figure 7.2) is very clearly hiding whoever he or she is. In another circumstance, this icon might be dismissed as simply being an attempt to obfuscate identity. But in this particular



audience, the choice of imagery has much more

18 posts

significance. A butterfly is generally known not only for its beauty, but as a symbol of growth and rebirth. A caterpillar spins a cocoon, and months later a butterfly bursts free, flying away from the land-bound life of the caterpillar. It is often seen as a symbol of growth and of freedom. This is precisely the kind of impression one might want to give having found a community that actively accepts a gender dissonance, one that encourages members of that community to grow and metamorphose into the beautiful inner person they identify with.

Another more explicit type of icon a rhetor might choose in this community would be like “Mike/Stephanie F” (Figure 7.3). This icon is about as literal as possible,

showing both sides of the rhetor simultaneously. Whether it is a case that Mike considers himself Stephanie or that Stephanie considers herself forced to pretend to be Mike,⁵ this icon shows the balance between the two. Mike has black hair, and the background of his half of the icon is



pink. The background of Stephanie's half of the icon is black, while her hair is pink. The two form a balance, suggesting that Mike/Stephanie at least considers there to be a balance between the two sides. I would expect that as she moves along her journey of gender discovery, she will move farther from Mike and closer to Stephanie. Terry Kogan writes that “Many post-operative [MTF] transsexuals choose to leave the transgender community after surgery because they no longer consider themselves to be transgender. They now consider themselves to be women... transsexuals do not view themselves as engaging in illusion or impersonation. Rather, they view themselves as expressing their true feminine gender identity” (1227). As Mike becomes Stephanie, she is likely to stop considering herself to still be Mike.

Another common choice for the first icon in this space is a cartoon, such as the one used by Misty (Fig 3.6). While other situations may see a cartoon as being used to hide the identity of the rhetor (such as when Cameron used the cartoon as his first icon, Fig 4.18), in a case like Gender Society, the cartoon takes on a different meaning. As

⁵ It is assumed that Mike/Stephanie is a MtF transgender; the society allows members to self-identify. The FtM have their user names automatically shown in red, the MtF in blue.

seen with Misty, the cartoon can present what the rhetor *wants* to look like. It allows her to create an online identity that comes with an online body. While Jeremy Kaye writes that “one can upload any picture onto the web in the place of one’s own” (168), it is more than that. In a community like Gender Society, the picture that one uploads in place of one's own isn't meant to deceive.⁶ It is meant to represent. This is the other reason to use a cartoon; the audience is (presumably) never going to assume that the cartoon is what the rhetor *actually* looks like, thus reasserting it as an image of desired appearance. This is more in accordance with what Sherry Turkle wrote when she said “When people create avatars, they are not themselves but express important truths about themselves” (*Alone* 230). The choice of a cartoon expresses an important truth; namely, what the rhetor feels he *should* or at least would *like to* look like.

This can be seen with the example of “Tara Bernadette” (Figure 7.4). Tara has chosen a cartoon image of not only a clearly female image, but also one that appears to be of Wiccan origin. Wicca, a religion based around nature worship, is largely focused on femininity and the power of women. The pentagram in the background supports this



mystical tone, as does the ceremonial position of the woman and the presence of the cup in a central position. The woman herself is somewhat ambiguous; there is no real detail to

⁶ At least, not in any serious sense. The picture might be meant to present a level of playfulness, irony, or satire.

the face and very little detail to the body. It could be argued, in fact, that the only detail in the body of the woman is the minimal amount to make it clear that it *is* a woman. This suggests that, while Tara wants to make it clear that she sees herself as a woman, she has not yet determined just what she-as-woman looks like. It creates a first impression of someone who knows for certain that she is female, but is still unsure about other details. This seems appropriate for a new member of the community. Members who have more experience being part of Gender Society would be expected to have more definitive icons, even those that are cartoons. Further membership in the community comes with pressure, sometimes subtle and sometimes blunt, to make sure that a user has chosen an actual icon; virtually all of the ‘blank’ icons found had fewer than 50 total posts, as opposed to the hundreds often seen with those who did not leave their icon blank.

Icons of Long-time Members

Above, I discussed the type of icon that suggests a combination of names. With a new user, these two names made distinctly separate with the slash mark between the names. This combination of names is not unusual in this community. Consider the icon of “Karen Brad,” (Figure 7.5). She has presented a photograph, presumably one of herself, one that makes it clear what gender she is trying

Karen Brad



2605 posts

to perform. Karen Brad still has masculine features, which may explain why she has kept

the masculine second name. But the feminine name is first, and the hair, along with what can be seen of the clothing, makes it clear that the identity she is presenting is that of a woman. Specifically, between the image and the name, she is presenting the identity of a transgender woman. It could be debated that Karen Brad is presenting a gender identity that is neither male nor female (or that is *both* male and female), but that debate seems to be making deeper assumptions than can be fairly made.

