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“What *South Park* Character Are You?”: Popular Culture, Literacy, and Online Performances of Identity

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Abstract

In this essay, I study MySpace and Facebook pages, as well as interviews with the university students who created them, in order to address how online literacy practices of contemporary convergence culture both use and are filtered through popular culture. Though their answers to questions of intent, audience, and rhetorical choices varied, students shared a common reliance on popular culture content and references appropriated from other sites to compose their identities and read the identities of others. They used popular culture icons, catch phrases, music, text, and film clips in postmodern, fragmented collages that seem simultaneously sentimental and ironic. The construction of these pages illustrates how popular culture practices that predate online technologies have been adopted and have flourished with new technologies that allow content to flow across media as well as increase the ease of audience participation. Online technological changes have changed what it means to be part of an “audience” by changing how individuals respond to and adapt popular culture texts to their own ends, such as the construction of identities on web pages. By creating potentially global audiences for any web page, these online technologies have changed the relationship of the popular culture audience members and their peers. The intertextual nature of popular culture texts creates opportunities for multiple readings of social networking web pages in ways that destabilize the identities students believe they have created. © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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If I handed out a sheet of paper with the heading “About Me” on it to a group of writing teachers and asked them to fill it out, I’ve little doubt that most would fill the page with expository passages about themselves, their backgrounds, accomplishments, family descriptions and so on. Every MySpace page has a section titled “About Me” where the person creating the page is invited, similarly, to write expository, biographical descriptions. Yet the “About Me” sections on the MySpace pages of university students are often among the least used, least detailed, and least informative parts of the page.

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Here is Tony's: "Hey! How are ya? Well a little about me. I'm a pretty laid back guy for the most part. I enjoy hanging out with my buds and kinda just relaxing. I just like to go out and have fun, but I know my limits. But feel free to talk."

Or Jenny's: "Oh, you know me. Just a girl who likes the sun on her face and the smell of popcorn. Say 'hi' if you want. Maybe I'll answer. Maybe not."

The brevity of these "About Me" entries might lead a person unfamiliar with MySpace to believe that the pages reveal little about their creators. But the truth is that the pages are filled with information that the writer of the page has composed to construct a performance of identity. This information is drawn from multiple media and, very often, directly connected to popular culture.

In this essay I address how online literacy practices of contemporary convergence culture are both filtered through and use popular culture. I've been reading MySpace and Facebook pages and interviewing the university students who have created them. Though their answers to questions of intent, audience, and rhetorical choices vary, what is common is the reliance of most of the students on popular culture content and references they can appropriate from other sites to enable them to compose their identities and read the identities of others. They use popular culture icons, catch phrases, music, text, and film clips in post-modern, fragmented collages that present selves that seem simultaneously sentimental and ironic. The construction of these pages illustrates how popular culture practices that pre-date online technologies have been adopted and have flourished with new technologies that allow content to flow across media as well as increase the ease of audience participation. Online technological changes have changed the nature of being part of the "audience" in popular culture in terms of how individuals respond to and adapt popular culture texts to their own ends, such as the construction of identities on web pages. At the same time such technologies, by creating potentially global audiences for any web page, have changed the relationship of the popular culture audience members to their peers. The intertextual nature of popular culture texts creates opportunities for multiple readings of social networking web pages in ways that destabilize the identities students believe they have created. These multiple readings create ambivalence for students who realize that their practices in composing pages online may be in conflict with how they read other pages and how their own pages are read.

1. Convergence Culture and Popular Culture Practices

Online technologies have blurred the boundaries between media and between producer and audience, what [Henry Jenkins \(2006\)](#) called "the convergence culture." For Jenkins, the elements that mark convergence culture include the opportunities for participation by the audience and the flow of information across multiple media platforms. These elements combine to encourage an interactive and "migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (p. 2). Jenkins conceived of convergence culture as more than the technological ability to move information across media platforms. He also regarded it as a cultural phenomenon where popular culture is a central organizing force.

If the 20th Century transformed popular culture from a local, participatory phenomenon to a mass-produced and consumed product, the start of this century has seen online technology create a more widespread interactive popular culture. Not only do individuals use discussion forums and web pages to comment publicly on or rewrite mass popular culture such as television, films, music, and video games, but the creators of these forms of mass popular culture are increasingly reading and reacting to these comments and critiques that appear online as well as creating interactive spaces that extend their narratives (Brooker, 2001; Deery, 2003; Storey, 2003).

