

Uncanny Collisions:  
Context Clash in Japanese Social Media

by

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**Note on Names and Pseudonymous Handles:**

In the following paper names and online handles of social networking site users (on mixi and myspace) have been anonymized for privacy concerns.

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## **Introduction:**

The following paper will address the possibilities of context-clash within a Japanese social networking site (mixi), taking into account both historical antecedents and current techno-ideological landscapes. **Part (I)** will start by situating various notions of identity performance within computer mediated communication (CMC). In particular, I will aim to show some of the limitations of a narrow notion of self-presentation as a kind of “information.” This discussion will also evaluate the usefulness of terms such as “self-fragmentation” vs. “the multifaceted-self” in relation to various theories of media and self-mediation. Here, I will introduce the possibility that ideologies of self are themselves culturally specific constructs that need to be analyzed as such.

In **Part (II)**, I will examine the way that Japanese language use shapes notions of self by mapping structural features of Japanese grammar onto lived partitions of social space. I will also identify broader sociolinguistic patterns in Japanese such as: cyclic-temporal relations, distinctions between work and leisure, parameters of spatial and relational cues, and differences between in-group vs. out-group talk in order to suggest possible frames of analysis for thinking about context-clash in Japan. I will then move to address broader theoretical implications of context-clash within Japan’s current socio-technological milieu as well within transnational media flows.

Next, in **Part (III)** I will develop a historical link between the kinds of confessional writing genres associated with Japan’s *shishōsetsu* tradition in order to develop a context for thinking about the *nikkei* (diary) feature in the Japanese social networking site mixi. I will then move on to discuss some of the unique design features of the mixi platform and contextualize these features in relation to patterns of user practice. Then I will explore some of the methodological challenges and opportunities provided by online (remote)

ethnography and also outline the scope my research questions in relation to these methodological parameters.

Key questions will include: How do mixi users conceive of, deal with, or anticipate potential context clash? What kind of context clash challenges do mixi users face? In what way do mixi usage patterns/design features invite context clash? Do non-CMC practices inform certain kinds of coping mechanisms and management strategies for dealing with context clash? In what way do sociolinguistic features of Japanese language use impact upon these strategies? And finally, how do genres of Japanese memoir/confessional writing (specifically drawing from the tradition of the *shishōsetsu*) inform the kind of writing practice that occurs on mixi?

**Part (IV)** will address these research questions through several avenues. First I will examine context clash in relation to various public imaginaries in mixi. I pay particular attention to my notion of the a tipping point (*matsuri*) public and its relation to the searchability of newly posted diaries (*shinbaku nikki*). I will also look at the ways mixi's design features and user practice patterns both help to structure metapragmatic discourse about the appropriateness of various behaviors in the mixi environment. Here I will draw from the ideology of *aisatsu* greetings in Japan and compare this kind of discourse to the function of meta-statements about mixi footprints (*ashiato*) and the practice of “escaping without commenting” (*yominige*). I will also examine these questions of metapragmatics in relation to tone and code-switching in mixi and then connect this discussion to a broader understanding of public behavior in relation to the discourse of eavesdropping in Japan. And finally, I will explore mixi's diary function (*nikki*) in relation to Tomita's (2005) notion of the intimate stranger in order to connect the online *nikki* genre to its historical antecedent, the *shishōsetsu*.

**Part (V)** will introduce the notion of interface pragmatics and discuss the ways that design and user-practice in social networking sites are both embedded within particular ideological investments in the self as avatar. In particular, I will examine the structural implications of diary comments (vs. wall-posting in Myspace and Facebook) within a marketplace of visual attention. Here, I argue that wall postings in Facebook and Myspace point to the relationship between poster and profile owner (through reference to shared experience) while shrouding the context of the conversational exchange. Conversely, Mixi's emphasis on diary postings and diary comments (instead of wall posts) makes the conversational context of comment-posts explicit while shrouding the relationship between poster and profile owner, i.e. reversing the structure of Myspace and Facebook's wall feature. Here, then, the existence of variously figured relationships towards the profile owner creates a kind of seductive context-clash which invites a "reader" to click to commenters' profile pages as a way of resolving mysteries of relationship rather than conversational context (as is the case in Myspace).

It is my hope that this research resituates more fundamental questions about identity performance for various CMC-related disciplines by examining questions of socio-historical and linguistic specificity. While this paper attempts to understand technological design and practice through the lens of culture, I am also sensitive to the criticism from within disciplines of Japanese anthropology that western research on Japan has often myopically tended to look for monolithic cultural explanations of much more complex technosociological phenomena (Ito 2005). Instead, following Inoue (2006) I hope to circumvent these kinds of problems within the field of Japanese studies by using the tool-box of linguistic anthropology, drawing especially on the notion of metapragmatic discourse. This approach will help me shift the frame of analysis from fixed notions of technology and

culture to a more fluid understanding of the ways that technological design and practice interact dialectically with broader patterns and situated affordances within Japanese language use.

## **Part I Theoretical Background:**

### **1.1 Context Clash as Parallax: expanding the informational paradigm**

It is the goal of this paper to broach the subject of context clash in Japanese social media and to explore the ways that pre-existing strategies for coping with context clash (in non-digitally mediated context) interact with and impact upon newer strategies associated with social media. In order to set up this discussion, I will first examine the disciplinary stakes involved and attempt to lay out what might be understood as a performative theory of context clash.

In light of the increasing awareness of what danah boyd calls “porousness” in online media (boyd 2002: 25), the notion of *context clash* (or context collapse) has emerged as a key area of theoretical interest in studies of CMC. While current examples include anecdotes about employers reading their employee’s myspace pages and bloggers adapting to the intrusive spectatorship of what boyd calls a super-public (boyd 2006e), it is nevertheless important to remind ourselves that the potential for this kind of uncomfortable clash (between divergent self-performance registers) clearly exists—and has always existed—outside the boundaries of CMC. And in fact, boyd argues that the phenomenon can be described in quite general terms:

While people seek to present themselves appropriately, they do not necessarily have control over what others reveal about their identity. When two worlds are bridged, information that may have been shared in one context can be shared in the other, potentially creating an awkward social situation. For example, introducing mom to all of one’s friends can be a recipe for disaster. (boyd 2002: 28)

I would like to dwell for a moment on the scenario that boyd invokes: “introducing mom to all of one’s friends.” This familiar example of context clash seems to draw upon a common reservoir of assumptions many of us have about the imagined cringe-worthiness of one’s parents’ awkward interjection into a peer group and vice versa. But the scenario also points to another sort of awkward rupture. In particular, it opens up questions of how the son or daughter should, themselves, act when confronted with such a liminal performative space. Should one take on the role inhabitation of “home” or “school”? Does body trump space, and if so, whose body and which space? This kind of conundrum seems to have less to do with information management, per se, and more to do with issues of identity performance in general. Your friends know that you have a mother; they know that, most likely, you act differently in front of her. Likewise, your mother could easily imagine you acting differently in front of your friends. In this sense, the metaphor of “information” bleeding from one context to another seems less relevant than a broader notion of perduring performative gestures bleeding from one context to another. I would extend this claim to suggest that, in general, the informational metaphor is a red herring here. Information, in this case, is merely a metaphor that describes a subset among a much larger array of performative gestures.

Take, for example, the precocious son being dropped off by his mother at school: she says goodbye awkwardly waiting for kiss. While salient geographical boundaries between “school life” and “home life” allow for the boy to separate these two performances of self, the presence of his mother’s body (as a kind of media object here) nevertheless awkwardly unveils the baggage of home to the predatorily nosy public of the schoolyard. So, it is not

the divulgence of the *information* that he participates in rituals of maternal affection which proves so dangerously revealing. Instead, it is the uncanny insertion of an intimate *performative gesture* (a kiss on the mother's cheek for example) into the surveilled space of publicly contested power relations (within his peer group) which causes the young boy so much consternation. In this sense, the boy squirms because he is taking on the stance of his own surveiller, his own Other—seeing himself through what Žizek (2006) refers to as a parallax view—and this happens regardless of whether or not he witnesses anyone actually eavesdropping, because the space of schoolyard's periphery, itself, serves as a media object which vividly invokes this public imaginary. Thus the presence of the mother is not threatening because of its informational content but rather because of the uncanny performative rupture that it sets up.

This distinction between information and performance can be put quite simply: (1) within a hypothetical community everyone has or has had a mother; (2) within this community we can suppose that everyone acts or has acted differently in front of their mother; (3) we can also suppose that everyone knows that *everyone else* acts or has acted differently in front of their respective mothers; but (4), not everyone wants to acknowledge this difference by enacting it publicly *even though* its existence is potentially accessible as public *information*. In short, information can be hypothetically known but still not authorized as available for performance as public “knowledge.”

This distinction between information and performance is not at all trivial, because it means that the son (in this particular case) is never forced to acknowledge the contextual

contingency of his self-performance until the moment of clash itself. In this sense, events of liminal performance are highly revealing because they force us into uncanny awareness of our own multiply situated experience of identity. The strategies people employ to repair contextual smoothness in the face of such a rupture tell us much about the kinds of (potentially competing) assumptions that exist implicitly within particular arenas of interaction. In the example of the mother dropping off her son at school, the mother's body can function as an index of the son's alternative identity in the space of the home.

Here, we can think of the mother's body leaning in for a kiss as a kind of media object that extends the son's home-identity into the space of the schoolyard. This notion of media as an extension of human perceptual experience was first proposed by McLuhan (1964) but continues to be invoked by globalization anthropologists to explain a wide array of signs. According to McLuhan, extensions are media that prosthetically extend the human sensorial capacity as well as the human ability to reach into time and space. But for the purposes of this discussion, I am interested specifically in extensions which point to other potential role inhabitations of a human agent. My argument is that the presence of the mother's body (in this example above) serves as an extension indexically linking the son to the imagined "world" (and concomitant identity performances) of his home life. In this sense the mother's body mediates and extends the experience of home life by reproducing one of its telltale gestures: the kiss.

Electronic media, however, seems to offer the potential for extensions which can instantaneously traverse partitions of social space. In this sense, Meyrowitz argues that

“electronic media affect us, not primarily through their content, but by changing the ‘situational geography’ of social life” (1986, 6). Meyrowitz’s main interest here is in the ways that television altered the parameters of who knew what about whom. In particular, he points out the ways that the ways that television and other sorts of electronic mediation collapsed the spatial partitions that had once delineate audience from non-audience. In other words, extensions can *extend* into multiple arenas simultaneously.

I don’t want to overstate the importance of simultaneity, however. McLuhan thinks of extensions as literal prostheses extending the human nervous system out into the world through electronically mediated channels, but I would like to deemphasize this somewhat overly physiological trope in order to mitigate the sense of instant synchronicity that the metaphor of a neurological synapse seems to imply. Instead, various theorists have developed concepts similar to McLuhan’s extension in order to describe how such mediating linkages occur over *durative* periods of time.

In particular, Latour’s notion of delegation (a.k.a. Jim Johnson 1988) describes the way that successive surrogate technologies point to, and mediate, what were previously human roles. His central example here is the technology of the door-closure, which was once an actual human being and only later manifested as a technological artifact. Over successive “generations” the door closure (or groom) ultimately evolved from human to technological form. Latour’s insight here effectively collapses the distinction between human and technological actors.

However, for my purposes, the weakness of Latour's notion of delegation is that the human source (which being delegated to a technology) is often covered up by these technological genealogies. For example, we don't normally think of the mediating connection between a mechanical door closer and its human antecedent; instead, the grounds of this indexical linkage seem to fade over time like a dying metaphor. In contrast, the link between the human body and various forms of digital media tends to be more salient and enduring. For example, we don't tend to forget that email serves as a surrogate for face-to-face contact with an actual human. What *is* useful here about Latour's insight, though, is that it points to the ways that digital media artifacts can cascade from one situation to the next in ways that cannot be imagined at the moment of their initial creation.

Both McLuhan's metaphor of media as instantaneous synapse and Latour's metaphor of technology as enduring functional genealogy, then, seem to have considerable middle ground. Email, for example, is both an electronic extension of human language as well as a kind of unpredictably delegated technology. (And here I am less interested in email's antecedents in the telegraph and written letter, and more in the idea that an email, which is saved in an archive, can have unexpected and evolving functions). Email, as copyable text, can endure and bleed into multiple kinds of contexts, and so, we can imagine an email causing performative ruptures in the same way that the mother's kiss can destabilize the young boy's schoolyard identity. This connection will re-emerge when I discuss boyd's insights about the role of asynchronous (persistent) communication in facilitating context clash.

## 1.2 Multi-situated Identity and the Stakes of Networked Performance

I acknowledge that uncomfortable collisions of identity performance existed long before new mediating technologies pulled back the curtain on our own contingencies of identity. However, there is nevertheless something new at stake. What has changed with the advent of networked media is that potential areas of context clash which we had formerly been able to hide from even ourselves (due to highly salient social partitions of space and time) now rise to the level explicit consciousness. Like the son suddenly rejecting motherly affection in the schoolyard, events of context clash often make us suddenly aware of partitions in our own identity which had previously enjoyed cover due to spatio-temporal segregation.

Similarly, linguists have long pointed to how language users will disavow their own utterances when it is pointed out that they have violated some self-proclaimed prescriptive “rule” of contextual appropriateness. The reason these inappropriate utterances remain unacknowledged (until a tape-recorder plays back what has just been said) is that the particular linguistic behavior exists outside of a meta-knowledge about language use for a given community. Linguists refer to this metalinguistic knowledge specifically as “metapragmatic awareness” (Silverstein 1976, 1981). Moreover, linguistic anthropologists are interested in the boundaries of native speakers’ metapragmatic awareness and treat this phenomenon as a key site of anthropological knowledge. In essence, the boundaries of metapragmatic awareness reveal particular performative gestures whose social function

native speakers cannot describe in explicit terms. These boundaries, thus, become serially introduced as sites of contested cultural meaning and value. Imagine, for example, the disagreement between a child and his/her parents over whether such-and-such an utterance was indeed said with a “fresh” tone of voice.