A longtime member of the community may also choose an icon that focuses on the welcoming aspect of the society. This icon of “Joni Mari Cruz” (Figure 7.6) is not only clearly gendered as female, but is also very open and friendly. She is smiling, she is making direct eye contact, and she is on the same level as the camera, looking neither up nor down, and hence not asserting any position of power



through perspective. Joni, with more than 1900 posts, is a moderator, which means it is her job to make sure that members using a particular forum, in her case the New Members forum, meet with the goals and standards of the community as a whole. She ensures that people are not being abusive to one another, that they are following the rules, and that they feel welcome. In virtually every topic in the forum, every time someone new introduces herself, Joni will personally welcome the new members and encourage

them to take part in the community. She is there as a welcoming committee, and her icon was chosen to help present that identity.

Other long-time users will choose a cartoon icon, as “Tara Bernadette” did, more clearly presenting a specific identity. The icon belonging to “Katie Glover” (Figure 7.7) is one such image. The image was presumably created specifically by her to use on Gendersociety.com (the writing in the lower right corner says “The Gender Society”), so it seems safe to assume that this is how Katie



would like to be seen. She is smiling and making eye contact, offering a warm presentation without overpowering the detail of who she is. It is more defined than the cartoon above, but still uniquely hers. Katie Glover is the owner of Gendersociety.com, and this image was likely selected to help her promote the ideals of the community, which would explain the friendly and open look of the woman in the cartoon.

Another possibility for an icon can be seen with “Cristine, Shye (GS Admin)” (Figure 7.8). Cristine is another of the administrators of Gender Society,⁷ and has chosen for her icon the cover of a magazine.⁸ Much of the detail of that magazine cover are too small to make out, but two aspects stand out as significant and



presumably intentional. First is the name of the magazine, *Jewish Living*. This suggests a fair number of things about Cristine, including not only her religious identification, but also the significance that religion holds in her life. If she did not consider her Judaism to be significant, she would likely not read the magazine at all. And if she were not proud of her Judaism, she certainly would not advertise it the way she does in this icon. The second significant part is the image on the cover, the model of the image. Clearly female, as presumably Cristine sees herself. But at the same time, clearly presented as not being what she *actually* looks like. The magazine cover makes it clear that this is not *actually* Cristine, though it still presents a fair impression of the identity she is trying to create.

Icons of Deeper Meaning

⁷ The administrators of Gender Society, like moderators, help to enforce the community rules, and can ban members, remove posts, or end discussions (preventing further posts) if they begin to violate the rules of the community. This provides a level of safety for the members of Gender Society, as they know someone is keeping an eye on things and making sure the conversations remain cordial and don't devolve into 'flaming.' Administrators have larger purviews than moderators, focusing on the site at large rather than a single forum.

⁸ It is unclear whether or not this is a real cover. The magazine, which ran for less than a year, no longer has a web presence, and attempts to find the image meet with no matches. I am assuming that this image was for a real cover for the purpose of this investigation.

Number of posts aside, some of the icons used on Gender Society have deeper meaning, such as those discussed in chapter 4, when looking at icons in other circumstances. Earlier discussions of icons such as “Misty” (Figure 3.6) showed how an icon can have both an initial impression (the cartoon of a woman, similar to those of “Tara Bernadette” or “Katie Glover” above) and a deeper meaning for those who recognize the source of the image and understand the significance of this particular cartoon. Misty has multiple levels of meaning: the female cartoon (presenting her both as female and providing the messages of a cartoon as discussed in Chapter 3), the Japanese Manga style (presenting a view into her interests, much like Cameron in chapter 4), and the meaning of *Ramona 1/2* (discussed in Chapter 3) as it specifically applies to transgenderism. This multiplicity of meanings within Gendersociety.com shows a deeper willingness and understanding of identity establishment, as the choice of an icon with multiple levels of meaning requires a specific audience in order to be understood.

The icon belonging to “AlisonRain2,” who I will refer to as simply Alison (Figure 7.9), is one of these icons with multiple levels of meaning. To many audiences, Alison's picture is just of a blue skinned creature, probably a woman. The assumption may be that it is a mask, suggesting that Alison is trying to hide who she is. Among the members of Gender Society, this is to be expected. It



might seem that Alison is trying to suggest that she feels like her real identity is hidden behind a mask, or that she feels like an alien, an outcast separate from the world around her, an outcast. All of these are congruent with the type of identity one would expect within the group. So Alison's choice of icon helps her establish that identity within the group.

Some members of Gender Society will also be members of a sub group that is interested in video games, much the way Misty is a member of a subgroup that is interested in Japanese Manga.⁹ The subset of video gamers will find there is more to the icon. The picture is of the character Samara from the video game series *Mass Effect*. The character, who appears primarily in the second game, is an alien who lives by a strict code of justice, fighting for the greater good as she (and her code) perceives it. She is uncompromising, self-sacrificing, and ruthless. She hunts down her own daughter, a serial killer. She takes the responsibility to do so on herself, and does her duty even though it conflicts with her maternal instincts.