As one example of how this can be experienced today by a single person sitting in one chair looking at one computer screen, the television series *Lost*, about a group of people stranded on a mysterious island after a plane crash, has an official web site with a wiki, message boards, previews, and episodes to watch online among other features. The series' producers also have web sites for fictional organizations featured in the program such as Oceanic Airlines, the airline involved in the crash, and the ominous Hanso Foundation that seems to figure in the island's mysteries. Just as importantly, however, audience members have created hundreds of web sites dedicated to the series and its characters: Sites such as *Television Without Pity* post detailed recaps of each episode as well as extensive fan forums, and on the site <FanFiction.Net> there are more than 5000 stories and novels posted drawing on the characters from the series.

If we want to understand how young people engage in daily literacy practices online, it is worth taking a moment to consider why popular culture adapted so quickly to online technologies that allowed both interactive and intermedia participation by individuals. Jenkins (2006) argued that popular culture dominates much of convergence culture "on the one hand because the stakes are so low; and on the other because playing with popular culture is a lot more fun than playing with more serious matters" (p. 246). Yet that statement by itself does not explain the easy symbiosis of popular culture and online technologies. Instead it is important to understand that the development of interactive online technologies allowed people to continue and expand the uses to which they were already putting their readings of movies, television, and music.

For a number of years scholars (Buckingham, 1993; Fiske, 1996; Morley, 1992; Morse, 1998) have challenged in both theory and research the conception of uncritical audience reception of mass popular culture. While acknowledging that popular culture reflects and reproduces dominant cultural ideologies, individuals in the audience who interpret such texts in the contexts of their own experiences do not accept them without question, adapting them to ideas that may or may not conform to dominant cultural values. Far from being passive dupes, individuals have always engaged in interactions with mass popular culture, whether by discussing television programs with friends or seeking out more information about celebrities in fan magazines. As people have read and adopted popular culture texts to their social contexts popular culture has long served functions of both identity construction and community building.

Long before online technologies, people would make statements or judgments about identity and taste based on the popular culture references of those they would meet. A person might ask new acquaintances about the movies they had seen or look through their record collections as ways of evaluating potential social relationships. Similarly people appropriated popular culture images and references in their daily identity performances. Part of the allure of mass

popular culture has always been the identification of audience members with celebrity as people performed identities through public appropriation of celebrity images. For example, students decorated school lockers with photos of celebrities or wore rock concert t-shirts to connect the attributes of the popular culture reference to their own identities. Consequently, the high school girl with the preppy pop star's photos pasted all over her locker and the boy walking down the hall wearing a heavy metal band t-shirt might give each other one glance, but on seeing the popular culture references they had appropriated not bother with a second.

The performance of identity is obviously always a social phenomenon. Thus, popular culture has not only been an element of identity construction but has also been a central part of creating community in contemporary society. Clearly mass popular culture has created common cultural references that are shared by millions of people who may have never met. Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) noted that the casual discussion of popular television programs has served the same social function as conversations about the weather in terms of providing material of which everyone could have both some knowledge and an opinion. Popular culture has also provided the basis for social activities (groups that get together to watch television programs such as *Sex and the City* or parties that took place when it was revealed “who shot J.R.” on *Dallas*) or shared social interests.

In the general population, such casual interactions with popular culture have been widespread. More intense, intermedia and interactive uses of popular culture such as fan clubs or fan magazines existed before online technologies, though they were the province of a much smaller group of devoted “fans” back when that term and its related behaviors had more derogatory connotations. Before the advent of interactive online technologies, writing fan fiction, attending a fan convention, or belonging to a fan club required a commitment of time, emotion, and resources beyond that of more casual members of the audience. Still, such devoted fans existed and did engage in such interactive activities of what Henry Jenkins (1992) called “textual poaching” in regard to mass popular culture texts. The activities of fans were motivated both by the desire to appropriate control of the popular culture text as well as the opportunity to become part of a “collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic” (p. 23).

The elements of intermedia and interactive popular culture that Jenkins emphasized as central to convergence culture existed before online technologies. Consequently, online technologies did not create the desire for such activities but rather provided opportunities and media that enabled more people to engage in such activities more easily. It is not difficult to see that fan web pages seem so like fan clubs or that online fan forums seem like larger water cooler conversations.