Sometimes hybrid performance itself—i.e. what Bakhtin (1934-35, trans. 1981) refers to as dialogic or multi-vocal structures in the novel—can exist beyond the limits of metapragmatic awareness. In other words, writers who integrate various voices in their prose may not have explicit knowledge of the subtle architecture of ironic framing that they are, nevertheless, quite deliberately mobilizing. Likewise, I would expect that we are not always aware of the performative transformations we undergo as we attempt to integrate multiple contexts “on the fly”—consider for example how intuitively improvised the incredibly complicated task of playing host to multiple peer groups at a party ultimately proves to be. If one were to attempt this task as an analytically rigorous strategy, the party would not flow at all—in part because it is the ebb and flow of risk and recovery which makes this kind of extemporized interaction socially productive.

Again, however, there is something about digital media which changes the stakes of these kinds of liminal experiences. In particular, the kinds of incongruities that arise when self-performance frames bleed from one context to another seem to be compounded, accelerated, and made more costly in a digital/networked setting. Boyd, discussing identity performance in social networking sites, points to four unique characteristics as key factors facilitating context clash in an online environment: (1) *persistence* (as a byproduct of

asynchronous communication), (2) *searchability*, (3) *replicability*, and (4) *invisible audiences*.

Related to this last issue of replicability is the notion of “openness” (to multiple publics). All of these factors can influence the question of media porousness: “In other words, what is the likelihood that the information presented in this situation to these people will reappear elsewhere?” (boyd 2002: 25).

As I have suggested, I would like to avoid the emphasis on “information” and instead refocus this question to ask: what is the likelihood that a performative extension in one arena will coexist in the context of another performative extension such that both will be associated with the same individual. It should be noted that this understanding of context clash allows for the possibility that multiple extensions may be wrongly assumed to have originated from the same person—all that matters is that the extensions are *purported* to have originated from the same body. In other words, when an employer “google-stalks” a prospective employee and finds inappropriate material associated with someone who has an identical name, regardless of whether the employer can correctly recognize the conflation, this situation should still be understood as context clash insofar as the employer can imagine naïve clients misrecognizing the prospective employee as this other person online. In this sense, context clash emerges not only from careless management of performative extensions but also from inattentive self-surveillance of one’s searchable doppelgangers. This difference is key, because it allows us to conceptualize the non-deliberate performative gesture (a photograph taken without the subject knowing and uploaded with an identifying tag) as a

kind of doppelganger-like extension—just as “real” to a potential audience as any so-called “intentional” self-performance.

Moreover, this notion of the doppelganger helps to ground the experience of identity fragmentation. In essence, an individual who encounters their own self-initiated extension *as if* it were a kind of uncanny doppelganger (intruding inappropriately upon the here-and-now) can be thought of as experiencing identity fragmentation.

### 1.3 The “Faceted” Self vs. the “Fragmented” Self

Boyd (2002) positions herself as a proponent of the term *faceted* (as oppose to fragmented) identity, arguing that the distinction between internal-self and social-self allows for a single unified internal identity—albeit one that is potentially concealed behind a multiplicity of external projections.

Suggesting that an individual is inherently fragmented and undergoing an identity crises is problematic. In a society where people play many different roles and must constantly adjust for different social contexts, their presentation may appear to be fragmented, but this does not imply that they are. Instead, such adjustments suggest that the individual is maintaining and presenting multiple *facets* of their identity as appropriate. . . I believe that an individual has a coherent sense of self, but in presenting only facets of their identity, they are **perceived** as fragmented. (boyd 2002: 26—my emphasis)

Boyd’s notion of the faceted self presumes a single “inside” self with multiple “outside” projections. Moreover, she seems to suggest that at any given moment, the “inside” self has complete metapragmatic awareness about all alternative “outside” projections of self. Boyd distinguishes then a (possible) *perception* of fragmentation from an (impossible) *experience* of fragmentation.

In contrast though, I contend that to understand the experience of identity fragmentation we need to take into account the kinds of performative ruptures that I've described earlier where an individual encounters their own contextually inappropriate extensions. Such encounters can force individuals to experience alternative performances of themselves that exist outside of metapragmatic awareness.

Moreover, Goffman's notion of impression management does not foreclose on the possibility of identity fragmentation. Ytreberg (2002) argues that Goffman is "ultimately agnostic" about the notion of a unified self, but also points out that Goffman's theories evolved towards a more variously situated notion of self. For example, Goffman's later writings on frame analysis (1974) helped to emphasize his theoretical shift from the *front-back* binary of impression management to a more flexible notion of self-performance. Writing about the performances of newscasters, he argues for an improvisational and situated understanding of *frames* as nested or overlapping genres of interaction in order to describe the way that newscasters step in and out of different formality registers (1981). Here, Goffman points out how the playful banter of newscasters moves from formal to more intimate frames with a kind of verbal wink. It is as if these performers are letting their audience have a peek "backstage." But importantly the "backstage" persona here is just as situated as the "frontstage" persona. The difference here is significant because it moves Goffman away from a conception of the "backstage" as a somehow inaccessible, and fixed, terrain. Instead, these later writings suggested how within a single performance variously shifting "backstage" personas could be invoked as a strategic device.

We all participate in elaborate rituals meant to convince others that our “authentic” internal self is bleeding into our external self. Taking advantage of reorienting phrases like “actually...” or “to be frank...” we jump between partitions of outside framing into other more intimate frames (positioned closer to an *ad hoc* **projection** of an internal-self).

Especially in non-English language research, where an analogous ideology of self can be harder to pin down, it might be more useful to adopt this notion of nested or overlapping formality frames as oppose to the *front-back* binary of Goffman’s earlier writing. In this sense, the experience of selfhood could be understood a situated projection of an internal self (which is pointed to by a shift in framing). The self, then, is that which “winks” from behind the “curtain” as one moves from a more formal register to a less formal one. However, this notion of the self need not endure from one situation to the next. Since different situations have different “curtains” they also have different projections of the “winking” self. Perhaps then, we can think of identity fragmentation as a kind of collision between different “winking” selves.

This contextually specific *ad hoc* notion of the self aligns my approach with *social identity theory* (a concept with roots in European social psychology), which defines the self in terms of a repertoire of possible social category allegiances that vary in their relative potential to direct the self towards perceived social prototypes (Hogg 1995). Social identity theory “views social identity as an enduring construct that changes with changing intergroup relations... [yet] places at center stage the view that the content of social identity is dynamically responsive to immediate contextual factors: different contexts may prescribe

different contextually relevant behaviors contingent on the same social identity” (*Ibid*: 265). The self then endures as a construct, but in terms of actual social practice it is variable and situated. Social identity theory in particular points out the ways that the self can be oriented differently as one moves between social groups.

*Identity theory* (a related model with roots in American sociology) is more concerned with the ways that the self can be oriented in multiple ways within a single social group. Here, the self is situated within various multi-dimensional allegiances organized according to a salience hierarchy of social roles (*Ibid*). The emphasis then is on intragroup role inhabitation rather than intergroup behavioral codes. But the theory still treats the self as a construct that is pulled in various directions as it moves between different contextual parameters.

While orienting my research within both a *social identity theory* and *identity theory* approach to notions of self, I will nevertheless draw most heavily from the methodology of linguistic anthropology. I favor this approach because linguistic anthropology provides a set of vocabulary to describe moments of interstitial (and improvised) self-reinvention. Since I am interested in the kinds of ruptures that digital/networked technologies invite, I am concerned then not only with the variable ways that the self is constructed but also with the ways that people creatively navigate or anticipate mediated events which can potentially destabilize the self. The linguistic anthropological approach also lends itself especially to research in Japanese media because of how the Japanese language codes the relational contingency of self into its very grammatical structure.

## Part II Context Clash in Japan

### 2.1 Context Clash and Japanese Language:

How are different communities addressing this new dangerous potential for “colliding worlds?” Not every language community demonstrates the, perhaps quintessentially, American ideology of a unified self. “Be yourself, people will like you” is what the mothers on TV provide as advice for their children. Instead, I expect that other (sub)cultural groupings and particular language use communities may have specific strategies for evading the context clash.

In Japan for example, partitions of social space are often highly segregated—much more so than in analogous American contexts. Rather than resort to monolithic descriptions of Japanese culture, though, I think it may be more useful to look at the ways the Japanese language itself structures the partitions between different genres of interaction. In general, Japanese grammatical structure stratifies language in very explicit ways. For heuristic purposes we can think of the language as divided into three levels of politeness: plain form, polite (*masu*-form), and hyper-polite (which is in turn separated into humble and honorific forms depending upon the subject of the utterance and the directionality of the verb used). It is important to note that no sentence can be completed, no verb can be conjugated, no interactional salvo can be offered without also orienting oneself relationally to one’s interlocutor/audience in terms of these politeness levels. In this sense, relational specificity between speaker and listener is unavoidably coded—since even neutrality (*masu*-form politeness) signals a strategic orientation to the deference relations of the interactants

involved. Interestingly then, from a Japanese perspective English allows for a masking of such language stratification differences (Inoue 2003).

Moreover, Japanese language levels are not selectively based (as they are in English) but rather are much more explicitly determined by modular categories. By contrast, in English any given utterance can include several lexical items that map implicitly onto various (disparate) genres of formality. As mentioned earlier, this kind of complex genre mapping is a phenomenon that Bakhtin labels as dialogic or multi-vocal (1934-35, trans. 1981).

Bakhtin thinks of “voice” as a particular flavor of speech. In this sense, “voice” as a theoretical notion is the literary equivalent of Goffman’s concept of framing (i.e. as a delineated genre of interaction). Bakhtin claims that language users have access to many voices simultaneously by drawing from what Bakhtin calls “heteroglossia” (the landscape of various speech genres that make up the palette of a given language community). Bakhtin is interested here in the ways that authors create ‘dialogic voicing’ or ‘polyphonic voicing’ as a way of structuring their narrative worlds (Ibid).

Goffman places this notion of multiple/hybrid “voicings” in the context of face-to-face interaction by evoking the metaphor of “footing.” Footing, here, provides Goffman with a way of describing how language users can engage with multiple “frames” *simultaneously*. Footing is, in essence, a description of the way a speaker aligns—or fails to align—with their interlocutor in relation to the topic-in-play during a particular conversational salvo.

Goffmanian ‘footing’ can be read as... allowing a mediating role for denotational text to [serve as] “play” in interaction. The implication [being that] ‘footing’ [allows for] the

‘alignment’ of the self to (an)other... in laminated [=simultaneously in effect] ‘frames’ of participation... serially introduced into discursive interaction. (Silverstein 1997—course syllabus/lecture notes)

The key term here is “laminated,” meaning that Goffman’s concept of footing helps us to imagine that various frames can be in play *simultaneously*. In addition, the notion that these shifts in footing can be serialized is important because it underscores how certain key performative gestures mimetically invoke new play frame genres. In the context of CMC, Craviotto (2006) has demonstrated that this theoretical understanding of laminated frames in identity play can be applied to conversational analysis in dating chat forums.<sup>1</sup>

I would argue, though, that in a Japanese context this kind of mixing (of frames) is made much more explicit (based on several finite and vertically structured alternatives for verb ending modulation) and so hybrid utterances are—at least on the surface—more easily identifiable and thus become prohibitive. In Whorfian (1956) terminology, we could say that formality is coded *overtly* (i.e. based on explicit modular rules) in Japanese vs. *covertly* (based on implicit selective rules) in English. As a consequence, there seems to be a much higher potential for metapragmatic awareness surrounding formality cues in Japanese than in English, and thus, prescribed parameters are much stricter and allow less room for ambiguity of deference categories. That said, forms of parodic or ironic framing (through playful hybridization of deference categories) are definitely possible in Japanese insofar as inappropriate levels of politeness (or inappropriate use of gender cues) can convey sarcasm or other sorts of strategic effects (Inoue 2006). In addition, various modular categories can

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<sup>1</sup> In Craviotto’s findings each typed message has the potential to either raise the stakes of intimacy (increasing risk) or pull back to a degree-wise-relatively-less-intimate frame (mitigating risk)—as if to say: “Relax, I was just kidding, why are you taking me seriously?”

be combined in order to soften the blow of a disagreement or to make a compliment/warning (as in “don’t work so hard!”) sound more resolute.

On the surface, however, politeness categories in Japanese map onto a finite set of stratified grammatical categories deictically oriented either “up,” “down,” or “neutral” towards one’s interlocutor (as oppose to English where genres of formality map degree-wise onto a cline of possible identity inhabitances). One direct consequence of this difference is that in English it’s much easier to dispute the social function of an utterance *post facto* as a way of retroactively performing damage control (i.e. as in: “You’re taking this all wrong; I didn’t mean it that way at all!”).

## **2.2 Japanese Ideology of Self:**

In the past, anthropologists have presented a Japanese notion of self that perpetuated a reductive account of the inside-outside binary which so often permeates descriptions of Japanese culture as the exotic other.

It seems that many anthropologists of Japan, anxious to assert the legitimacy of their fieldwork site according to older primitivist standards of the discipline, persist in taking the exotic angle, even finding premodern holdovers of village communities, for example, in the practices of the multinational corporation. Analysis too often falls back on the tired *uchi-soto* (inside-outside) binary as all-purpose explanatory trope. (Kelsky 2001: 29)

As a way of preempting this kind of naïve approach, I have attempted to adopt the sensibility that Dorinne Kondo (1990) invokes with the rubric of relationally defined selves. In *Crafting Selves*, Kondo reflexively explores the role of Japanese language in constructing a contextually contingent experience of self. Echoing the claims of *identity theory* she describes

her experience during fieldwork as she struggled to adapt to her multiple adopted roles (daughter, sister, neighbor, researcher, student, co-worker, employee, etc) and in so doing developed an increasing awareness of the situatedness of selfhood.