So among an audience of *Mass Effect* fans, Alison's icon suggests a lot about her. It suggests, if not those qualities held by Samara, at least an admiration for those qualities. Among that particular audience, Samara is an idol to be looked up to, and regularly recognizable. Within the context of Gendersociety.com, it suggests that Alison is very proud of the gender identity she presents, and she is uncompromising about it. She

⁹ While these groups are subsets of the members of Gender Society, that is not to suggest that the groups are smaller or even that they are necessarily contained within Gender Society exclusively. Rather, these sub groups are *another form of identity* that these people ascribe to. Within this particular group or audience, those other identifiers are secondary, making them sub-groups in that sense.

gives the impression that she has very clearly defined and inflexible ideas of what is right and wrong, and while those ideas may not match what society at large suggests, they are still the code by which she lives. And if that makes her an outcast (i.e., an alien), then so be it. So again, there is an identity presented on the surface, a further identity presented with a bit of recognition, and even more presented with complete familiarity with the image source. Each of these levels of meaning is accurate, but those who recognize it better will be better able to understand what kind of person Alison is; in a way, such icons act as a filter to help the rhetor select and find the potential friends or connections most similar to herself.

How Predetermined Audience Affects Online Identity

Knowledge of the audience before establishing online identity allows more possibilities for authenticity in selecting an icon. By being aware of the audience he is approaching, the rhetor is able to not only limit the dissonance between intended message and inferred message, but also to allow deeper levels of meaning than may otherwise be possible. This is not to say that other communities do not allow these multiple meanings, nor that simple icons are lacking in those deeper meanings. Instead, I am suggesting that knowing the audience, as those who join Gender Society are able to do thanks to the letter on the front page of the site, allows the rhetor to select an icon that will invite the investigation necessary for the audience to find these deeper meanings. Membership in a

community does affect identity, but the makeup of that community, the audience, also effects how many levels of meaning an icon can reasonably be expected to present.

When someone posts on a forum with an icon next to his name, that icon can influence the tone of everything that person writes. Misty's icon will be next to everything Misty says, allowing her icon to send a specific message and embed an additional level of meaning into the text of her words.

An icon can have one meaning on the surface, with deeper meaning available only to those who recognize its source. Often times (Misty, AlisonRain2, etc.), that's okay; having one meaning on the surface still serves its purpose when engaging with an audience that does not have certain insider knowledge. It will still present an element of the intended message even if it doesn't give the entire message. One way to illustrate this would be with a thought experiment, looking at an icon that might be chosen for this audience. Consider, for example, the image

(Figure 7.10)¹⁰ which might be used as an icon by a (fictitious) person I will call Jack.¹¹ Someone with no basis of knowledge might look at this and assume that it is a tribal design, which would not



¹⁰ Bridges et al., 83.

¹¹ Using a fictional person allows me to focus on the icon itself, because it eliminates any additional information that might be provided by existing text or a profile to be examined.

be far from the truth. Zero insider knowledge would suggest that the Jack chose this icon because he feels some level of identification with tribal identities, primitive cultures, or pictograms. Someone who has some awareness of the role playing games of White Wolf Publishing Inc. would recognize that not only is this is a pictogram, but is a glyph of the werewolves within the world of darkness setting. Further awareness of the system Werewolf: The Apocalypse would tell someone that this particular glyph is meant to represent a specific tribe: the Children of Gaia. Knowledge about the tribe in this fictional world would tell the audience that this rhetor is identifying with the tribe's peaceful nature, desire for cohesion and diplomacy, and environmental concerns. It may also evoke images of sexual freedom, which, combined with the shape-shifting fluidity of the werewolves, might allow its use in Gender Society to represent someone who feels that his own gender (or sexuality) is shifting.

So at the surface, this icon would add an air of tribalism to whatever Jack said; perhaps a level of naturalism or simplicity. Basic recognition of the source of this image would make the things that Jack said have a tone of ecological focus (as the werewolves in the world of darkness setting are, at their most simplistic, ecological terrorists), and more of that tribalism and unity, since wolves are pack-focused creatures.

A deeper recognition would add further nuance to Jack's words. He would be seen as more inclusive, of wanting people to get along, of seeking peaceful solutions rather than violent ones. His words would be weighed with the knowledge of the stereotypes of

this fictional tribe in its fictional world; but only those who were aware of such things would have access to that level of nuance.

However, even those with absolutely no knowledge of gaming would get at least part of the message that Jack was trying to send with his icon. Even those who had no idea what the symbol meant would have the opportunity to understand what kind of person Jack was, and through reading the words he might write, they would come to greater and greater understanding of who he is. The icon, in other words, offers that first impression, but also influences how his communication will be received, how future messages impact his audience. So the icon is a first impression *and* a lasting influence.