2. Changes in Concepts of Identity and Text

Although changes in technology have created some new forms of popular culture, the larger impact of online technologies in terms of extending and expanding participatory popular culture practices has been in three areas. First, new technologies have, through the ease with which they allow interaction and the appropriation and combination of multiple media, vastly

increased the number of people engaging in interactive popular culture activities. Fan fiction, fan forums, web pages, appropriating texts in multiple ways – all activities that used to take a substantial commitment of time and energy – are now accomplished with little effort and little time invested, making available the kinds of activities only undertaken by the most dedicated fans that Jenkins described in the early 1990s.

Also, the ease and speed of movement of pop culture content across media now enables both faster shifts in meaning and juxtapositions of popular culture words, images, and video that create new meanings. Online technologies, like other electronic popular culture media on screens that preceded them, often privilege images, speed, and sound (Selfe & Hawisher, 2004). The capabilities of online technologies to reproduce and distribute multiple media simultaneously have allowed the producers of mass popular culture from television to music to video games to make all or part of their content easily available online. The equivalent of old print fan magazines or tours of studios, for example, are now available to us as we sit in our homes. At the same time many of these new combinations of texts happen at the hands of individuals, not just corporate organizations with vast material resources. Of course cross-media content existed before online technologies, as anyone with a *Star Wars* novelization or soundtrack can confirm. The difference now is that the ability to engage with and combine content across media happens quickly, easily, and is shared by traditional producers and individual members of the audience, with each drawing the interest of fans. Individuals can combine and publish these texts with technologies that make posting photos of movie stars on a web site far faster and easier than cutting up photos and pasting them inside a locker. The technologies that have enabled people to, as Jenkins (2006) claimed, “take media into their own hands” (p. 16) has altered how popular culture is both produced and consumed: “The results can be wonderfully creative; they can also be bad news for all involved” (Jenkins, p. 17).

Finally, online technologies have changed the relationship of audience members not just to popular culture producers but also to each other. The kinds of performances of identity and community building I mentioned above, such as wearing concert t-shirts or talking about a television program around the water cooler, were for most people confined to face-to-face interactions. If someone asked if I liked a television program, not only would I probably already have another context for knowing the person, but when I answered I could tell the effect of my response by watching the other person’s reactions. Now, however, the use of popular culture images to create a personal web page may have a global audience who know nothing else about the creator of the page. The other shift from face-to-face performances of identity through popular culture content to online performances is that the latter are just as often accomplished through reading and writing as well as images and video. What’s more, both author and audience have come to expect participation facilitated by online technologies. Students creating web pages on social networking spaces do so with the expectation that others will not only visit the page but also respond to them and the page’s content. Just as they often will respond to the popular culture content they encounter, students expect friends to make judgments and comments about their choice of songs, images, and video, or to respond to fan forum ideas or fan fiction stories.

As the means of production have expanded from those with substantial financial resources to potentially any member of the audience, the sense of authorship and ownership of popular culture texts has also changed. Now that online technologies have made the production of

popular culture both affordable and relatively effortless, any person can take part in it by mashing up images and songs, creating machinima, or even just putting a soundtrack to one's identity by choosing a song to play when a MySpace page opens. Who among us, after all, has not dreamed of having our own personal soundtrack? The desire to take ownership of a text, regardless of its author, and the confidence and authority to do so, is another mark of convergence culture. Interactive media have created not only the opportunity to appropriate texts and reconstruct them but also the confidence and expectation within students to take such control of texts. This participation, however, is not always solitary and more often than not is connected to communities of participatory audience members who can either respond to any text or connect their interests and knowledge with those of other fans.

3. Popular Culture Content on Social Networking Sites

It is well accepted in the rhetoric and composition community that both definitions of literacy and performances of identity are complex social phenomena situated in cultural contexts. Those working with online technologies have extended these ideas to the performance of identities on web pages that are instantly accessible to people across town or around the world. The emergence of MySpace and Facebook has created an explosion in the number of people posting personal web pages. The ease with which the templates of these social networking web sites allow individuals to create personal sites mean that such expressions of identity have suddenly become available to anyone, not just people who can write .html code or even use point-and-click web-writing software. Although the templates may be criticized for the limitations they place on composing texts, there is no doubt that the ease and predictability of the templates have encouraged both wider creation and consumption of such web pages with both MySpace and Facebook claiming users in the multiple millions.

Although the MySpace and Facebook pages of many high school and college students include the kinds of material that have regularly shown up on personal web pages in the past, such as photos of friends and family, what is distinctive about the web pages on these social networking sites is how much more material and emphasis there is on popular culture. Most of them have a great deal of popular culture-related content, often comprising more than half the information presented on the page and often numbering between 50 and 75 distinct popular culture elements.