[The] proper use of Japanese teaches one that a human being is always inevitably involved in a multiplicity of social relationships. Boundaries between self and other are fluid and constantly changing, depending on context and on the social positioning people adopt in particular situations. (Kondo 1990: 31)

This notion of a relationally oriented self pervades the language structure of Japanese to such a degree that one could argue no sentence can be uttered without indexing at least minimal contextual parameters about the social relationship between speaker and addressee. This explicit grammatical coding of social relations suggests that Japanese have a much higher degree of metapragmatic awareness about their own multivocality because they can point to specific segmentable linguistic structures which index the variable social relations which provide the pretext for their usage. In other words, these structures of the Japanese language encourage speakers to be more aware—than English speakers for example—of their own ability to shift between various role inhabitances depending upon whom they are addressing.

Ironically, however, this sophisticated metapragmatic awareness of situated identity that the Japanese language tends to facilitate is often coupled with an extremely pervasive ideology of self that posits a clean and enduring (i.e. non-situation specific) distinction between an “inside” and “outside” persona: *bonne* and *tatemae* respectively.

[M]ultiple, infinitely graded layers of selfhood are often described in Japanese in terms of two *end points* of a continuum: the *tatemae*, social surface, that which is done to smooth social relations, and the *bonne*, “real” feeling; *omote*, the front, formal side, vs. *ura* the back, or intimate side; *soto*, outside, and *uchi*, inside. (Ibid)

In practice these categories are often invoked as definitive explanations of the difference between public and private versions of the self. However, Kondo considers these categories of inside vs. outside persona to be contextually constructed and referentially empty.

Let me emphasize that the boundaries of *soto/uchi* and *omote/ura* are contextually constructed, shifting, and therefore referentially empty; they are *not* dualistic, essentialist categories. (Ibid)

Because the concealed *honne* (internal-self) is assumed to be contextually present (yet linguistically distant) in any given interaction, Japanese speakers tend to conceptualize communication as a process of inferring subtle variations from otherwise highly formulaic communication patterns. It's through these subtle variations of affect that one can infer the presence of the *honne* (internal) self. And Japanese often claim that this process of direct *honne* to *honne* communication (based on mutual intimating and inferring about the *honne* self) is an ability that only native Japanese have access to (Siegal, 1994a). There is even a term, *ishindenshin* to describe this kind of “communication without speaking” (or rather, communication submerged *below* speaking channels), and Japanese speakers often make claims that interacting with non-native speakers complicates this kind of communicative practice (Ibid). The separation between *honne* and *tatemae*, then, is extended ideologically as a decontextualized universal for all Japanese in all possible communicative situations.

But while the dominant Japanese ideology of self posits a consistent, decontextualized split between “inside” and “outside” persona, Kondo's argument suggests that the actual distinction between “inside” and “outside” frames of self are developed *ad hoc* in particular contexts of usage and reformulated from situation to situation. This argument

parallels my earlier comments about the ways that different social “curtains” require different “peeking” or “winking” selves behind those curtains. In both Japanese and English, however, there are no specifically segmentable forms that point to this contextual variability and thus it remains outside the realm of metapragmatic awareness. So while the Japanese language exceeds English in its ability to explicitly index variable social relations *within* a given situation, both English and Japanese speakers seem ill equipped to metapragmatically parse the kinds of differences in self performance that happen *between* situations.

Communication technology in Japan often draws upon this ideological impulse to reduce an *ad hoc* sliding scale of intimacy down to two its essentialized poles of identity. Tomita (2005) argues that the advent of mobile technology in Japan fostered a tendency to think about non-mobile loci of communication (the fixed line telephone) for example as representative of a kind of socially interconnected “original” (outside) self while the mobile phone (the *keitai*) represented a new kind of emergent “real” me inserted into public space.

In contrast [to a fixed line telephone], *keitai* is a telephone of an individual, not tied to a particular location, and its number can be perceived as the individual’s number. From this standpoint... [there is a contrast between the] “original me” and the “real me.” In other words, the traditional “original me” was restricted to social positions and roles like the fixed-line telephone. In contrast, the “real me” is the other self in cyberspace, the identity that has been freed from the restrictions, like *keitai*. (Tomita 2005: 199)

This tension between a “real” self, able to enunciate within a highly public arena, and this new notion of public “space” itself—a highly intimate yet anonymous domain—creates a phenomenon that Tomita refers to as the “intimate stranger.” This notion of anonymous intimacy echoes Joseph Walther’s (1996) concept of the hyper-personal effect in which communication over less rich media channels (IM for instance) creates a more intimate

connection between strangers than face-to-face communication would otherwise allow. Elsewhere, this idea has been labeled the “familiar stranger” phenomenon in studies of urban sociology (Milgram, 1977) and has emerged more recently as the subject of experimental research using wireless technology (Paulos, Goodman: 2004).

While this phenomenon seems generalizable to a variety of situations, in the context of Japan the notion of an “intimate stranger” has particular resonances. In Japan the barriers to intimacy are highly structured, and social relationships are linguistically coded according to strict rules of deference. These linguistic and social features would seem to make the implications of the hyper-personal effect less obvious. How do we talk about a relationally defined self when the “self” encounters the “other” anonymously? How does one intimate stranger address another intimate stranger? Is there a slippage between intimate strangers and original selves—in other words, if and when anonymous friends become less anonymous how does an individual manage this transformation? These questions seem to be at the heart of the connection between context clash and new media, and they will re-emerge in later sections as I attempt to address these concerns in relation to the social networking site mixi.

In general, such questions seem to be increasingly critical problems within Japan’s techno-social imaginary. A recent *anime* called *Serial Experiments Lain*, by Ryutaro Nakamura, takes as its subject the various permutations of Lain’s identity as she explores various forms of virtual embodiment. These variously embodied permutations of Lain, however, start to become unruly, existing outside of her control and damaging her “real life” social

relationships. This dangerous permeability between different forms of self-mediation gets translated visually as a literal encroachment of bodies from the virtual realm—referred to here as The Wired—into “real life” experience.

The Wired is a separate layer above the layer of the real world, but because of the blurred boundaries between the two, there are instances where Wired entities suddenly appear in the real world, either as fully-formed bodies or as wraith-like ghosts. Visually, it is quite sparse, yet it pulsates with life and changes constantly. As [Lain] delves deeper into the mysteries surrounding the Wired and interacts more and more with various users, Lain finds that copies of her are surfacing and causing havoc on her behalf. The people around her remark that they’ve seen her around on the Wired or even in real life in places she had never been before, causing her to question if she is the only true Lain in existence, and if she really is who she thinks she is. . . . [This uncertainty reflects] a sort of technologically-aided, reverse dissociative identity disorder. (Zheng 2007: 1-2)

The threatening ambiguity of these virtual bodies—whose actions are often only revealed retroactively and whose ghost-like visages fade in and out of sight—may parallel a larger fear of ambiguity about technologically mediated social relationships in general. Moreover, the series points to the ways that Tomita’s “intimate stranger” (mediated by the mobile-phone) becomes socially threatening when there is a slippage from disembodied into embodied contexts. This kind of slippage is most commonly associated with asynchronous digital communication (such as IM or SMS) where media forms leave persistent (i.e. potentially un-erasable) artifacts in their wake—artifacts which can take on a kind of unpredictable agency of their own. In this sense, *Serial Experiments Lain* has made literal the kinds of metaphorical fears that I used to describe identity fragmentation in digitally networked worlds: i.e. as the uncanny experience of encountering your own doppelganger.

## 2.3 Context partitioning in Japanese Language Use:

Before I introduce the Japanese social networking site, *mixi*, I would like to look at the ways that Japanese identity performance takes on some of the preexisting strategies for dealing with context clash. In the context of Japanese language use, interactional genres tend to be highly partitioned along a number of parameters: (a) **cyclic-temporal partitions** that regulate formality registers, (b) **work vs. leisure** based situational partitions, (c) **spatial vs. relational cues** that structure appropriateness, and finally (d) **ingroup vs. outgroup talk**.

### 2.3 (a) Cyclic-temporal partitions:

Workday interaction and other sorts of institutionally sanctioned daily processes tend to demonstrate a cyclic drift from highly formal registers to less formal ones. Rohlin (1996) points out how parameters of formality are inculcated by academic institutions during the middle school and high school years. From my own experience working in a public middle school in Japan, the disciplining of identity performance followed a particular temporal schedule. The (official) day started with a bow and a morning meeting during which honorific and humble verb forms would be employed. As the day would wear on, teacher-to-teacher interaction would tend to become less formal, until finally (after school) language would become much more relaxed. Many young male teachers would stay long after classes had ended. The purpose of this “voluntary” overtime was presumably to “finish up work” and conduct after school activities (*bukatsu*), but functionally this period of time seemed instrumental for establishing more intimate relations with co-workers.

Japanese temporal partitioning of formality categories sets itself apart from

analogous English phenomena due to its highly cyclic, rather than cumulative (i.e. linear), patterning. In other words, in Japanese work place communities, interaction in the early morning hours is often highly formal regardless of intimacy established in previous contexts. While after-hours parties serve a ritualized function in cementing social trust (usually through consumption of alcohol), the morning after a work party, this newly acquired intimacy will be—at least superficially—forgotten. Instead formal identity performance resumes, in effect restarting the daily cycle over again. This kind of "resetting" of formality cues seems to lie in stark contrast to the kinds of cumulative/linear formation of intimacy in English language communities. In this sense, even with consistent co-interactants, self-performance in Japanese tends to be highly prescribed according to cyclic temporal parameters. This is not at all to say that people cannot become intimate over time in a Japanese context, but rather that this gradual increase would have the properties of an obliquely angled sine-wave.

### 2.3 (b) **Work vs. Leisure:**

Although the increasing acceptance of *arubaito* ("part time" employment) has complicated the picture somewhat, Japanese tend to form extremely intimate social bonds with coworkers. Drinking parties, vacations, and other sorts of leisure activities are most likely spent with ones coworkers, such that, by contrast too much time spent recreating with ones family or with non-workplace friends can trigger disapproval. In this sense, a great emphasis is place on contextual partitions between workplace and non-workplace interactions—with the former being valued over the latter. Such a description may seem

increasingly myopic and ahistorical, but it is important to note as a departure point, and in my own experience at a public school this tendency to value workplace relationships over other sorts of ties seemed quite operative.

### 2.3 (c) **Spatial vs. Relational cues:**

Politeness in Japanese tends to more prescribed by relational rather than spatial cues (as oppose to a language like English where these kinds of performance parameters are based upon "earshot" boundaries). For instance, a student could get away with speaking in incredibly rude language to a pupil in front of a teacher (since the fact that the conversation takes place in a classroom is less important than the fact that the statement was directed to another student). In contrast, the same comment directed to the teacher would trigger strong disapproval. In this sense, relational cues take priority over the role of potential (or eavesdropping) spectators.

This prioritization of relational cues over spatial cues contrasts sharply with Meyrowitz's insights about the role played by *spatialized* restriction parameters in determining contextual appropriateness in English.

While we usually tend to think of situations in terms of what and who is in them, situations are also defined by what and who is outside of them. Behavior in an environment is shaped by the patterns of access to and restriction from the social information available in that environment. The way male high school students speak in a locker room, for example, is determined not only by the presence of other male students, but also by the absence of female students, parents, teachers, and principals. (Meyrowitz, 42)

In contrast to this description of the role of excluded audiences in determining appropriateness of certain kinds of identity performance, I would conjecture that analogous Japanese scenarios allow for a great deal more slippage. The Japanese language ensures that

the specific relationship between speaker and addressee is coded into grammatical categories of any utterance. While spatialized boundaries of identity performance *do* nevertheless exist in Japan, the impact of this relationally specific grammatical coding seems to be that “eavesdropping” audiences have less explicit recourse to claim offence.

That said, in explicit metapragmatic conversation, speakers of Japanese often invoke spatial metaphors as the dominant trope of in-group/out-group distinctions. In this sense, metapragmatic discourse seems to be in tension with the kinds of relational specificity that Japanese grammar licenses. This tension has emerged historically in a number of scenarios as a conflict between high status “eavesdroppers” and lower status “exhibitionists” who feign obliviousness.

For example, media discourse throughout Japanese history has often decried youth culture’s waning politeness (especially that of women)—expressed most indicatively through the use of in-group language in outside settings (such as public transportation). While the close relationship between speaker and addressee in these cases licenses such in-group talk as grammatically appropriate, from the perspective of an eavesdropper, the broadcasting of this intimacy comes across as crude and shameless. In Inoue’s research, it is the very knowledge that women speak plain-form (i.e. masculine) sounding language to each other was in itself a kind of perversity for older men. In this sense, within wider metapragmatic discourse, spatial cues seems to take priority over relational ones.

In work place interaction, there also tends to be considerable attention paid to smoothing over ambiguities of in-group/out-group categorical anomalies (for example, the

question of how to address someone who overlaps both categories simultaneously). Such ambiguity can cause considerable workplace consternation over whether to use humble or honorific forms. This kind of fretting over which kind of directional categories (humble vs. honorific) seems to demonstrate a conflict between spatial and relational cues, in the sense that grammar relies on relational structure while certain ideologies of language use suggest spatial metaphors as a rationale for speech levels. This inherent conflict between assumed and actual (grammatical) bases for speech levels may account for why Japan has such a rich history of discourse condemning use of in-group formal categories in public settings.