This leads me to questions about identity and icons that are beyond the scope of this investigation. Therefore, let me turn now to the possibilities of the future.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Non-Verbal Communication

Given that non-verbal communication plays such a vital role in communication,¹ and there is little or no opportunity for non-verbal communication online (at least in the sense of unconscious or visual communication), and given that the creation and maintenance of an online identity is a goal in computer mediated communication, the icon stands as one of the most essential starting points for that identity. Offline, first impressions are made by way of clothing choices, physical appearance, and body language. Online, that first impression is made by way of an icon. The icon, along with the screen name chosen by the rhetor, presents that first impression to others online. That icon, while limited by the structure of the programs of the social networks or spaces it occupies, allows a rhetor to create a first impression for those he communicates with, similar to the way non-verbal communication works offline.

Ideally, the icon sends a specific message about who the rhetor is as a person, and that message is received clearly and directly by those the rhetor is communicating with. While it may not be possible to ever reach a perfect clarity between intended message and inferred message, there are certainly steps that can be taken to reduce the gap

¹ And, in fact, non-verbal communication is a large field within communication studies. I have focused on a specific aspect of that larger area. I am using the term very generally, but with the knowledge that there is much more to the field than what I have used for this study.

between them. Better understanding of the network, of the audience, and more focus on the presentation of identity will all make help messages become more clear.

More that Can be Learned

Icons remain a rich source of analysis, and there is much still to learn. What has proceeded is a base upon which further research can build. Any research project, by its finite nature, leaves areas still to explore, 'holes' still to fill. What has preceded is a starting point, and while the work within is vital to the understanding of the role icons play in online identity, there are other approaches that will explore in greater detail some of those holes. While I did triangulate (or at least overlap) my methods of investigation as much as possible, the limited nature of this research suggests that some bias at least will have survived. Future research with an eye on validation data, such as might be compiled with other methods of inquiry, will increase the reliability of the conclusions drawn in this study (Fadnes et al.).

It may not be possible for a single approach, nor even for another set of triangulating methods, to be successful owing to the very nature of visual rhetoric. A comprehensive theory of visual rhetoric, as Charles A. Hill writes, requires a combination of existing theories, multiple viewpoints from multiple fields (26). If that is true, then there is no one theory of visual rhetoric, or at least no comprehensive way to go about analyzing the rhetorical power of images. This, though, is not as disheartening as it may

first appear. There is, after all, no single theory of any kind of rhetoric.² In order to analyze the information in the cases for future study, thinkers must develop, or at least select, one of the potential theories of visual rhetoric.

Charles Kostelnick writes that “visual rhetoric always begins with a designer shaping visual language for a specific audience and purpose and culminates with a reader interpreting that language in a specific situation” (215). Take this not as the suggestion that visual rhetoric *qua* visual rhetoric begins this way, but rather that any analysis of the visual, any practice of visual rhetoric, begins with the person investigating (Kostelnick's ‘designer’) shaping the discussion by defining terms, by specifying what visual elements will be the focus of the study. The visual elements, the visual artifacts, make up a huge part of the rhetorical environment. Sonja Foss warns that ignoring the visual “means we understand only a miniscule portion of the symbols that affect us daily” (303). She is writing to suggest that the visual is important and cannot be avoided, but her point works in the other direction as well. If ignoring the visual means only a miniscule portion can be understood, then the visual must make up the majority portion of the rhetorical situation. So if the non-visual makes up 1% of the rhetorical environment, then the visual must make up 99%, at least if we assume that there is no third category.

There are many different methods of analysis for visual rhetoric. Gillian Rose suggests a form of content analysis. But there are problems with that: “content analysis

² Indeed, one could argue that there is no single theory, no 'right' theory, for anything. There is no unified space theory in physics, philosophy has been trying to develop a single view of metaphysics for more than two and a half millenia, and there will likely never be a universally accepted answer to whether Batman can beat up Superman.

puts further strictures on the use of images. To begin with, content analysis must address all the images relevant to the research question” (62). It is not feasible to examine every image that might be used as an icon (as *any* image whatsoever would then qualify). This problem can be avoided by using more specific research questions, questions that bring with them limitations on the content, such as the use of icons on a specific site within a specific time frame.

It may also be argued that the space of CMC, even specifically the space of social networking, is too large for content analysis; something more focused is needed. Susan Herring (2010) suggests a version of content analysis meant more for use with the multimodal nature of the internet. She calls it WebCA, and says that while “non-traditional content analyses can benefit scholarly understandings of the web and expand CA as a methodological paradigm,” it should be remembered that “any significant expansion of an established paradigm is likely to generate some resistance” and that “web content analysis could be taken less seriously than other branches of social science.” But she also writes that “Innovation is especially needed when new phenomena present themselves” (246). WebCA also requires a level of systematic sampling similar to that of content analysis, which can run into similar problems of scope, as the icon is somewhat ubiquitous. A smaller, more limited version of content analysis (or of WebCA) may be possible when trying to increase the understanding of the role icons play in online identity.