The templates that shape MySpace and Facebook pages raise a chicken-and-egg question about the influence of popular culture in the performance of students' identities online. The templates ask people to think of their identities in terms of popular culture references: with the requests for lists of favorite movies, television programs, books; with the capability to choose a song to play when the page opens; and with the capability to load images and video from other sources. We shouldn't be surprised that's how people respond to the templates. Still it is easy to see why these social networking sites set themselves up to emphasize popular culture content if we again think about how popular culture texts serve as the common cultural touchstones by which we are used to first judging other people. If, when we initially meet people, we often ask about their tastes in movies or music or we scan their books shelves, it is a natural move by MySpace and Facebook to replicate such information on their pages. The

popularity of the sites indicates that the decision to construct the templates around popular culture content resounds with users who are comfortable with this approach. I've yet to see a student's MySpace or Facebook page that does not have the popular culture lists filled in, though I'm sure they exist. Even when other forms of identification, like political or religious affiliations on Facebook, are requested, they are not filled in as regularly and, perhaps more significantly, viewers are offered only a few predetermined choices on drop-down menus rather than the ability to create an individual list. Nor are there options available for other lists that might be used to construct identities like, for example, "most important social issues," or "places I have lived," or "childhood illnesses."

In addition, on both social networking sites lists of popular culture references are linked so that by clicking on the name of a band one can connect to the band's MySpace page or, on Facebook, to others who have also listed the band. Such linking encourages thinking about popular culture preferences in terms of communities of others who share the same tastes. The capability of online technologies to facilitate the affinity spaces around popular culture texts is a key element of convergence culture that influences the reading of personal pages, as I will illustrate below.

What also makes the lists of references on social networking sites different than conversations one might strike up with a new acquaintance is the capability of online technologies to publish the information for a broader audience. This is another instance where the intersection of media technologies and popular culture practices converge to create new concepts of performing identity. The popular culture content and references on social networking pages are available for others, casual acquaintances or even sometimes strangers, who encounter them in contexts that perhaps lead to significantly different interpretations than the authors intended. The question of how the presence of an audience beyond the local influences how students regard identities on these sites is an important one to consider in thinking about convergence culture and one that can provoke students' anxieties as I will discuss below. Such performances of identity through popular culture content that reach beyond the local are changing the way students compose and read their identities on such pages.

4. Reading Others' Identities Through Popular Culture

A fairly representative example is Ashley's MySpace page. Like many pages hers has a song that plays when the page is opened: in this case a song by pop musician Josh Groban. She has lists of favorite movies (*Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Star Wars*, *Madagascar*, *Dirty Dancing*, etc.); music (Josh Groban, Justin Timberlake, Nickelback, Nichole Norderman, Green Day, etc.); books (the *Harry Potter* series, *The DaVinci Code*, the Bible); and television (*Charmed*, *Veronica Mars*, etc.). Embedded in the lists are images of some of the films and television series she mentions, such as *Eragon*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *Charmed*. The two largest images on the page are under the heading of people she wants to meet. There you find a large photo of Orlando Bloom reclining on a couch, shirt unbuttoned to the waist, and Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. In addition Ashley has downloaded from another site a questionnaire about personal preferences that includes questions about popular culture like her favorite CD or favorite candy bar. The page also includes other images

such as a U.S. Flag and a statement of support for U.S. soldiers, and the background for the page is an image of an angel with a rosary draped over its shoulders.

Other students' MySpace pages have other forms of popular culture content in addition to the kinds on Ashley's page. For example, Mitchell's page includes the results of online personality quizzes he has taken on sites such as Quizilla. These quizzes allow him to download the image and description of his results. He has, among others, the results of "What *South Park* Character Are You?" (Kyle) "What *Pirates of the Caribbean* Character Are You?" (Barbossa), and the kind of rock star he is most like (punk rocker). Jenny's MySpace page displays downloaded music videos, including Fatboy Slim's "Weapon of Choice" and comedian Judson Laipply's "Evolution of Dance," which became hugely popular on YouTube.

I first asked students how they read the MySpace and Facebook pages of their friends and people they had only just met. Although the responses varied in terms of what students looked at first, they were surprisingly consistent in the way the students interpreted the authors' performances of identity. Shannon, for example, paid particular attention to the song on a person's MySpace page:

As for their song, I listen to music a lot so that tells me a lot about them. What kind of song they would like. Maybe more is that it tells me what kind of song they would put up on their page for me to see. Because if it's more of a rap song, then it's not so much for me. You can tell a lot about a person by the song.