### 2.3 (d) **In-group vs. out-group talk (eavesdropping and in the public sphere):**

Inoue's research into the historical evolution of gender in women's language foregrounds long held a preoccupation with overheard speech in Japanese media (2002, 2004). Focusing on the modern schoolgirl between the 1880 and 1910, she points out how woman-to-woman familiar language was overheard in public (i.e. eavesdropped upon) by men and deemed vulgar in media discourse of the era. Inoue makes comparisons to the situation of the late 1980s and 1990s by pointing out that during both epochs, ambivalence about a dramatic social change was mapped onto isolatable linguistic units of female language that then became naturalized as "unpleasant to the ear." She emphasizes the importance of a male metalinguistic framing, noting that "what is significant is that male intellectuals were not just distracted by schoolgirl speech but that they positioned themselves in the act of overhearing" (Inoue 2003: 157).

Consider the scene of a modern Japanese male intellectual *flâneur* walking on the increasingly urban streets of Tokyo, pausing to eavesdrop on the conversation of

schoolgirls. What possesses him as an urban ethnographer/observer to stop and listen to their unspeakably “strange” voice, which he identifies, not as inarticulate noise, undifferentiated from other elements of the sonic landscape of the modernizing city, but as a speech form that signifies in the order of social things?... The moment of hearing schoolgirl speech not as noise but as a signifier—as *meaning* something to the hearer—is a critical sociohistorical horizon in Japanese modernity. (Ibid)

The key point for Inoue seems to be that since women are/were “seen-but-not-heard” in so many other spheres, then, to suddenly witness intimate female language in a public sphere may have felt like a total incongruity, and so, for this reason it was threatening to male ears.

Ito (2005) extends this notion of threatening incongruity (of language) to a more gender-neutral example. In particular, she discusses the initial experience of mobile phone conversation (*keitai* talk) as vulgar when placed within a public setting. In particular she looks at the early period of *keitai* adoption as a new civic negotiation that threatened older people who didn’t want to be subjected to the in-group/familiar (i.e. plain-form) utterances of youth while riding public transportation.

#### **2.4 Context clash as a transnational phenomenon:**

We can quickly see how social media evades the typical confines of national boundaries by foregrounding linguistic, as oppose to geographic, boundaries. These linguistic boundaries however are often semi-porous and thus conducive to miscommunication and contextually inappropriate performances of self (i.e. as a

performance that would be appropriate in one type of language group gets misappropriated by another). In this sense, context clash is a transnational phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

Transnational context clash seems to occur frequently when imagery and language are combined in mixed media. Holden (2003) has pointed out how the transnational circulation of tattoo culture has resulted in odd appropriations of both English and Asian graphical representations. In the context of CMC, linguistically triggered context clash has emerged most strikingly on youtube.

In July of 2006, an incident occurred on youtube that still has resonance for many Japanese consumers (and producers) of online video. A youtube user (Katou) posted a message excoriating the racist language typical of the site. In particular he condemned the ignorant hate language directed towards Japanese citizens in the comment sections of Japanese-language-based media. Because he cited the actual hate language (in quotes) many Japanese misinterpreted his criticism and thought that he was actually espousing the attitudes he was in fact attacking. This misunderstanding initiated what, in Japanese geek parlance is called a *matsuri*. While the original term *matsuri* indicates a “festival”—often a locally celebrated holiday for which a particular town or community is well known. In the context of the internet, a *matsuri* actually implies a “bum rush” upon an unsuspecting (though not always undeserving) victim. Often a *matsuri* involves revealing the RL identity of a particular

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<sup>2</sup> While for the purposes of this research I am primarily interested in the concept of context clash within mono-lingual communities, I think it is nevertheless important to point out how easily (and how often) this kind of collision seems to occur within multilingual arenas. It will also be useful to talk about context clash in terms of cross-linguistic performance because such a phenomenon underscores just how inconsequential the issue of performative intentionality ultimately becomes. Put simply, one can effectuate a clash-worthy self-performance without intending to do so at all. This shift away from a performative intentionality model will also help me get away from the centrality of the information metaphor in understanding context clash in general.

victim as well as divulging personal details such as home phone number and workplace or school contact information. In this particular incidence, the *matsuri* was incredibly fierce, perhaps serving as a sort of tipping point for growing resentment towards the proliferation of anti-Japanese hate language on youtube. Irony mounted upon irony, though, as a new figure (Yamachan) emerged as the subject of a new *matsuri* when she tried to defend Katou by pointing out the misunderstanding. By now the incident had already achieved high visibility and so the *matsuri* directed against Yamachan was particularly vicious. Eventually Japanese media outlets started to pick up the story, but at this point people had already begun to piece together their original mistake. In the end, both Katou and Yamachan were lionized almost as martyrs and celebrated as new spokespeople for the anti-Japanese hate language movement on youtube. Katou in particular has achieved hero status and has been dubbed *Aniki* (older brother) by his new fans (Itmedia 2007).

The role of the *matsuri*, though, has emerged as potent threat in the social imaginary of internet media in Japan. People have begun to acknowledge and guard against the possibility of violent context slippage (misunderstandings, vindictive exposure, sudden *matsuri* attacks, etc). Incidents like this *matsuri* have foregrounded the possibility that one is not always in control of the future use of their own media. Thus for cautious Japanese internet users, the management of various online inhabitations has to go beyond the here-and-now in order to imagine future scenarios of potential context clash as well as expanded (transnationally fluid) boundaries of reappropriation.

## 2.5 The contemporary socio-technological milieu:

Ito points out that, in the past, those interested in the social impact of technology in non-western countries have been far too eager to map technological development and patterns of usage onto simple monolithic cultural explanations.

Perhaps the most frequent question that I have received in relation to my work on Japanese *keitai* use has been, ‘Yes, but to what degree is all this specific to Japanese culture?’ It is difficult to imagine asking a similar question being asked with such frequency about the Internet as an artifact of U.S. culture. (Ito 2005: 5)

The implication here is that while those in the U.S. are able to imagine the relationship between culture and technology as dialectically integrated, there is nevertheless a temptation to view technology in non-western contexts as either a hegemonic extension of western culture or as a manifestation of an ideological Other (i.e. a monolithic, dehistoricized, essentialized version of culture). Instead, Ito argues for an approach that seeks to investigate both culture and technology as mutually contingent and historically situated phenomena.

Rather than seeking to explain or transcend national differences in uptake of a technology, we take cultural, social, and technological specificity as a starting point. We critique a pervasive assumption that society and culture are irreducibly variable but technologies are universal. (Ito 2005: 6)

Her approach then stands in stark contrast to cultural comparisons that treat technology in terms of a set fixed set of monolithic practices.

In a similar sense, I would be wary of a description that portrays the architecture and aesthetics of mixi in terms of essentially Japanese cultural characteristics. For example, while non-optional design feature of *ashiato* (footsteps left by a navigator when viewing another user’s mixi page) might be interpreted as somehow indicative of Japanese notions of privacy,

this argument becomes specious in the sense that it conflates design decisions, with behavior patterns. Moreover, since the success of social networking sites often depends upon a critical mass (which in turn relies on historically auspicious pre-conditions), it is disingenuous to assume that the relative success of mixi within a larger marketplace of social media somehow proves that Japanese have “selected” certain design features as somehow more comfortable. That said, designers of course structure an interface with a certain audience in mind, and in digital media the reaction of users to particular design features remains in constant flux, and thus there is a dialectic between behavior and design. What we *can* say analytically is that, regardless, mixi and the particular design features that it represents, are a socio-historical fact—and this fact itself has influenced the marketplace enough that any subsequent social media in Japan must engage with a sphere of users who are familiar with mixi’s unique design features.

In addition, I think it is useful to look at the ways that behavior on mixi tends to draw from, and interact with, the Japanese language in the same way that face-to-face interactional genres tend to be structured through a dialectical relationship with the linguistic categories. Social relationships are coded within the pragmatic functions of language in a way that makes the role of the Japanese language in structuring online interaction impossible to ignore. However, I should note that this approach in no way espouses the kind of naïve version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which posits that language *determines* thought. Instead, I align with current movements within linguistic anthropology which assert a dialectical relationship between improvised language-in-use and the affordances of language structure

(when it is brought “into play”). In a similar sense, I would argue that you can extend this kind of dialectical relationship to the connection between design and practice within a social networking platform—both tend to be mutually constitutive yet asymmetrically oriented according to different parameters of time. Specifically, over the real-time flow of interaction on a social networking site, design structure remains covert until it is called into play, and yet, over the longer historical flow of time (as new technologies interact within a marketplace of various media), it is user behavior which seems to remain covert until it is prodded into the light through dramatic changes of interface design—take for example the angry reaction of many facebook users who wanted their stalkable information to remain covert when the newsfeed feature was first introduced (boyd 2006c, 2008).

It is this kind of longer term notion of the socio-historical trajectory that I plan to address here. Just as Ito looks at mobile phone technology in Japan in terms of a particular historical milieu, I would argue that social media online exists within a constellation of historical events and media discourses surrounding the use of this technology in Japan.

In the past decade, a particular set of media discourses have emerged around the dangers of online interaction. In particular, the media has exaggerated the dangers associated with meeting people offline that one has met online. In *Japanese Cybercultures*, Holden (2003) points out how due to a few high profile rape cases in the early 2000s, the Japanese media engaged in a widespread negative publicity campaign against the emerging culture of *deai* (online encounter) and *meru-tomo* (“mail” friend). Holden argues these media

portrayals all seemed to ignore how many people had netted “personally—and socially—beneficial outcomes [from this kind of technology]” (Holden, 2003, 37).

One important factor in this irrational fear, is a general mistrust of *otaku* (“geek”) culture. *Otaku* are presently experiencing a kind of renaissance in Japan right now as the former stigma of the term is being gradually replaced by a more empowering self-identification pattern of usage. The *otaku* of today are still outside the mainstream, but their presence on talk shows and magazines has seen a sharp rise in the last two or three years. Media treatments have shifted from disdainful to more bemused. This new form of *otaku* even has a separate scripting (ヲタク vs. the former オタク) as a way of disassociating it from its previous pejorative incarnation.

*Otaku* are still to be feared, but now, this fear seems largely tied to actual power that *otaku* wield rather than to a general mistrust of associated anti-social behavior. Much of this new found power derives from the promotion of *matsuri* culture by sites like 2channel.net—an extremely popular web forum that might be described as a more salacious, more aggressive, version of digg.com or slashdot.org.

In Sapporo, October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Hakuryo High School was flooded with phone calls at 8:00 a.m. in the morning. Users of the site 2channel had found an online video depicting relentless teasing and violence towards a bully victim who they dubbed *Mogu*. The video had been shot on the mobile phones of a bully and his girlfriend and subsequently posted on youtube. Someone found the video link and alerted people in a 2channel forum. “Let’s save *Mogu* became the rallying cry” and the subsequent *matsuri* became legendary in *otaku* circles as

both the bully and his girlfriend were identified along with their school and parents contact information (Mainichi 2006).

## Part III: Historical Background and Methodology

### 3.1 Historical Linkages between the *Nikki* in Mixi and the *Shishōsetsu* Tradition.

The *shishōsetsu*, which roughly translates as “I-novel”,<sup>3</sup> emerged around the turn of the century as Japan was undergoing the massive social changes of associated with industrialization and modernism. As Japanese writers became increasingly influenced by the western novel, they nevertheless continued to draw upon Japanese literary traditions which valued a kind of representational “transcription” of experience over invention of fictive scenarios.

As we have seen the starting point in much Japanese "fiction" has not been the construction of a hypothetical situation but the observation of an actual one. This modus operandi is hardly unique to the *shishōsetsu*; precedents can be found in such classical forms as the *zuihitsu* (discursive essay), *kana nikki* (poetic diary), *haibun* (haiku and prose), and *kikōbun* (travel sketches), all of which are literary descriptions of lived experience. (Fowler, 16)

In contrast to these kinds of well regarded (observation-based) representational forms, the traditional narrative counterpart of the novel in Japan (the *shōsetsu*) enjoyed little status the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (*Ibid*). During this period the western concept of the modernist novel began to supplant the original Japanese sense of *shōsetsu*—which diminutively translates as “little talk”). As the western novel gained prestige, the *shōsetsu* also improved its reputation.

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<sup>3</sup> Fowler argues against the use of this phrase as a translation for the *shishōsetsu* because “to translate *shōsetsu* or *shishōsetsu* as ‘novel’ or ‘I-novel’ at all is to assume, wrongly, I believe, some easy interchangeability of narrative method between the two cultures. The task as I see it, therefore, is to distance *shōsetsu* from ‘novel’ while collapsing the perceived distinctions between *shōsetsu* and *shishōsetsu*” (Fowler, ix).

Nevertheless, even as the status of the western novel gradually elevated the standing of novelists in Japan, one finds that “[e]arly twentieth century writers... could not help feeling ambivalent toward their literary heritage. To wear the label of the *setsuka* (*shōsetsu* writer) was to acknowledge the vulgarity of one’s calling” (Fowler 1988: 24). In part, then, as an antidote to this pejorative association and “in hopes of gaining respect for his work, [the modern Japanese novelist] tried to contain it within the referential framework of traditionally accepted prose forms” (*Ibid*)—a stance that encouraged writers to treat the novel form as a window into direct experience of nature. This unique set of historical circumstances set in motion a trajectory of writing that many now associate with the legacy of the *shishōsetsu*.