Luckily, content analysis is not the only method of visual rhetorical analysis that Gillian Rose presents. She also talks about semiology, which solves the above problems. She writes that “There is no concern among semiologists to find images that are statistically representative of a wider set of images, for example, as there is in content analysis. Images are interpreted in close relation to semiological theory, and the discussion of particular images is often directed at exemplifying analytical points. Thus semiology very often takes the form of detailed case studies of relatively few images, and the case study stands or falls on its analytical integrity and interest rather than on its applicability to a wide range of material” (79). A detailed case study, then, can include relatively few images. And if those images are sufficient enough, interesting enough, and subjected to strong enough analysis, then those few images can be used to answer exceedingly large questions. This is the method that has been used in this study, choosing and analyzing a few specific cases and examples. More in depth exploration of examples, or the study of different kinds of cases, may lead to more fruitful explorations in the future.

There are also domains of online identity that I have not addressed, spaces that have their own rules. I have not examined web pages as a whole, though many instances of identity are presented in web pages. Indeed, a web page offers a huge variety of possibilities for identity. Everything from a corporate web site to an artist's website is a

chance to use CMC for creating identity. Websites are important and numerous (there are hundreds of millions of them), but have not been the focus of this investigation.

Similarly, I did not examine e-mail communication, though there is a great deal of identity construction there as well. E-mail remains one of the primary methods of communication online, and is a strong source of identity construction; everything from the name of the e-mail address to the automatic signature automatically added to the end of a message can provide information and understanding about the nature of identity online. E-mail is an important part of CMC, and plays a large role in the development of identity. Future exploration into the topic might benefit from focusing on e-mail or on web pages generally.

More than Establishing: What Else Icons Do

The methods briefly touched on above will both fill in the gaps about how icons help create online identity, and also may help to show what role those icons play once the identity is created. Identity is not a static thing; it evolves over time, and it must be maintained. Like gender, identity is *performed*, and must be performed continuously. Herein, I have discussed icons only as a *first impression*. Even in the context of Veronica, where I discussed multiple icons over time for the same person, the focus was still on what messages people would receive about her when experiencing the icon for the first time.

The icon remains with the rhetor throughout his participation in whatever group he has joined. The longer he remains within that group, the more there will be to identify him, to understand what kind of person he presents himself to be. Everything he writes will still be effected by his icon, though. It will flavor his words, provide a modicum of tone, and will help him perform the identity he creates as he creates it. An icon that creates dissonance will have a different impact on the perceived tone of what the rhetor writes than one that inspires laughter, or that is just an open presentation of the person. An icon created to obfuscate identity will suggest different things than one meant to expose it.

The icon never changes. It is static by nature. However, the rhetor is always able to pick a new icon. This is not a modification in the sense that I can change my clothes. Any different icon is a new icon, sending a new and different message. The icon doesn't change, but the rhetor might choose a different icon. This new icon will alter the tone of everything the rhetor has said within that community, as the icon will change at every point, on every post. This is why an icon with a specific facial expression is a difficult one to use well over time. If the icon is smiling, it adds a friendly tone to everything the rhetor writes. If she then revises the icon to one where she is frowning, then everything she has said becomes more negative. The entire nature of her communication can change with the new icon, as it now has a negative tone that was not intended originally.

Future Research

There is still much that can be learned from icons. Icons represent, in some cases, the only visual element of some communication online, and hence play an important role in the rhetoric of the online world. Even when there are other visual elements involved in the space of CMC, the icon still plays a major role. Knowing more about the visual side of CMC will improve understanding of that extra space. The more that is known about the role played by the icon, the more that can be known about online visual rhetoric.

There is debate how closely online behavior can be mapped to physical behavior. If it can be closely mapped, then there is much that can be learned. Yee et al. write “if it is the case that behavior online is largely similar to physical behavior, then it becomes possible to use these online worlds to test behavioral science theories that are predominantly concerned with physical behavior, both at the micro level and at the macro level. At the micro level, people have utilized this paradigm within the laboratory to study a number of types of social interaction behaviors” (116). If online behavior can be mapped to the physical, then knowledge of the visual role played by icons can be discovered through empirical experimentation.

It might also be beneficial to have an investigation in the text that accompanies the icon. This text may shed light on the choices made that led to the icon, the impact the icon has on the tone of the text, and how that icon represents the rhetor’s identity. Perhaps more importantly, the accompanying text will also allow an investigation into the

reactions of the viewers, of the audience. It will allow a testing of whether or not the identification that Burke suggests is actually occurring, and whether or not the icon successfully helps the rhetor gain membership to a community.

In addition to the study of social interaction, a visual focused content analysis (WebCA), and semiological investigations can produce further refinement and deeper analysis of what has been seen in the specific examples I investigated. As Stemler writes, “content analysis is a powerful data reduction technique. Its major benefit comes from the fact that it is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding” (7). With more data, more hypotheses can be investigated, and more definitive results can be produced. The examples above allowed the examination of special situations and particularly interesting elements, but content analysis will allow more general understanding of the role icons play in online identity.