Although Jenny also paid attention to songs, she mentioned other items that also helped her interpretation of the page:

You can tell from their quotes if they have a perverted sense of humor, depending on what their quotes say. Or music wise you can tell if you like the same genre. If someone has a lot of rap listed, I won't get along with them as well because I'm not the biggest rap person. Rap or country. Usually I think by figuring out what a person listens to you can figure out more about them. There are some things you can just tell in an instant. If they list a lot of Disney movies it's going to be a little weird to talk to them. . . .

Though the popular culture elements that drew their attention varied, all of the students mentioned that these elements influenced how they read the page owners' identities. The only other elements mentioned by a significant number of the students were personal photographs placed on the page. Popular culture influenced how people read identities on the pages and also the judgments such readings led them to make about others. As Jenny and Shannon mentioned in their quotations, their judgments about someone they did not know well could be shaped by the popular culture content included on the page. Some of the students even mentioned the shock of looking at a friend's MySpace or Facebook page to find popular culture references that surprised them or seemed inconsistent with the person they thought they knew. One student likened them to "guilty secrets" and Shannon noted, "Some of the people I've known since long before MySpace have things on their pages that I can hardly believe and I think 'What is that?' or 'That doesn't make any sense' or 'I don't like that.' I try not to let it make me like them any less, but it makes you think twice about them anyway."

Again, the judgments people make about the popular culture preferences of others are nothing new. We have all been shocked at the revelation that a movie we loved is one a close friend loathed. Yet as I noted above, in the past those judgments were made most often in

face-to-face interactions with one person at a time and usually only about one form of popular culture at a time. The performance of identity through popular culture forms on MySpace and Facebook pages, however, happens in a virtual space, to an audience that may or often may not be known to the writer, and offers multiple pieces of popular culture content that are read both quickly and in relation to each other.

James Paul Gee (2004) has noted how interactive popular culture has allowed for the creation of “affinity spaces.” These affinity spaces, which Gee argued could be virtual or physical such as web sites or fan magazines, bring people together through a shared interest or activity. Affinity spaces allow individuals “to any degree they wish, small or large, [to] affiliate with others to share knowledge and gain knowledge that is distributed and dispersed across many different people, places, Internet sites, and modalities (p. 73). Interactive popular culture has allowed the creation of multiple affinity spaces for any single popular culture text or interest, such as the example I mentioned earlier of the television program *Lost*, where those with an interest in the show have the opportunity to engage in fan forums, fan fictions, online games, and so on. These online affinity spaces can be easily accessed and so demand little commitment, though they also often allow levels of commitment that become habitual and defining for the individual. Popular culture content on social networking pages creates small affinity spaces demanding minimal commitment; an image or a song may result in a comment from a visitor to a page, but usually little in sustained discussion, although the image or list of favorite movies may be linked to further content that broadens the affinity space. Even so, the popular culture content on these pages creates opportunities for affinity spaces between the owner of the page and the user that are sustained by the popular culture content, not necessarily by age or gender or educational level (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006). What is different about these spaces in contrast to a fan forum for a television program is that popular culture is not the motivation for visiting the page. Yet once visited, the popular culture content mediates the relationship between writer and reader. The identity of the page owner cannot be read without making connections to outside popular culture content.

5. Students’ Anxieties Over Being Misread

The students’ affection for using the images, songs, and templates of social networking pages to make quick judgments about others, including friends, stands in contrast to their awareness that the identities they were creating on MySpace or Facebook were incomplete and could result in incomplete or inaccurate readings of their identities. Tony, for example, realized that the incomplete representation of his identity could be misread by others, particularly those who did know him face to face:

I would say that my friends are the audience. But I know they’re not the only ones who look at it. But on here I guess it’s almost a surreal kind of thing. People who are looking at MySpace aren’t real. It’s almost like they don’t exist as people, like they’re not going to look at my profile page and think that is what they should think about me and think that is me. Which really they probably do. But my chances of knowing who these people are is slim to none so it doesn’t really bother me how they view me as a person.