As a whole, the various threads and movements of the *shishōsetsu* tradition render it somewhat difficult to categorize in terms of a strict set of stylistic forms [Hijiya citation]. However, despite this resistance to genre categorization, the *shishōsetsu* nevertheless reflects a certain consistency in terms of the ideological claims of its authors and audience. One relatively enduring ideological assumption seems of the belief that the *shishōsetsu* represents a non-mediated form of direct experiential transcription. Hand in hand with this myth of non-mediation, another key ideological assumption of the *shishōsetsu* is the concomitant belief in a special relationship between author and reader.

The combination of these two ideological positions licenses a kind of Hemingwayesque terseness of background details that pervades much *shishōsetsu* writing. It should be noted that terseness, here, does not apply to experiential descriptions (which are instead often rather rich and sometimes bafflingly specific in their attention of detail) but rather to a lack of background information relating to past events and already introduced people. In effect, there is an assumption on the part of the authorial frame of a *shishōsetsu* that a prospective reader comes to the experience of reading with a great deal of biographical

information about the author and the author's life. Even if this presumption proves false, the overall effect is to place the reader in a position of intimacy. In this sense, Fowler, draws specifically from the Walter J. Ong's explanation of Hemingway's terse literary style in order to springboard a discussion of the relationship between reader and *shishōsetsu* author.

Describing the reader of a Hemingway novel, Ong argues that:

The reader—every reader—is being cast in the role of a close companion of the writer... It is one reason why the writer is tightlipped. Description as such would bore a boon companion. What description there is comes in the guise of pointing, in verbal gestures, recalling humdrum, familiar details... The reader here has a well-marked role assigned him. He is companion-in-arms, somewhat later to become a confidant. It is a flattering role... Hemingway's exclusion of indefinite in favor of definite articles signals the reader that he is from the first on familiar ground. He shares the author's familiarity with the subject matter. The reader must pretend he has known much of it before. (Ong 1982—quoted in Fowler 1988: 68)

Fowler goes on then to describe the way the *shishōsetsu* similarly places the reader in a position of assumed intimacy by glossing over background details and “acting” as if the reader already knows the basic biographical text of the author's life (either metaphorically or literally through extensive reading of a serialized oeuvre).

To western eyes, the *shishōsetsu* a mode of writing would most likely be labeled as a kind of autobiography or memoir, but the problem with such descriptions is that it assumes the existence of writing which is *not* meant to be read as autobiographical in some sense. Instead, the legacy of the *shishōsetsu* and its antecedents had pervaded so many Japanese written forms that one finds a porousness between fiction and nonfiction modes and a loose sense of narrative structure in both. In addition, the Japanese reader (or spectator) tends to read all representational forms as potentially autobiographical in some way. So ideologically speaking, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is ultimately less salient in Japan

than in the West. In many ways, then, the *shishōsetsu*, even in its earliest stages, reflected a dominant mode of reading in Japan.

The nascent form of the *shishōsetsu* however would represent only the first salvo in what would be a series of developments in the formal evolution of the *shishōsetsu*. In particular, discourse surrounding the *shishōsetsu*—along with the social structures that institutionally supported *shishōsetsu* writing— would follow a complicated trajectory intersecting with evolving national and global narratives. Consequently, the constellation of historical linkages connecting the *shishōsetsu* to the modern correlate of blogging in Japan paints a very complicated picture. Various periods of the *shishōsetsu* history map onto different aspects of online cultural production, but there is no clean isomorphism between one practice and the other, or between one particular historical moment and another. In short, I would expect that the *shishōsetsu* will *not* prove to be a neat and tidy antecedent to blogging in Japan. Yet, given how contested the category of blogging in English has proven to be (boyd 2006a), this messiness seems hardly unexpected.

That said, there are certain moments in the history of the *shishōsetsu* which deserve careful attention because they reveal a great deal about the specificities of navigating context clash within a particular set of social practices licensed by, and constitutive of Japanese language practice. Thus, I will briefly trace the historical lineage from the *kenyūsha* era to the *bundan* circle, finally expanding upon a particular writer, Shimazaki Tōson, as a possible antecedent and point of reference to current Japanese blogging practice.

In some ways, the early era of the *kenyūsha* writing circles seems to map well onto blogging practice in terms of fluidity of intra-group social interaction set ironically within a sort insular echo chamber. The *kenyūsha* represented a community outside of “regular” society, a community able to flow beyond normal social partitions, yet one that ultimately

reified social structure of Japanese hierarchy. In this last sense, however, the *kenyūsha* seems quite different from the kinds of novel social forms that emerge in mixi (and in fact, may actually map more consistently onto blogging practice in general where hierarchies of A-list and B-list writers tend to accumulate within various tightly knit networks of cross-link clusters).

In terms of the social function of *nikkei* writing in mixi, the writing tends to look more like the later epoch of *shishōsetsu* social formation (namely, the era of the *bundan*). The *bundan* ultimately represented a loose circle of *shishōsetsu* writers who (unlike the *kenyūsha*) entirely cut themselves off from structured society and ultimately eschewed the hierarchical social structure that their predecessors had encouraged. They nevertheless engaged in extremely interconnected social practice, forming what might be called a community of recluses. This odd combination of reclusiveness and intense sociality should not be considered oxymoronic. One can be entirely cut off from the strict social hierarchy of Japanese civic life and familial relations while at the same time continuing to pursue a different set of relationships among one's fellow outcasts. These kinds of flexible relationships don't necessarily reify the deference hierarchies of normative Japanese social life, but rather maintain a looser, more open and fluid, social structure—such as that which emerges around hobbyists and recreational communities in Japan. Furthermore, the fact that these kinds of communities emerged around common experiences of ostracization places the *bundan* within a larger pattern of (sub)cultural formation in Japan.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This kind of community of recluses emerges again later in the century when Japanese begin to travel abroad, delaying the life of salary work, only to find themselves pariahs upon their attempted return to Japan (Kelsky 2001).

As an analogy, the loosely knit but incredibly intimate communities that evolved through English blogging networks like Xanga seems apropos here. However, to the degree to which Xanga blogs operated as confessionals, one could argue that those particular writers were able to mitigate the dangers of hyper-sincerity by maintaining semi-pseudonymous identities. The writers of the *bundan*, by contrast, not only accepted that the very nature of the confessional mode would ensure a kind of forced exile, but they also celebrated this kind of self-destructive hyper-sincerity as an enlightened approach to life itself.

Importantly, not all *shishōsetsu* writers of that period belonged to the *bundan*. Many in fact, had managed to write in a style that allowed them to maintain their family relations and normative social ties. This group wrote in the style of the *shinkyōshishōsetsu* (a more naturalistic mode in which the writer discovers himself not through the violent process of total confession but through the quiet wisdom of self reflection in the context of nature). *Shinkyō* writers presented a cautiously diplomatic alternative to the extremes of masochistic self-exposure that the *bundan* writers embraced. Effectively however, both modes valorized an ideology of sincerity, and consequently, the *shinkyōshishōsetsu* projected not only a different kind of writing style but also a different sense of identity—i.e. that of the contemplative ‘self’ which licensed such a style in the first place. In this sense, the *shinkyōshishōsetsu* writer had mastered a different sort of confessional mode that reified, rather than subverted, an essentialized notion of Japanese social harmony.

I would like to suggest that *nikki* writers in mixi seem somehow caught in the middle of these two modes. While there is clearly an allure based on intimacy and self-exposure operating in *nikki* posts (i.e. the attraction of intimate stranger phenomenon). Many *nikki* seem highly aware of social boundaries and diplomatic methods for skirting around the

problematic consequences of too much sincerity. I am interested in the ways that some *shishōsetsu* writers attempted to balance their external social obligations with the aesthetic expectation of their craft. These aesthetic expectations typically included the assumption that writers should place a blind loyalty to direct experience above all other values, even, and especially if, it means the destruction of their social standing. However, a particular set of writers managed to balance the aesthetic obligations of the craft and the larger social obligations of Japanese society. “[T]hese writers provided models of social behavior in which the individual could relate himself to society in a positive and constructive manner without destroying himself” (Powell, 60). Since bloggers, and especially non-pseudonymous bloggers involved in communities like mixi, are ultimately faced with the same sorts of tensions that *shishōsetsu* writers faced (between the simultaneous dangers and allure of self-exposure), I believe that a careful look at similarly positioned *shishōsetsu* writers will prove immensely useful for this discussion.

One particularly relevant figure who wrote in this dichotomous mode was a literary figure named Shimazaki Tōson. Writing outside the *shishōsetsu* circle, Tōson distinguished himself as a more mainstream novelist who nevertheless borrowed from certain features of the *shishōsetsu* genre. Tōson also set himself apart from his contemporaries in the way he grappled with themes of the modern self yet attempted to reconcile this approach with a more traditional notion of ‘self’ (i.e. the ‘self’ as imbricated within a web of obligatory social relations).

For a *bundan-jin* it was an unusual attitude to adopt—remaining a member of the feudal family system, maintaining contacts with relatives, and reconciling oneself with the old meaningless, inhumane way of life. The fact that Tōson had readers outside the literary world seems to have been due to this conciliatory character of his mode of thought.

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accepted as the modern man's mode of expression and was using it as a means of applying indirect pressure and appealing to face. But Itō Sei comes strongly to the defence of Tōson's method. However much it may have been criticized by *bundan* writers and critics, this was the only method which permitted Tōson to express himself fully without destroying his family ties. His works create a picture of a full man who has a strong desire to live in harmony with the world at the same time as being cunning enough to preserve himself and his miserable life

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Shimazaki Tōson was able to accomplish the miracle: his mode of thought, revealed in his style, 'was neither purely rational, nor meekly submissive to the old conventions, but proceeded along the middle ground without destroying either side, and yet enabled the author to assert himself to gain fulfillment', and there lies his strength. (Powell 1983: 61-64).

This understanding of Tōson in many ways originates from critic Sei Itō, who emphasizes the trope of the *aisatsu* as a central metaphor in Tōson's work.

Tōson's style during this period strikes me as being a prose rendering of Japanese *aisatsu*, the approach to and vocabulary of everyday 'civilities'.... The structure of Japanese society is such that reason and demonstrated proof count for much less than the pressure that derives from the individual's relation to his surroundings, from the necessity of saving face and preserving appearances. In this sort of society rational or realistic expression is effective only among the intellectual elite, in all the other vast strata of society peopled by masses it is language at once forceful and indirect, language that oppresses though insinuation, that is most telling. And this is the secret that Tōson learned from the dynamics of the languages of *aisatsu*, as it is used in Japanese society at large.  
Sei Itō (1965).

I would like to qualify Itō's emphasis on the *aisatsu* here. While the trope of the *aisatsu* serves a key function for those seeking to identify essential Japanese features of communication, I think the analogy is somewhat misleading. Itō draws upon a notion of the *aisatsu* here as a formulaic phrase that accomplishes sophisticated pragmatic functions while purporting to *merely* fulfill a requisite surface level performance of politeness. I would argue that Tōson instead recruits the confessional mode of his *bundan* contemporaries in a way that subverts the surface level obligations of social harmony to which the *aisatsu* serves as social lubricant. Where the analogy works however is in the sense that an *aisatsu*—depending on the way it is uttered and its context of usage—can have highly strategic performative “effects.”

Sometimes an *aisatsu* can convey profoundly contradictory emotional intentions while at the same time purporting to fulfill the surface level function of politeness. (For a somewhat limited analogy here, we can think of the western concept of passive aggressiveness as a kind of clunkier manifestation of this contrast between surface level appropriateness and pragmatic—i.e. performative—intentions. This kind of disconnect need not at all be malicious in the Japanese context however. But this duality between surface level appropriateness and underlying intentions is key, because it is the very obligatoriness of the *aisatsu* form licenses its use as an evocative vehicle of emotional resonance. It *must* be said, which means that *how* it is said becomes laden with meaning.

In a similar way, Tōson strategically harnesses the obligatory features the confessional mode. Granted Tōson was writing in a more mainstream fictional mode, but since even fictional work in Japanese literature is often interpreted as semi-autobiographical, this slippage between fiction and non-fictional genres was relatively smooth. The common denominator for both modes was a similar prioritization of sincerity. The ideology of sincerity, like the discourse surrounding the *aisatsu*, celebrates unflinching self-exposure as a kind of aesthetic virtue. But Tōson uses this cloak of sincerity as a way of accomplishing very specific strategic ends within his “actual” daily life. In this sense Tōson employs the *shishōsetsu* mode strategically to further goals of sociality rather than oppose them.

...After Tōson reached the age of forty, the conditions of his life changed. He was obliged to help his own family, which in economic terms had declined disastrously, and to save his elder brother, whose business failure had led him into crime. Also about this time, after his wife’s death, he began having an affair with his niece, his brother’s daughter. If the affair had been exposed, it would have meant social ruin, and Tōson was afraid. There is even evidence that his brother, who sensed what was happening, was continuously asking Tōson for money—a kind of blackmail. At this point in his life Tōson wrote *Shinsei*, which is an uncamouflaged confession of the affair. Temptation, feelings of guilt, and fear of social sanctions are the theme of the novel....

Tōson wrote *Shinsei* with the intention of securing his position in society, breaking off the affair with his niece once and for all and putting an end to his brother's extortion. . . .

Tōson's fear of society and his willingness to sacrifice his niece are only thinly disguised in the form of a confessional novel. . . . Tōson merely borrowed the outer form of the confessional novel which was accepted as the modern man's mode of expression and was using it as a means of applying indirect pressure and appealing to face (Powell, 63).