Controversial texts, whether they are posted on blogs or published on more widely used web sites, will provoke responses from any number of different people coming from any number of walks of life. An examination of these icons used in response to a particularly controversial text may be a fruitful way to examine the impact of icons on communication and give some insight into the amount of conscious attention rhetors pay to their choice of icon.

Further investigation could focus on large groups of icons within specific spaces. A comprehensive examination of the icons on Gender Society would be one way to go, but it would also be fruitful to examine the icons that are chosen specifically by an audience reacting to a post. When someone writes a blog, he may have chosen an icon (before the blog entry is posted) to represent himself. Anyone who comments on that blog will also have chosen an icon to represent herself. However, she may be choosing the icon *specifically* to respond to the blog post. She may choose, therefore, an image that either enhances the point she is making, or that exists in stark contrast to the words, allowing the icon to present sarcasm better than text alone is capable of doing.

An eye should also be cast to the technology that will make it *more* difficult to maintain separate identities online. There are already programs that search for the origin of an image, and it is only a matter of time before facial recognition software will be able to confirm that two pictures are of the same person, even if that person is dressed in a stage-persona disguise, such as Estella wearing a mask in chapter 6. This technology may make it difficult for someone to maintain multiple simultaneous identities. Research into these possibilities, and into how rhetors find ways around them, will be a valuable project to further the understanding of online identity.

Technology continues to advance. As it does, possibilities for online identity and for the use and even the definition of icon, may expand in ways that are difficult to predict. That said, it is important to at least make the attempt.

Future Possibilities

This discussion of icons would be incomplete without a cursory glance into the potential changes coming as technology continues to advance. In Chapter 1, I discussed how the change in technology moved from user names to icons. In addition to icons, there already are also avatars, full body 3D representations of a person or character, usually in a video game.³ These avatars serve much the same purpose as icons, but are far more dynamic. While an icon may have animation, it still remains at least partially static. The avatar can walk around, change clothing, and provide nonverbal cues much as a person in offline communication.

These cues, however, are not always trustworthy. Just as the icons are limited by the programming, the avatars are limited by the design of the space (such as a video game) that they inhabit. Nonverbal cues may have been programmed in to the avatar, and thus cannot be trusted the same way face to face nonverbal communication can be trusted. The avatar, while a step along the path, still has limitations and reasons to suspect what messages it sends. In other words, the avatar still has the gap between intention and inference.

Steps beyond the avatar might include a fully expressive video or audio clip of the person speaking. It is possible that icons as we currently know them will be replaced by pictures like those in the world of Harry Potter: animated and able to move around and

³ At least at the time of this writing, avatars in video games are always cartoons with animation; as technology advances, it may be possible to have more photo-realistic avatars.

express a level of independence, or like the holographic Princess Leia in Star Wars. An icon next to a post on facebook may be individually tailored to that post, showing the rhetor's intention as it related to that post and only that post, which may even achieve the kind of visual synchronicity of Face Time or Skype, or an asynchronicity that is still directly mapped on a single post. This is already technologically feasible; the primary reason it is not done is the amount of processing power and memory required to have a different icon every time someone posts a status update, a comment, a note, or anything else.

It is also possible to see fully interactive virtual reality representations of people in social networks. While this seems as if it will just be the same as in person meeting, the adjustability and personalization already available for the icon and the avatar will not go away. When a person is able to present a fully formed virtual body, he will do so with the ability to represent himself however he wishes. He can be taller, more attractive, and better dressed than his real life counterpart. Or a rhetor may decide to represent himself as a different gender, a different species, or even as an amorphous entity that defies normal description. We have seen this sort of alteration in icons, as discussed in chapter 3; a fully interactive virtual representation will enhance the possibilities for obfuscation that are already employed.

This change in technology will make the process of creating online identity more difficult⁴ and provide more possibilities, but the goals will remain the same. As now, the body formed online will be subject to the gap between what the rhetor intends to say about herself and what the audience believes the rhetor is trying to say. It may be easier to adjust the online body when given the reactions of the audience, which will speed the rhetor's progress, allowing her to shrink and hopefully eliminate that gap in a much shorter time. But the process will be much the same. As with Veronica in chapter 5, the more the rhetor explores her identity, the more self-reflection she has, the better she will be at representing herself. Unlike Veronica, she might be able to change more quickly, receiving more and faster input from her audience. The process, while faster, will be the same.

⁴ In the sense that there will be more options, and hence more decisions that need to be made with more possible implications of those decisions.