Students like Tony displayed an understanding of the slipperiness of representation that would make any postmodern theorist proud. Tony makes the distinction between the people who might read his page online and the people he would know face to face. In part this understanding comes from the different perceptions of the audiences of the pages. It also, however, comes from the understanding that the audience in such situations is double, regardless of the web site. Students like Tony understand that while they may be constructing an identity for their friends, the nature of the online text is that it is extended to an audience that is beyond the knowledge and beyond the control of the writer of the page. The practice of using popular culture images to create an identity or proclaim an affinity extends back as least as far as those decorated interiors of school lockers many of us remember from our youth. Unlike the locker, however, the web page is not just seen by friends or even passing acquaintances but by anyone who can access the page. And the affinity that those visiting the page feel for different popular culture content may be in conflict from one person to the next. **Julia Davies and Guy Merchant (2007)** noted in their research on blogs that the tensions between known readers and unknown readers often create anxiety for writers and result in surprising and often disruptive responses from readers. Students who had not set their page viewing preferences to private or limited to friends quickly realized how they might be read in different and disturbing ways by others online. All the students reported receiving unwelcome and often deeply disturbing messages from strangers, particularly on MySpace, at least until they changed their settings. These kinds of messages, particularly for the women, made Tony's detached position toward an unknown audience much less available as a position to take. As Ashley said:

There's kids the age of 12 on there [MySpace] and they try to act like they're a teenager. They try to act like they're in their 20s, the way they dress, the way they act, their profiles. And people wonder why these 30- and 40-year-old psychos who are on there end up finding these girls because they [the girls] don't know better than to not say something.

Even students who had set their preferences to private realized that, while it might make them uncomfortable to think about, they could be read by friends of friends of friends, or people they might only meet through a social networking site and who would be reading their identities only through their pages.

For some of the students this raised questions and concerns about their intent in creating their pages and the reality of being read differently than that intent. Jenny said:

When I fill out my own I try to think "this is what I do like, this is what I don't like." But when I take a step back from it I think "Does that really describe me or not?" It kind of makes you think, "Oh wow these musicians I'm listing have a lot of dark music. Is that really me? I just like the music."

Jenny's thoughtful reflection on how her page is representing a particular identity is indicative of the kind of care many students put into the choices of popular culture content they employ in composing their social networking pages. Though they may dismiss the pages as frivolous or fun in their initial comments, during the course of an interview it was not uncommon for students to report spending many hours "tweaking" – a verb which can mean either minor or substantial revisions – their pages and thinking about how these pages and their images, references, and songs will be read by friends, acquaintances, and strangers. The com-

monly held belief that social networking pages are composed without thought or even anxiety is about as believable as thinking that university students don't pay attention to the choice of which clothes to wear.

Jenny's comment also illustrates the tension a number of the students mentioned about how their pages might be open to multiple readings they did not intend. The source of the anxiety in her comment can be traced in part to issues of competing and conflicting contexts in the use of popular culture content. Although the templates and conventions of the sites guide interpretation, the intertextual connections created through popular culture content can vary greatly. We often think of popular culture as a set of communal texts with which we are all familiar. While this commonality may have been more accurate in years past, in today's convergence culture of multiple popular culture sources that flow across media and invite participation from audience members, the interpretation of any popular culture text is necessarily more situated and dependent on the specific context. The context of a social networking site personal page and the juxtaposition of different popular culture content on such a page creates multiple meanings of the kind that concerned Jenny.

6. Context and Interpreting Popular Culture Content

As I mentioned above, the popular culture content on individual pages varies widely. What is consistent across student pages, however, is that the popular culture content is almost always displayed without comment or explanation. The writer of the page offers little guidance about the way the various popular culture elements are to be interpreted or why they have been placed on the page. The meaning, then, must be arrived at through the reader's intertextual connections to the popular culture references and the juxtaposition of these popular culture elements on the page.

The question of context is crucial to how popular culture content is written and read on social networking pages. Take for example, on the MySpace pages I described above, a single image each from Ashley's page and Mitchell's page. Under the heading of "Who I'd Like To Meet," Ashley has a photo montage of Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. On his page Mitchell has an image of the character Kyle from the television program *South Park* as the answer to an online quiz he took on the results of "What *South Park* Character Are You?" The image has the caption, "You are clever, and often come up with intelligent and funny comebacks to other people's stupid remarks."

Each image exists on the page as one element within the template of the page. Obviously putting the Depp photos under the heading of who Ashley would like to meet prompts us to read them as an object of romantic fantasy, whether humorous or not. It also could indicate a preference for dark-haired men with beards. The image of Kyle and its caption suggests that Mitchell thinks of himself as smart and funny or that he perhaps sees that conception of himself as ironic. It also indicates an interest in animated television programs. Just as important as how we read the images on the page, however, are our connections to the popular culture content that extend beyond the page. Because these images are adopted from larger popular culture texts, how we respond to them will be influenced by our relationship to the original text, and the original text's position in the larger culture. Thus, highly contextual affinity spaces create

contexts for interpretation that may provide one set of meanings for those within those spaces and another for those unfamiliar with the texts.