What Itō refers to as “merely borrow[ing] the outer form of the confessional novel” actually represents a rather complex maneuver. Tōson was able to harness the strategic benefits of the confessional mode which, despite its purported disinterest in the niceties of social life, nevertheless has a very specific performative “effect,” namely, that of *redemption*. In other words, while the discourse of confession rejects inhibition as a kind of tyranny imposed on the self vis-à-vis the constraints of the social world and instead fetishizes the notion of non-mediatedness as an end in itself, the confessional mode nevertheless fulfills a very specific *social* function—it exonerates the confessor as a kind of tragic hero. In particular then, Tōson recruits not only the stylistic features of the *bundan* writers but also utilizes the ideology of redemption through self-exposure. By channeling his transgressions into art, he manages to give them a kind of social cache. Ironically, then Tōson borrows from a discourse that *rejects* social engagement precisely as a way of regaining face and resolving awkward social relations within his family. In essence, Tōson not only exculpates his sin of incest, but in so doing, also preempts the fees that his brother was charging as extortion. Thus despite his nod to the *bundan's* rebellious rejection of social mores and inhibitions, he nevertheless evinces the desires and regrets of one who wants to remain in contact and in harmony with the social world that envelops him. In this sense, Tōson seemed to combine competing sensibilities of strategic diplomacy and wanton self-exposure.

Thus, despite the fact that he was not an actual *shishōsetsu* writer, Tōson positioned himself between the extremes of the *shinkyōshishōsetsu* writers (who valued social harmony) and the *bundan shishōsetsu* writers (who eschewed normative social relationships and celebrated the abject life of self-destruction). Such an approach to writing was not at all uncommon, and many writers who were not considered *shishōsetsu* writers per se, nevertheless, popularized the confessional mode by demonstrating how the confessional hero can navigate social life.

During the same period that witnessed the development of the *bundan*, there were in Japan great writers whose lives and works placed them outside the main *bundan* current. Due to the particular circumstances of their lives, these writers, unlike the inhabitants of the *bundan*, remained aware of the outside world and sought to establish the basis for a rational and harmonious existence within society.... Writers such as Shimazaki Tōson, Natsume Souseki, Mori Ougai, Shiga Naoya... These writers remain immensely popular to this day. (Powell 1983: 60)

One could argue that the popularity of these writers speaks to the centrality of a certain dichotomy between self-exposure and self-containment in the Japanese notion of self. In this sense, Tōson positions himself between two pivotal imagined communities (to borrow Benedict Anderson's phrase) or rather two competing modes of discourse which attempt to describe the Japanese subject.

While a dominant ideology Japanese language use often posits a Japanese subject as uniquely self-contained and sensitive to social relationships, the reality of Japanese language use reflects a more dynamic tension between objectives of social harmony and strategies of self-exposure. As I have argued earlier, the use of in-group language in public space (such as a train) functions as a kind of transgressive performance. Likewise, in many other sorts of official social spaces (such as a workplace environment) mildly transgressive code-switching into confessional registers can function as a way of performing in-group solidarity. Just as in English speaking workplaces, for example, Japanese co-workers will participate in after-

hours gossip (about those not present) as a way of solidifying intimacy through exclusionary discourse.

So while the dominant ideology of Japanese *aisatsu* (which Itō draws upon to describe Tōson) posits a community of language users who can understand the covert functional “meaning” hidden behind formulaic pleasantries, this trope of the *aisatsu* is probably less emblematic than native users would like to claim. Instead I would argue that the *aisatsu* serves merely as a useful gloss for a much more flexible mode of metapragmatic discourse.

Moreover, the dominant ideology of language use posits the possibility of *ishindenshin* (a term sometimes used to convey the uniquely Japanese ability to understand the implicit intentions of other native Japanese). The ideology of *ishindenshin*, however, seems to elide the actual messiness of Japanese language in practice—which demonstrates much more improvised shifts of footing as speakers move between sincere, confessional, and ironic, frames of discourse. There are also a whole host of phrases that we might think of as Goffmanian shifters, phrases such as *jitsu wa* [to be honest], *jissai ni* [actually] etc, which serve to license a kind of confessional mode of speaking. These phrases allow speakers to deictically point out awkward areas of social knowledge or make implicit functional requests without actually denoting an explicit referent. The phrase *chotto* [lit: a little] uttered after a request or invitation and usually accompanied by an awkward pause or a sucking in through the teeth, is enough to signal extenuating circumstances which license a refusal or non-response.

The picture of Japanese language use that emerges then seems to have much in common with Tōson’s “middle way,” than with the *shinkyōshishōsetsu* writers who gravitate entirely towards non-socially threatening modes of self expression. Tōson’s writing however

claims a different kind of ideological underpinning. Specifically while Tōson's writing purports to exalt the confessional mode at the expense social harmony (and in fact does quite the opposite), in contrast, Japanese speakers may describe native language use in terms of an ideology of self-restraint for the sake social harmony, while their actual language use evinces a strategic use of the confessional register.

In this sense, modes of confessional writing in Japanese seem to be authorized by a different set of ideological assumptions (i.e. those that valorize direct transcription of experiential reality, celebrate uninhibited sincerity, and reject social prohibitions against self-exposure). Importantly, however, as Tōson's case demonstrates, these values should not necessarily be taken at face value, but rather can be used as a kind of indirect justification for confessional acts, which themselves, may actually serve quite strategic and premeditated social functions.<sup>5</sup>

Tōson's "middle way" also seems to bear a striking resemblance to the kinds of writing that appears in *nikeki* entries in mixi. The idea of a public diary, itself, is quite directly related to the confessional mode of the *shishōsetsu*, but even beyond this obvious connection, there seems to be a more specific similarity to Tōson's strategic approach to self-exposure. In particular, Tōson situates himself between the poles of the *bundan* (the rebellious self-designated pariahs who cast aside their social obligations) and the *shinkyōshishōsetsu* writers (who wrote in a way that allowed them to preserve their social relations). Likewise, *nikeki* writers seem to operate between the extremes of two kinds of discourse. On the one hand, their mode of expression draws directly from the confessional online diaries of anonymous Japanese bloggers. But mixi users do not enjoy the same kind of complete anonymity that

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, this tension between purported objectives and actual social functions parallels the kind of duality that operates in workplace organized drinking rituals (where the purported goal of celebration masks a more covert function of social mediation of conflict).

their pseudonymous blogger counterparts enjoy (since their mixi friend group presumable includes “real life” friends and not exclusively online acquaintances). Mixi users instead should be considered semi-pseudonymous in the sense that their handles (usually not a reproduction of their legal name) are nevertheless known by those who know them in “real life.” This fact, combined with the fear of a vindictive *matsuri* public position the mixi-based *nikki* writer in a peculiar position. In contrast to the entirely pseudonymous blogger, the *nikki* writer reaps both the consequences as well as a performative attractiveness of social risk. In addition, as I will argue later, *nikki* writers, like Tōson, are able to recruit the discourse of confession for very specific socio-pragmatic effects. And just as in English social networking sites, the ritualization of certain previously private events (such as a breakup in a romantic relationship) are increasingly being performed in public where a slippage occurs between a purported “public” audience and a potential covert “intended” addressee. Just as Tōson wrote *Shinsei* in part with his brother in mind (as a way of preempting extortion by making his transgressions public), *nikki* writers can also write using a “voice” of public confession while simultaneously fulfilling quite specific social functions. In both cases, the writer seems to be harnessing the social licenses provided by an alternative register.

That said, there are also substantial differences between the kind confessional writing that occurs in Japanese literary genres and that found in mixi diaries, and these differences deserve attention. In mixi there doesn’t seem to be the kind of celebration of self-destructive behavior. For example, despite the popularity of workplace rants in mixi (especially *nikki* posts that complain about *arubaito*), these rants don’t seem to represent a deliberate effort to get fired. In this sense, while discourse around the *shishōsetsu* offers an ideological position

that favors sincerity over social standing, the writing found on *nikki* however seems more self consciously diplomatic. Moreover, the mode of writing presented in *nikki* posts does not seem to posit an ideal mode of living (the way the *shishōsetsu* genre does). Likewise, discourse around *nikki* posts, in general, doesn't seem to be focused on an ideology of non-mediation the way that *shishōsetsu* writers were. Instead, the discourse around what makes a *nikki* post successful seems to be more invested in the idea that online performances of sincerity require both courage *and* tact.

One interesting parallel between the online *nikki* and the *shishōsetsu* mode is that both rely on nested readership with varying degrees of background knowledge (about the author). *Shishōsetsu* writers wrote primarily for an intimate community of people who were “in the know.” These readers would know whether (and how) a writer was shaping the events of their real life as they channeled this experience into their writing. Beyond this more intimate readership, however, existed a much larger community of potential readers who accepted the *shishōsetsu* mode as a direct unmitigated autobiographical representation. Online writing (and personal blogging specifically) seems to parallel this phenomenon of nested audiences oriented towards the author with differing levels of background knowledge.

Yet, the stakes seem to be different in an online context where the tipping point between intimate performance and public exposure can be unpredictable and risky. Part of what seems fascinating about *nikki* posts then is their unique relationship to the risks of context clash. It is my hope that by looking at mixi diary writing in the context of one's (potentially and unpredictably expanding) friend group, I may be able to explore some of the coping strategies afforded by the Japanese language.

### 3.2 Unique Features of Mixi:

#### 3.2 (a) Terminology:

The origin of the name mixi is apparently a combination of the English words ‘mix’ and ‘I’, referring to the idea that a user, “I”, in effect “mixes” by interacting in the mixi environment. It is not insignificant here that they are borrowing the English term “I” (and there is a long tradition of advertising campaigns drawing on the cachet of the English terms for selfhood as a way of tipping the hat to notions of a modern self).

#### 3.2 (b) Communities:

Communities (organized around hobbies, interests, etc) function as gateways to making friends (much the way that fakester and celebrity profiles function in myspace). Communities have online forums where people can share their opinions, tastes, and experiences publicly. Recent community posts also appear on one’s personal profile page and this information (like a facebook newsfeed) gets updated continuously along with links to recent *nikeki* posts written by one’s friend. Later I will go into further detail about the role of hobby/interest based communities in shaping the phenomenon of the “intimate stranger.”

#### 3.2 (c) Privacy:

While mixi’s design seems to encourage interaction through communities (which often grow to hundreds or thousands of members), many users seem to keep a relatively small network of friends. Moreover, *Mixi* users are much more likely to select avatars that don’t resemble personal photographs. In many cases these avatars are anime characters or

celebrities. *Mixi* has a minimum age requirement and also requires an invitation before joining. Multiple ways of writing one's name in Japanese also tends to complicate searchability (there are at least 4 different scripts available if one includes roman characters). *Mixi* sends out logs of *ashiato* (footprint made by online visitors) so that you can monitor everyone who's been viewing your site. There doesn't seem to be an option for anonymous viewing (as in Friendster). The use of nicknames (which are changed with high frequency) tends to complicate searching for someone known in an offline context.

### **3.3 Methodology:**

My research approach presents both challenges and advantages regarding what one might call "database ethnography." *Mixi* allows for users to peruse their vast database of *nikki* entries by searching according to key words. Certain key words or phrases can be thought of as indexical signs linked to specific contextual parameters, and so a researcher has potential access to a vast array of data about *nikki* scenario types or genres. These might include: rants, social gossip, invitations for advice, travelogues, narrative accounts of daily events, romantic testimonials, etc. The researcher's task, then, seems to be in testing out possible key words around which particular scenarios might pivot.

Since I am studying context clash, I was interested in those moments when *nikki* diarists feel they are moving from one register to another and need to acknowledge this change strategically by using certain explicit metapragmatic indicators of register-shifting. These metapragmatic indicators included phrases such as *jitsu wa* ['actually' lit: 'in truth'], or *bucchake* ['to be frank']. Certain nouns such as *kokubaku* ['confession'] and *shoujiki*

['sincerity'] or verbs such as *'tereru'* ['to be shy or awkward'] were also used as search terms in order to locate explicit metapragmatic discourse.

In this sense, searching the database of *nikki* entries in *mixi* offers an incredibly accessible way to quickly discover relevant data. One can also search particular content markers to find specific *nikki* topics which might lend themselves to an analysis of context clash, for example, hypothetically a combination of: *'shachō'* ['boss'] + *'yoppara-'* [adjective or verb stem for 'drunk'] might lead to examples in which diarists explain methods for strategically navigating the world of after-hours drinking with co-workers. (In practice, however, such searches based on combinations of key words tended not to yield predictable results.) Additionally, a researcher could locate metapragmatic discourse about *mixi* etiquette itself by searching for key terms such as *'maimiku'* ['mixi friend']" which is often used as a verb (*'maimiku-shite'* or *'maimiku ni natte'* meaning 'be my mixi friend' or 'become my mixi friend'). In this case, I looked for specific *nikki* posts which explained a user's general strategy for whom and whom not to accept friendship from. All of these search criteria point to a vast array of potentially valuable data about strategies for coping with context clash in *mixi*.

Despite these opportunities, this kind of approach also raises some specific concerns and challenges. Perhaps most glaring of these challenges is the problem that database queries overemphasize the value of explicit language (i.e. because it is unambiguous and thus searchable). Nothing guarantees us that those who talk explicitly about topics related to context clash are somehow representative of a normative mode of strategic diplomacy around these issues. As a conciliation, though, this challenge is merely an amplified version of the conceit that any interview places on a subject by inflating the explicit claims that an interviewee makes while de-emphasizing the silent voices of those who would not want to

be interviewed (and here I'm setting aside the gaps of additional silence from those who actually *do* choose to be interviewed). In database ethnography as I am defining it, there *is* no interview, so there is likewise no opportunity for the kinds of biases that interviews invariably introduce—especially the idea that interviewees might structure their answers in relation to what they think an interviewer wants to hear.