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Appendix I: CMC Forums

CMC Forum	Purpose (according to the site as of 8/1/2013)	Purpose (subjective)	Audience
Facebook	“Connect with friends and the world around you on Facebook.”	Update social network with constant minutiae.	Friends, both actual and those met in virtual space, as well as friends of friends
MySpace	“Discover, share and connect with culture, creativity, sound, images and people.”	Individual web space for displaying creativity.	Fans, contacts, friends
Friendster	“Define your own personality. Create your own profile, play games, make friends or enemies and compete or cooperate with other players.”	Social network for playing online games, making contacts, possibly dating	Potential competitors or dating partners.
Gender Society	“The Gender Society is one of the largest online communities for transvestites, crossdressers, transsexuals and transgender people in the world today, with members right around the globe...”	Forum for discussions about gender identity and transgenderism.	The transgender, their loved ones, friends, supporters, and the curious.
World of Warcraft	N/A	Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG)	Fantasy video game players who want to play in a connected space
Faculty Website	N/A	Displaying information about a faculty member, including vita, sample publications, course sites, etc.	Prospective or current students, other academics.
Google+	“Share with just the right people. Share some things with friends, others with family, and almost nothing with your boss...”	Social network site focused on user-controlled audiences.	Friends, contacts, family, all specifically chosen and grouped for maximum privacy.

Appendix II: Veronica's Narrative

Picture One: So the first picture is complicated. I was feeling pretty happy with myself. A couple friends and I went out shopping. At the time I was 19 years old, lesbian living on my own while going to college for graphic design. I bought a whole new outfit and went to a pool hall in Burnsville that allowed smoking inside with my girlfriend (at the time) and some friends. I thought for the first time in a while that I liked the way I looked. It became my icon because I liked how I looked. I thought it made me seem pretty with a side of badass. This is how I was before. I dressed in black with splashes of color with weird little added touches like angel wing earrings or sandal high heels that would light up when you took a step. Clothes, my hair color, the movies I'd seen, the music I listened to were a very ingrained part of my personality and how I presented myself. I didn't admit much about my geeky side because it was hard to find a girl in my social circle who didn't roll their eyes at Dungeons and Dragons every Saturday night.

Picture Two: This icon is a little later. I no longer went to bars or out very much at all. I had dropped out of college after being sexually assaulted on my way home from class. I wore comfortable clothing, things that didn't show off much if anything about myself. I had been distant from old friends because I started to have panic attacks pretty hard if I got uncomfortable. I had started to throw most of my free time into gaming when I wasn't working. I started really getting into Sci-Fi, anime and fantasy. I was convinced

by my stepsister to try to go to an Anime convention in town. This is the fox hat I bought there. It was also the time I first met B (as I'm not sure I should use her name here) a friend of my brother who played table top games with us. I started to find myself attracted to her, which confused and bewildered me (as she was transgender). I had known I was a Lesbian since I was 10 watching Titanic for the first time. I had no idea what being attracted to someone who did not fit on the gender binary meant and there was little help to be had trying to look up terms.

Picture Three: I changed icons here as I was tired of the old one. I had been dating B for a while. I was still newly wadding into our relationship. Telling my family I was Lesbian plus for lack of a better term had not gone well. My very Christian family I think would have preferred the plain lesbian bit, I think. My brother had been supportive, in his own way. This picture was taken while B and I were out clothes shopping as she insisted I did not know how to dress myself. I changed to this picture because my mother had complained that I didn't have any pictures online where I was happy looking.

Picture Four: I had started to fully embrace myself as well, myself. I started going out more. I started larping and making some more friends. I agreed to do a photoshoot with one of the people from larp. I was still pretty nervous and not sure how I felt about being

pretty but it made me feel really good about myself. It used to be one of my favorite pictures of myself.

Picture Five: I updated to this one shortly after my daughter was born. I had gone from being a lesbian to being suddenly and madly in love with a man and had a baby. It was hard to deal with the third redefine of my sexuality but I had really started being happy, I was embracing everything about myself. Even when I thought I couldn't love anyone more there came this little person who was just the best bits of me and him. It was amazing. I changed to it as it was the beginning of the newest chapter in my life.

Picture six: This is my favorite picture of my daughter and I. My husband took the picture while I was simply describing the fish to her. She was so amazed by what was going on, having never seen fish so many fish in her whole life. I think it just shows how far everything has changed for me in the past years. I have a family and it makes everything just kinda amazing.

Appendix III: Survey



This appendix is a summary of the survey about Veronica's icons. The survey included one of the images of Veronica and asked several questions about that picture. The people surveyed had never met Veronica either online or off, and were only told that the picture was used as an icon in a CMC social network environment. They were not told *what* environment. Responses were gathered for the first five of the six images.

The surveyed were of varying ages (youngest being 31, oldest 46) and came from an educated background (All but one are college graduates, some have Master's degrees, some PhDs, and one a JD). They had all been using social networks with icons involved for a significant amount of time (the least being 3 years, the most being or than 20 years)

Each participant was given one of the images and asked the following questions:

1. What would your first impression of this person be, seeing this icon?
2. Please explain the photograph in your own terms.

3. How old do you think this person is?
4. What, if anything, does the person's clothing suggest to you?
5. What can you tell about this person based solely on the icon?
6. What message do you think this person is trying to send with this icon?

The general responses from the survey, including (where appropriate) significant quotes.

Image 1:

What would your first impression of this person be, seeing this icon?

This person is trying hard to look bored.

Please explain the photograph in your own terms.