If we look at an image of a *South Park* figure without a knowledge of the television series, it is just a crudely constructed image of a young boy smiling. Our knowledge of *South Park*, however, can change our reading. If we see *South Park* as juvenile and offensive our reading will be different than if we think of it as irreverent and creative satire. *South Park* has a reputation in the larger culture beyond that of a simple animated television series. It has been the focus of numerous public debates about offensive material on television and written about in mainstream media many times. At the same time its popularity can be charted in the t-shirts, posters, and catch phrases from the show that float through the culture disconnected from specific episodes. Consequently, an image from *South Park* can be read as a reference to more than a television program; it becomes instead a synecdoche for a particular popular culture sensibility of subversive, transgressive humor and cultural critique.

The reading of a *South Park* image becomes even more complicated if we know the characters on the show. Kyle is smart and funny, so we might see Mitchell's posting of the image on the page as in some way a sincere reflection of the identity he is constructing. Had the character posted been Eric Cartman, the selfish and bigoted character from the program, we might see it as a more ironic statement. The fact that either character is the result of a "personality quiz" from a site that has countless parodies of such quizzes would also influence our reading.

Similarly, Ashley's image of Johnny Depp can be read not only as an image of an attractive young man. Our reading of the image will depend on whether we have seen the movie from which it was taken and how we felt about the film, as well as our knowledge of Depp's other films and even our knowledge of his public life as a celebrity. How differently might an image from Depp's film *Ed Wood*, about the cross-dressing cult film director, be read on the page? Even with the image on Ashley's page, do we assume that Ashley is aware of Depp's roles in other films when she includes it, or is it his image in only one film that appeals to her?

Convergence culture has allowed individuals to use popular culture content to compose identities on social networking sites with unprecedented ease. Students take advantage of this opportunity to use such content to create texts that they feel represent them in some specific way because they feel they can rely on readers understanding the meaning of the popular culture references. They count on readers of their pages sharing affinity spaces and understanding which references should be read seriously or ironically. Yet because popular culture texts have meanings outside of a personal page the way photos of family or friends do not, the intertextual layers of meaning in popular culture texts can undermine, or at least be read far differently than, the writers' intentions. This is but one way the changes in technology that allow media convergence have altered the relationships of audience members to each other. A member of the *South Park* audience, for example, now has ways to perform his or her identity for other members of the audience by using images from the show in ways that may or may not be dialogic but certainly influence interpretations of identity.

The question of authorial intention in creating social networking personal pages is, of course, a slippery one. Even for the students I spoke with, different elements on the page reflected different levels of interest. Tony had on his page many images of college and professional sports logos and athletes and talked at length about how central his interest in sports was to his life. Also on his page, however, was a favorite *South Park* character that he said he had

included on a whim: “I have my favorite *South Park* character, even though I’ve probably only watched *South Park* about four times. But I saw a friend had one up on his page and I thought it was really funny.” There was nothing on the page to indicate these differences, however, so a reader of the page might see the *South Park* reference as an important part of the representation of Tony’s identity.

It is important to understand that students often see these pages as created for friends as online extensions of face-to-face social relationships. This is reflected in the personal photos, quotations, and jokes from friends posted on the pages. The popular culture content is, similarly, often an extension of social relationships. An image from a movie may reflect a shared interest in that film with a particular group of friends who may have watched the movie together. A catch phrase from a television series may reflect a social discourse specific to one group of friends who use that catch phrase as part of sharing a particular affinity space. Such a catch phrase is an extension of daily activities used to reinforce social bonds. But a person with a social networking page is connected to multiple social groups whose interests and relationships to the multiple popular culture texts on a page overlap and conflict with each other. These overlapping affinity spaces mean that some readers of the page may be drawn to certain images or videos or songs and simultaneously puzzled or even disconcerted by others. This is why even close friends, when encountering the multiple popular culture texts on a page, can respond with surprise and consternation about the identity represented.