A perhaps more potent problem raised by the methodological assumptions of database ethnography, however, is the issue that there is an inherent danger in allowing researchers to test observations by searching for instantiations of isolated words or phrases. In particular, there is the problem that, for the most part, a researcher can almost always be guaranteed to find what they are looking for, in the sense that there will most likely be some sort of text “out there” that corroborates nearly *any* conjecture. There is a danger then that trusting a database to serve as a reliable surrogate for the ethnographic informant will tend to inflate a researcher's own false sense of omniscience by eliminating the vetting process whereby initial assumptions get tested against the real-time flow of participatory interaction. The problem with testing mini-assumptions against a searchable medium then seems to be that the database pre-edits that experience before the researcher has a chance to digest it. This kind of approach, then, tends to miss out on the seemingly random connections, problematic outliers, and unexpected discoveries that emerge from first-hand experience of social activity in daily life.

In response to this argument, however, I would contend that, again, this danger of research as a kind of self fulfilling prophecy is not unique to database oriented methods of qualitative research, but rather, represents a general charge against the intellectual honesty of those who purport their evidence to be definitive when “evidence” is justified by the degree to which it coheres within larger social narratives and explanations. Such a charge could be

leveled just as easily against any discipline that requires analytical judgments to be based to some degree on decisions of selection (and concomitant decisions of exclusion).

A more legitimate challenge to database research is this method has the danger of ignoring the ways that context is built over time. Database searches tend to de-emphasize the longer-term temporal dimensions of mediated performance among evolving ego-centric friend groups, and so in this sense, I believe criticism might be merited. In the context of this project then, a database ethnographic approach might de-emphasize the accretion of antecedent references in *nikki* writing. This would be a problem because—as suggested by the analogy to the *shishōsetsu*—familiarity is often constructed in writing by assuming the reader’s cognizance of background details (which the writer is then able to omit). In anticipation of this problem, however, I have deliberately tried to consider larger contextual parameters developed over time by specific *nikki* writers.

That said, contextual accumulation over time is to a certain extent undermined by mixi’s own design structure which invites a slippage between different layers of public exposure. Mixi users often happen upon a recently posted *nikki* by searching through what are called *shinbaku nikki* [‘recent arrival diaries’]. There is even a formulaic greeting that these readers can add to the *nikki* as a comment in order to license their intrusion—“*shinbaku nikki kara kimashita*” [‘I’ve come via the recent *nikki* postings list’]. This codification points to the likelihood that any *nikki* author who chooses to make their *nikki* public knows, then, that they are potentially addressing a much larger audience. Consequently, writers may feel the need to balance their friend audience with this larger potential (“super public”) audience.

Ultimately, I would argue that the most potent criticism of this database approach to ethnography would be that it places too much faith on particular words and phrases as

magical talisman—irreducible speech-acts with one and only one licensed context of usage. In other words, the search query format structures research questions exclusively around isolable lexemes. The problem here is that such a position encourages us to essentialize the relationship between single forms and generalizable “types” of context. In contrast, linguistic anthropologists tend to point to both explicit *and implicit* aspects of the metapragmatic function, and criticize philosophers of language like Searle and Austin who only look to the referential dimension of certain explicitly performative words and phrases without understanding the pragmatic (i.e. social-functional) dimension of all language-in-context (Silverstein 1976). In this sense, I would argue that database research likely doesn’t reveal the most useful examples for close analysis—insofar as the best examples of diplomatic navigation in potentially treacherous areas of context clash are, quite possibly, not locatable by searching for key terms such as *‘jitsu wa’* in part because such terms point to this shifting in a more-or-less overt, and therefore, clumsy way. Instead, the most revealing examples of implicit metapragmatic function may actually be more *ad hoc* constructions that elide the very clunkiness which would otherwise ensure their identifiability as key words to search (in the first place).

It is my conjecture, though, that such searchable examples will, nevertheless, reveal larger discursive beliefs around certain register-shifting practices, and in that sense, they are telling. So for example, while the search term *‘jitsu wa’* [‘to be truthful’] may not reveal very sophisticated examples of strategic register shift, the form itself is nevertheless likely to point to a certain minimal level of diplomatic navigation—a polite “heads up” to one’s interlocutor in order to cue them into the potentially transgressive nature of the subject material to come. The very fact that this invocation of “truthfulness” purports to license a possible transgression is, in itself, extremely useful information and, combined with other sorts of

shifters, might unveil a landscape of context-clash-in-context. These token examples of context-clash-in-context, then, may in turn reveal larger abstractable (i.e. normative) patterns of strategic navigation.

### 3.4 Key Questions:

Ultimately, I expect this project to serve more as a way of probing potential research questions rather than definitively answering them. At this stage my main concern is to place the following questions within various discursive frameworks and to gather together a constellation of heuristic models that might guide further research. With this spirit in mind, I do not expect to exhaustively answer all the following questions (posed below), but I *would* like to propose the following areas of inquiry as useful points of entry.

- How do mixi users deal with, conceive of, or anticipate potential context clash?
- What challenges (either design-based or practice-based) do mixi users face in their efforts to navigate context clash?
- In what way might mixi usage patterns and design features invite context clash?
- Do offline practices inform certain kinds of coping mechanisms and management strategies for dealing with context clash?
- In what way, does linguistic stratification, relational specificity, and high levels of situational partitioning (in the Japanese language) impact these strategies?
- How do modes of Japanese memoir writing (specifically drawing from the tradition of the *shishōsetsu*) inform the kind of writing practice that occurs on mixi?

## **Part IV Analysis:**

### **4.1 Context Clash as Public Imaginary:**

Fears of the *matsuri* public epitomized by 2channel bullying have made mixi users increasingly cautious about the kinds of information and media they release online. In some ways, the widespread media coverage of *matsuri* events represents a shift in popular awareness of what danah boyd calls the “super public” (2006e). Diverging somewhat from boyd’s original association with blog audiences, however, this kind of pernicious super public relies on tipping points of massive public exposure rather than on long-tail notions of a sustainable, micro-level, invisible audiences. The implications for context clash are still relevant, though, in the sense that information from backstage (i.e. from “real life”) has the potential to suddenly leak into the frontstage (in this case through the viral discourse of a *matsuri*).

Perhaps in reaction to this threat, Japanese generally tend to be more guarded with their online personas than North American users of facebook or myspace. For example, mixi users usually select non-photorealistic pictures as their profile avatars and often use pseudonyms as handles. Moreover, the manipulation of various options for writing one's name in Japanese provides a barrier to searchability. This tendency towards privacy, however, is coupled with a structural emphasis on community. In particular, mixi’s interface design underscores the importance of community forums (loosely organized around hobbies and recreational activities) to a greater degree than its western counterparts. This emphasis on joining communities seems to encourage mixi users to friend those who they don’t already know in “real life.”

However, other factors suggest that mixi users balance various friend groups and thus have a more nuanced relationship to anonymity. For instance, judging comments posted to *nikki* entries, users seem to experience a slippage between their “real life” connections and their *mixi* friends. In this sense, the possibility of guarding one’s identity (with complete anonymity) seems to be problematic. It may be the case that people are highly self-monitoring in their offline behavior—for example, refraining from giving out mixi handle information to non-peers. Further research would be required, however, in order to answer these questions more definitively.

A crucial aspect of these privacy concerns seems to be related to the issue of segregating one’s work place interactions. Traditionally, Japanese are known for socializing extensively with their co-workers, and such socializing usually includes highly orchestrated rituals of collective intoxication—considered to be part of one’s workplace duties (Moeran 2005). Often, for the traditional Japanese salary man social-life *iz*, by definition, something you partake in with your coworkers (even to the exclusion of outside friends).

However, more recent structural changes in the Japanese economy, along with concomitant social changes, have led to a workforce (especially among the younger generation) that relies heavily on part-time jobs as oppose to the traditional life-long salaried positions often associated with the Japanese workforce. During the 80s and 90s the term *freeter* was used to describe a “serial part-time worker who only holds part-time jobs or who moves from one job to another” (Kosugi 2002—quoted in Hamada 2005: 136). The *freeter* was juxtaposed pejoratively (especially if referring to a man) against the *sarariiman* whose occupation and position in society was considered much more stable. The term *freeter* combines the English word *free* and the German word for part-time worker *arbeiter* and also can suggest someone who lives parasitically off of their parents. *Parasaito singuru* [“parasite

single”] is another term that gained currency in the 90s as a way of describing this generation of young adults who still lived with their parents. More recently the term NEET (No Education, Employment, or Training), pronounced *ni-to*, has been used to describe young individuals who exist completely outside the job market. Experts believe that “about 400,000 people aged between 15 and 24 were in this category in 2003, five times the figure in 1997” (Nakamura 2004). With this increase in the number of unemployed young adults, Japan witnessed the gradual erosion of the function that occupation formerly carried in structuring one’s public relationships (even, and especially, those outside the workplace). The emergence of NEET youth notwithstanding, however, many young adults maintain *arubaito* (part-time work) positions, often in the service industry.

As one might imagine, a common scenario for *nikki* posts involves complaints about one’s workplace experiences. Many of these kinds of workplace rants involved complaints about *arubaito*. Interestingly, these rants appeared prominently when I searched for the key words *iisugitaka* [“I might have said too much”—employing here an intimate, plain form, grammatical structure]. Many *nikki* are structured around a kind of post-work venting to friends about how much their boss or their co-worker has been bothering them. This might indicate that *nikki* writers both aware of the perils of online exposure but also willing to stretch those boundaries as a kind of self-consciously performative mode of venting frustration.

Others spoke more indirectly about having “said too much” *at work* (rather than reflexively in the immediate context of their *nikki*). For example, one writer Mimi wrote a *nikki* rant in which she complained about her boss but also added that “I got too emotional at work and might have said too much.” What if such a proclamation was seen by her boss? Would the boss be happy that Mimi acknowledged her lack of tact, or would the boss be

angry that this venting had taken place in a public forum? Should the boss confront Mimi, in effect admitting to having stalked her online? Such problematic scenarios might emerge if Mimi's workplace peers are also her mixi friends.

Since, *arubaito* work tends to be less permanent there may be more willingness to allow a slippage from professional sociality (like the kind discussed above) into more casual forms of social connection. It would be extremely interesting to find out whether people are friending their co-workers or if they are avoiding this kind of potential context clash even in *arubaito* situations. In my experience, *arubaito* workers definitely socialize with their workplace friends even if the position is only part-time. Part-time work friendships also seem more likely to bleed into other social contexts whereas salaried workplace relationships remain highly segregated. That said, factional cliques emerge in the Japanese workplace just as they do in any American counterpart. And in these situations gossip often functions as a way of constructing in-group solidarity through out-group exclusion. Are *nikeki* that complain about work, then, merely another kind of gossip?

I would venture the conjecture, that, no. In some sense, *nikeki* are unique in the way they license a mode of sincerity not commonly associated with workplace gossip. That said, where the language of the *nikeki* does actually seem to overlap somewhat with workplace discourse is in the kinds of talk that takes place during after-hours drinking parties. In the same way that the *nikeki*'s form—drawing from the *shishōsetsu* tradition—licenses what would otherwise be transgressive self-exposure by emphasizing the redemptive qualities of the medium, likewise collective drunkenness with one's co-workers also licenses a kind of confessional mode of speaking that would not be possible without the excuse (and necessary pretext) of alcohol. Especially, during the hazier moments at the end of an evening of drinking when more collective venues are replaced by quieter drinking establishments and

more fragmented groups of co-workers. Moeran (2005) argues that it is in this late night haze of “wet” social interaction that the “hard work” of smoothing out workplace tensions and divulging uncomfortable resentments occurs.

This division between day- and night-time worlds, as well as between ‘dry’ and ‘wet’ forms of social interaction, is also characteristic of many of Japan’s rural communities, where, as we shall see, what goes on in the day-to-day lives of local farmers, potters and other craftsmen tends to be discussed over alcohol, and what is said during these evening drinking sessions itself affects the daytime discourse and its outcomes. (Moeran 2005: 26).

The reason collective inebriation licenses this kind of talk is that confessions can be voiced without being “officially” enunciated. The next morning, all that was divulged during the previous night’s exchange may be disavowed. However, the work done through these exchanges will have a direct impact on the “real life” of “dry” (i.e. professional) work.

This kind of ritualized spatio-temporal partitioning (i.e. that there is a time, place, and state of mind when transgressive candidness is licensed by drinking), however, conflicts with the structural reality of online writing practice. As boyd points out, online media enjoys the features of replicability, searchability, persistence, and invisible audiences, and thus a *nikki* read by one co-worker could conceivably be read by other co-workers and even eventually by one’s boss. In other words, the fact that a *nikki* entry, as a kind of performative act, is not ephemeral nor spatially bounded, might create potential problems for those who post workplace rants on mixi. However, it is also possible, that the very geographical personalization of a mixi page (i.e. that it is “owned” by someone), licenses it in other ways. While a *nikki* entry is potentially available to a superpublic (up to and including one’s boss), the fact that a boss is searching for his/her employee’s mixi pages is, in itself, a kind of transgression (not so unlike rehashing the confessional words of a co-worker spoken during a previous night’s drinking excursion). In this case, then, it is the “enunciation” of a confessional that is problematic, not the original act of production, and this enunciation can

only occur in the space of the workplace itself. In other words, perhaps Mimi (above) does indeed expect her boss to possibly see her angry *nikki* entry, but the boss would nevertheless be unable to *enunciate* the post itself in the space of a workplace encounter. The boss could, however, find an altogether unrelated reason to make Mimi suffer.

Ultimately, though, due to the tone of her *nikki* it seems unlikely that Mimi wrote with the expectation that her boss might see her post. Perhaps, instead, Mimi expects that some aspect of the entry might be relayed to her boss through a co-worker intermediary. Or, perhaps most likely, Mimi wants to recruit non-workplace friends as a kind of public sounding board to offer advice and empathetic encouragement.