A young woman in a hat, looks bored.

1. How old do you think this person is?

22 years old.

3. What, if anything, does the person's clothing suggest to you?

Clothing does not suggest anything – picture too small and blurry to tell.

4. What can you tell about this person based solely on the icon?

They are young.

5. What message do you think this person is trying to send with this icon?

Entertain me (though they don't want to have to ask).

Image 2:

1. What would your first impression of this person be, seeing this icon? The consensus was that this person likes hunting and is a 'no frills' and 'serious' type of person.
2. Please explain the photograph in your own terms. "a photograph of a young person wearing a bright orange knit cap, a grey hoody, and a camo jacket (maybe hunting attire). The shot is a headshot with the person leaning his/her head to the right (as viewed). His/her body also faces right, but his/her head is angled away from the body and back toward the camera."
3. How old do you think this person is? Late teens, early twenties
4. What, if anything, does the person's clothing suggest to you? Hunting or outdoor activity
5. What can you tell about this person based solely on the icon? That her interests are more important to her than her appearance.
6. What message do you think this person is trying to send with this icon?
Uncertain beyond that she likes the picture.

Image 3:

1. What would your first impression of this person be, seeing this icon? nervous, reserved, not very adventurous
2. Please explain the photograph in your own terms. girl with generic glasses and no makeup, minimal awkward smile, picture in the hat department
3. How old do you think this person is? Between 20 and 25
4. What, if anything, does the person's clothing suggest to you? Very little
5. What can you tell about this person based solely on the icon? Also very little
6. What message do you think this person is trying to send with this icon? "look at me! I'm funky and adventurous! Look at my cute little hat!"

Image 4:

1. What would your first impression of this person be, seeing this icon?

This pose says, "I am *trying* to look sexy and confident," not just "You may find this picture sexy, and you may think I am confident." Her arm up, head tilted, and cleavage, especially since it's highlighted by jewelry, tells me this person is *trying* to look alluring.

2. Please explain the photograph in your own terms.

I focus on the eyes looking directly at the camera with her arm up and head slightly tilted and then the cleavage highlighted, literally highlighted. But I think the

brick background is a little out of place and the cut-off stuff in the upper right contrasts with the otherwise carefully designed photo.

3. How old do you think this person is?

Between 27 and 32

4. What, if anything, does the person's clothing suggest to you?

It is sexy and a bit formal or fancy with the bedazzling, but not over the top. I see the choice of black as a “little black dress” formality, not as gothic or anything like that.

5. What can you tell about this person based solely on the icon?

Well, this is where I get a little bit flexible and say “not much”—meaning that I can make a lot of assumptions but I’m not sure what exactly pans out.

6. What message do you think this person is trying to send with this icon?

As with #5, not as sure here. I would be able to nail that down more if I knew where the icon appeared. I’d see it very differently if it were on a dating site, for example, or Facebook, or some sort of online community exclusively for women.

Image 5:

1. What would your first impression of this person be, seeing this icon?

This person is a young Caucasian or Latino woman with a small child who wears corrective lenses and has dark hair.

2. Please explain the photograph in your own terms.

A young woman with dark hair and glasses is holding a small child. She is smiling slightly and looking up into the camera, possibly to make her jaw line appear more firm. Furniture and a door are partially visible in the background.

3. How old do you think this person is?

In her twenties.

4. What, if anything, does the person's clothing suggest to you?

It is slightly chilly in the room.

5. What can you tell about this person based solely on the icon?

This person has a light complexion, dark hair, is wearing glasses, is feminine in appearance, is holding a baby or small child, and is wearing a striped outer shirt over a black undershirt.

6. What message do you think this person is trying to send with this icon?

I am a person with a pleasing appearance and a young child.

Appendix IV: The full text of Katie's letter:

Welcome To The Gender Society

Welcome to the Gender Society. Established in 1999, The Gender Society is one of the largest online communities for transvestites, crossdressers, transsexuals and transgender people in the world today, with members right around the globe. We also cater for the families and friends of transgender people and for their admirers.

Need information? Worried that you might be a transvestite or a crossdresser or, heaven forbid... a transsexual? No problem. We are a self-help group with heaps of members who'll be only too glad to give you the benefit of their knowledge and experience. Sift through hundreds of articles on transgender related subjects and tens of thousands of forum posts on crossdressing and transsexuality.

Post a question in the forums or get one-to-one advice from other members by visiting our chat rooms. Post some personal ads in our classifieds area, check out our transgender picture galleries, our member's blogs and use the member search facility (for finding transgender people near you). We offer a transgender related video archive like YouTube, where you can learn how to apply false eyelashes or develop a female voice and much, much, more.

Don't forget our free, bi-monthly, glossy, transgender lifestyle magazine - Frock!

We also have heaps of new features and benefits with new items being added all the time. And remember, although we do like you to become a Full Member if you find yourself here a lot, Basic Membership is free! I so hope you'll like what we've done with your community.

Hugs, Katie x