One quick example of how the slippage between daily social life and the content of social networking pages can lead to misreadings comes from Jenny’s Facebook page. She has, among her quotations, one from the film *Forrest Gump*. When I first read the quotation “Run, Forrest, Run!” I assumed she was a fan of the film and was drawn to the quotation because of the way it represents the title character’s quest for independence and dignity. I also assumed she enjoyed the film and that led me to assumptions about the kinds of movies she liked and what that indicated about her personality. When she talked about the quotation, however, she said, “I’m on the rugby team and my nickname is “Forrest.” I am supposed to run, apparently, so they nicknamed me “Forrest” and yell that at me when we play.” Clearly her teammates visiting her page would understand the reference and appreciate her attempt to reinforce her bonds with them. For others reading the page, however, the social context is lost and replaced with the context of the original popular culture text and its meaning in the larger culture. Such misreadings, several students said, also resulted in parents not understanding popular culture references, or whether such references were meant ironically, and responding with concern or puzzlement.

The result of the multiple popular culture references or content on a page is more than the creation of multiple and overlapping affinity spaces where one person might like *Pirates of the Caribbean* while another likes *Charmed*. Obviously these multiple images, videos, songs, and lists do not exist in isolation but are regarded in juxtaposition to each other. On Ashley’s page, for example, we do not see Johnny Depp without also seeing images of Orlando Bloom, *Eragon*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Charmed*, the U.S. Flag, and an angel with a rosary draped over its shoulders. This collage of images is also juxtaposed with lists of favorite songs and movies and a downloaded song. Some of the juxtapositions may seem complementary, such as the image of Bloom and an image from *The Lord of the Rings* films in which he acted. Other images, depending on our readings, may seem contradictory—Depp as

a critic of U.S. foreign policy next to the U.S. Flag – or puzzling – the angel as the background to all the images. For the writer of the page, these multiple images may seem like different aspects of identity or may only represent different motivations at different moments. Either way, the juxtaposition of disparate popular culture elements shifts the meaning of each as it is arranged with the next.

The use of collected elements to create a collage of meaning has been interrogated in different settings as a move characteristic of authorship in a postmodern culture. The use of unexpected juxtapositions and associative meanings composed from appropriated texts has been addressed in such contexts as the creation of zines (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), memes (Lewis, 2007), web pages (Alexander, 2006), and new video (Stephens, 1998). According to Mitchell Stephens (1998), new identities can be created not only through the linear exposition of print texts but also “through the deft juxtaposition of carefully selected aspects of surfaces” (p. 217). The students I spoke with were comfortable and confident about the creation of identities through the composition of fragmented, associative collages of popular culture texts. Their performance of self on these pages is the kind of *bricolage* that Michel de Certeau (1984) imagined when he wrote that “Everyday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others” (p. xii). Immersion in popular culture as discourse, as epistemology, as a text for creating identity is the everyday life of both our students and ourselves. Added to the already pervasive nature of popular culture are the technological capabilities of online communication that have not only made this kind of appropriation of and composition with popular culture texts easier but have often made cutting, pasting, and creating with such texts easier and faster than composing with print (Lewis, 2007). It would indeed be more remarkable if students bypassed popular culture as a means of composing personal pages than that it has become the foundation for such performances of identity.

It remains unclear how students creating these pages think about the issues of juxtaposition and arrangement. Questions I asked about how they approached these issues, both in composing and reading personal pages, did not elicit detailed responses. In general students said they did not think about how the popular culture content on a page might work as a complete text, with one image or song influencing another. Students instead said they put each piece on the page to serve an individual purpose rather than to work in concert with another element. Several mentioned not wanting their pages to look “cluttered” and that they did not like other pages that were too busy with different elements. But they were not able to define what qualities or amount of content constituted clutter. They could talk about the overall effect of a page or about individual elements, but not about how elements worked to complement or conflict with each other. This is an area of research that remains important, however, and one I hope to continue to investigate.

7. Implications

This special issue makes clear that, as convergence culture extends throughout our society, many of our students will be the most involved and the most comfortable composers and readers of multimedia, multimodal texts. At the same time, as Jenkins (2006) pointed out, much of the daily content and practices in convergence culture involve popular culture. This

is particularly true for practices that take place outside of school. If we are to understand how students' literacy practices grow and change in a culture of media convergence, then we must pay attention to how they are shaped by the discourses and rhetorics of popular culture. We need not only to attend to how students employ online technologies to read and write with popular culture but also to consider what rhetorical patterns and genre expectations influence how they read and write texts such as a social networking page with more than fifty popular culture elements and references on it. As I have argued in the past (Williams, 2002), this is not a matter of bringing popular culture into the writing classroom; it comes in every day when we and our students arrive. If we expect to understand how our students are responding to the literacy demands of an interactive, online convergence culture, both in and out of the classroom, we need to explore the ways that the references, genres, and discourses of popular culture, both visual and written, shape their reading and writing practices.

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