This stance of recruiting a “public” in order to aid in a highly private experience emerged quite prominently in 2004 when a timid man (known commonly as *densha otoko*) saved a woman from harassment on a train and subsequently became a hero of the 2channel community as they collectively coached him in various efforts to woo her. This incident, which eventually turned into a TV series in 2005, spurred a collective imaginary about the way that super publics can be recruited to advise individuals and inspire courageousness with their collective will. It seems quite likely that many *nikki* echo this kind of distress signal to an invisible public sphere. In this sense, the image and mystique of the *matsuri* public has often been portrayed as a benevolent mass of altruistic *otaku* (geeks). In the following section, however, I will venture further into discussing the more negative and foreboding aspects of the *matsuri* as an imagined community.

## 4.2 Categories of Public:

People tend to write their diaries with a particular audience in mind, but also have to imagine new potential audiences as their friend group expands. Here boyd's concept of a super public seems somewhat incomplete, because there are really two or three distinct kinds of potential context clash as one's target audience expands into public discourse spaces over which they have less control:

#### 4.2 (a) **The proxemic public:**

The proxemic potential refers to one's expanding friend group as well as one's expanding friends-of-friends who may be known from other contexts (all of whom may be part of one's "audience" depending on profile settings). I think it's important to think about how a user has high stakes invested in what this audience thinks of their media, (i.e. you care about friends-of-friends think of you).

#### 4.3 (b) **The potential proxemic public:**

The potential proxemic public here refers to the set of RL friends and acquaintances that could that one could find using a search function. Although it should be noted that especially in mixi, this method of searching yields very poor results and becomes a layer of privacy much the way information on facebook used to be protected behind layers of noise (i.e. before newsfeeds took this layer away by making it easier to stalk). A more likely way of finding someone, might be to discover them through a third party "friend" whose identity is not as buried (either through pseudonyms or through other scripting challenges).

#### 4.3 (c) **The tipping point (*matsuri*) public:**

As I will argue, this third category, the *matsuri* public, seems to be the most threatening of the three. Although, importantly, in media discourse the danger associated with this kind of super public is not necessarily separated from the dangerous aspects of the other two. Despite the impact and popularity of the *densha otoko* narrative, *matsuri* publics (and *otaku* in

general) are definitely not seen as exclusively benevolent figures. And as suggested by the *Aniki* story, victims of a *matsuri* are not always deserving of their online notoriety.

In 2006, a *mixi* user experienced extremely harsh treatment at the hands of the 2channel community, and again this incident achieved national attention. In particular, a virus (malicious friend-bot) had infected the *mixi* user's account with the effect that all of the photographs on their hard drive were uploaded to a third party site. These pictures were then quickly disseminated on the 2channel forum. Unfortunately, in this particular case, the photographs included those of his girlfriend naked, and one in particular in which she was lying on a bed with her legs spread open. This picture became notorious almost immediately in the 2channel community, and it spread rapidly across the Japanese internet along with a flash animation. This time the *matsuri* that ensued was particularly evil in its intent. Ultimately, the identity and contact information of the man whose computer had been infected, along with that of his girlfriend and their families, were all revealed online. This had a devastating impact on their lives, and the man eventually committed suicide out of shame. Moreover, during this time, media coverage of the event was so relentless that it caused *mixi*'s corporate stock to plummet, and this impact continued from late October until November 22<sup>nd</sup> when the stock finally began to climb again (Nextxp.net 2006).

Despite the relative infrequency of events such as this, the risk of sudden *matsuri* victimization remains a real and palpable threat to *mixi* users and likely informs many of their feelings about privacy and identity protection. At the same time, these threats associated with forced exposure may also serve to *enhance* the performative impact of gestures which actually *do* reveal intimate details about a user's life. In other words, discourse that espouses risk of public exposure may actually make gestures of vulnerability all the more attractive (in essence because these gestures evince a level of cavalier confidence which

attracts more viewers to one's page). In this sense, mixi users may find themselves searching for a balance between risk and security in their *nikki*.

#### 4.3 The *Shinchaku Nikki* as Liminal Public Space:

The fact that users can search through *shinchaku nikki* [recent arrival diaries] seems to have a large role in structuring this aspect of imagined super public (or *matsuri* public). Sometimes *nikki* authors can, to a certain degree, preempt or invite what you might call a mini-*matsuri* by addressing their *nikki* entry as a kind of performative solicitation towards an undefined *minna* (everyone). For example, one particular user named Akira wrote a post which he introduced with the following passage:

What does everyone do before they fall asleep?

Maybe everyone's the same, but before [you] fall asleep, don't [you] think about various things?

This time [i.e. this *nikki*], I'm going to talk about the deluded thoughts that I couldn't escape last night.

The theme is, you guessed it, "my life"[laugh].

Everyone's had similar thoughts I'd expect:

I'd like to become this... I'd like to become that...

[Maybe we don't want to admit it, but] each and everyone one of us is like this [music notes added for levity].

If I think about it, the fact that I'm turning 21 next month is something I can welcome [music notes added for levity].

I thought 20 came fast. Working... playing... studying...

Well the part about studying didn't really happen but... [laugh].

So this thought came to me: if I counted the days of my own life and added it all up, what would it be? Well I gave it a try.

Have I got a little bit too much time on my hands?? Well say what you will [laugh]. Without further adieu [music notes added for levity]:

"The time units of daily life covered by a 21 year old's life time" (calculated by Akira).

Year count... of course, 21 years  
Month count... 252 months  
Day count... 7476 days  
Hour count... 187,488 hours  
Minutes... 11,249,280 minutes  
Seconds... 674,956,800 seconds

PS: I rounded off [music notes added for levity].

Honestly, I don't what I did with all that time passed.  
Displaying it in number form like this, I'm making that question even more vague [laugh].

But, still I'm young [music notes added for levity].  
I'd like to try living the slow life of old age together with everyone else [laugh]

Karaoke, Bowling, Gate-ball... any takers? [music notes added for levity.]

Looking at the above numbers, makes me worry myself, but I think that's a really trivial thing to worry about.

I'm not ready to carelessly toss this thought away though.

But if you talk [too much] about what worries you, the motivation to hold onto your good thoughts and feelings can start to get depleted [laugh].

The people who know me probably know what I mean, even if I don't say it [music notes added for levity].

There's still some time left, but I'm 20 years old, and my youth is quickly disappearing.

How come I can only think but not act [on this feeling]??

Before I start thinking and suffering over this stuff I should make my body respond [to these feelings] with action!!

This is one of my faults. Even my teacher got angry at me for it [downward arrows]

I guess [sometimes] it's good that there's people to get angry at you huh...

I've even gotten a mouth full from my career adviser.

"Getting angry at the anything goes [unambitious-type] is my specialty!!" he said.

"Idiot! If you want to change, you have to grab onto the path that will improve your situation. That's the one thing you're not able to do right now!!"

I really thought I was going to cry [laugh].

[To my teachers:] Thank you.

Everything but action!! That's what I'm doing!!

I can't disappoint my teachers!!

Seeing me like this, if you have anything good to offer up, please lend your voice.

This *nikei* was incredibly popular with both a proxemic public (Akira's friends) as well as *matsuri*-like mini version of a "super-public." Many non-friends introduced themselves

saying “*hajimemashite, shinchaku nikki karakimashita*” meaning roughly “nice to meet you, I stumbled upon your diary via the *shinchaku nikki* most recent *nikki* search.” As the comments increased more and more people from this *matsuri*-like public started introducing themselves in this way. Many were impressed with the maturity and contemplative posture of such a young adult reflecting over the first 21 years of his life. Others applauded his good sense in appreciating the scolding admonishments of his teachers. Akira’s attitude of both Akira was somewhat taken aback by this sudden mini-fame and wrote from a position of inflated confidence in his next post.

*Nikki* are purportedly written with one’s proximal (friend-group) audience in mind, since they are directly informed of their friends’ posts through a newsfeed on their respective profile pages. However, at least for those who elect not to limit the public distribution of their *nikki* posts, for the most part, people have to simultaneously consider the possibility that any given *nikki* could garner a mini-*matsuri* of sorts. In addition, the mini-*matsuri* (i.e. that which happens within *mixi* itself) has the potential to become truly viral once it leaps onto a site like 2channel. I am interested in how this balance of current and potential future audiences is negotiated. This issue will be discussed further in relation to Akira responses to his commenters in when I discuss linguistic stratification in a later section.

#### **4.4 Design Features and Usage Patterns in Relation to Context Clash:**

##### **4.4 (a) The Metapragmatics of Footprints (*Ashiato*):**

*Mixi*, like Friendster, encourages people to post testimonials on their friends’ pages. No editing can be done to the testimonials (instead they can only be approved or denied). In

one instance, I was shown a testimonial that revealed the real name of a person whose identity had otherwise been protected. This kind of breach can represent a dangerous area of context clash.

In informal exchanges with friends, I have found that surprisingly some Japanese users of mixi feel a greater sense of privacy *with ashiato* as oppose to without them. This seems to suggest a higher prioritization of the performer's privacy (i.e. by knowing who their audience is) over the privacy of those who might like to lurk anonymously—a marked contrast to the dominant design, practice, and ideology in the US where the obvious recourse against “stalking” is a privacy filter that simply filters out unknown eyes. In mixi, rather than create barriers against the prying eyes of one's invisible out-group (i.e. rather than filter out the potential audiences constituted by various layers of “non-friends”), the solution instead is to simply make all eyes reflexively visible (and asynchronously so—such that the eyes themselves leave a persistent metonymic reminder of this voyeuristic act of sight). One particularly interesting ramification of this design strategy is that the universal presence of *ashiato* seems to negate the “need” for the kind of layered privacy filters that western social networking sites employ, and so nearly everyone on mixi allows their profile to be completely open. A secondary consequence, then, is that one need not “friend” a loose acquaintance for the sole purpose of making themselves mutually “visible” (i.e. as one finds in facebook), and perhaps as a result, mixi users tend to have smaller friend groups on average than their counterparts in western social networking sites. A simpler way of describing this distinction might be to say that mixi users don't need to be “friends” in order to function as friends on mixi (the exchange of *ashiato* can serve as a loose pretext for message exchanges without any consummation of this friendship). But the functional role of

the *ashiato* as socially relevant mediating sign has a more complicated ontological status than this simple explanation suggests.

One particularly interesting piece of this puzzle emerged in the early months of 2007. During this time, a new mode of metapragmatic discourse emerged around the subject of *ashiato*. In particular, a new increasingly vocal group of users began complaining—both on various mixi venues as well as in more anonymous forums such as 2channel—about other users who were navigating to someone’s page and then exiting without leaving any sort of message or acknowledging *nikki* comment. This phenomenon was referred to as *yominige* [‘read and flee’] or *fuminige* [‘step and flee’]. Critics of this practice suggested that the mixi community as a whole should prescriptively prohibit the practice of leaving *ashiato* without including any accompanying comments. The rationale here was that an *ashiato* (especially those left in response to a new *nikki* post) were a kind of empty gesture of presence, a gesture that “needed” to be accompanied by a comment in order to reassure the page owner of the visitor’s approval. Comments in this sense provided a minimal evaluative assurance that *ashiato* did not.

The term *yominige* actually emerged much earlier in Japanese web parlance, and in fact, relates to the once common practice of visitors signing an online guestbook when they would visit a personal webpage. When users would visit a site without signing in, the site owner would know due to disparities between the hit count and the number of signatures. Feeling slighted as victims (*yominige sareta*), the site owners would then try to figure out the identities of the unannounced users (by searching via IP address). These culprits were then pejoratively labeled as having committed *yominige*.

Interestingly, in mixi this practice of *yominige* was associated more often with older users while younger users seemed to be the most vocal in criticizing this behavior (ITmedia

2007). Perhaps, this difference can be accounted for by considering that many late adopters of mixi are actually older users. Some users will prominently display their own personal policy about comments—often called ‘my rule’ (*mai ru-ru*)—on their main profile page. Others will also display more permissive messages indicating that they do not follow a specific *yominige kinsbi* (prohibition of *yominige*). Some users have also responded to the perceived obligations of *yominige kinsbi* with a complete rejection of the mixi site altogether—a phenomenon now commonly referred to as *mixi-tsukare* or mixi exhaustion (Ibid).

The metapragmatic discourse around *yominige* points to the role of *ashiato* as a kind of incomplete performative greeting. However, this reading of the *ashiato* overlooks certain cases when leaving an additional comment is not necessarily prescribed. Many users find that they respond to an *ashiato* from an unknown user by reciprocating the *ashiato* until one or the other provides a friend request. In general, when anyone creates an *ashiato*, this “footstep” shows up in the page owner’s *ashiato* list. If the page owner is curious about who has visited their page, they may click on the visitor’s handle, thus reciprocating the *ashiato* on the visitor’s page.

This exchange of *ashiato* (commonly referred to as *fumikaesu*) can happen multiple times, and often licenses a greeting of introduction and a subsequent friend request. Several times I have been greeted with the stock phrase “*ashiato arigatougozamasu*” [“Thank you for the *ashiato*”]. In some sense, then, *ashiato* parallel the role of *aisatsu* (formulaic greetings). *Aisatsu* usually occur in minimal pair-parts. Sometimes these are symmetric as in the English greeting “Happy New Year,” but in many cases *aisatsu* have different obligatory initial vs. final pair-parts. In other words, a specific greeting requires a specific response. *Ashiato* on the other hand, seem to have more ambiguous functional possibilities. In some cases, an *ashiato* can license symmetrical reciprocation (as in the above case where two people don’t

know each other and gradually slip from anonymity into intimacy via several iterations of reciprocated *ashiato*).

But *ashiato* left between friends are often a response in and of themselves to a new post on a friend's page (i.e. to a post which shows up in a page owner's newsfeed). Here the *ashiato* is not an initial pair-part but rather a second pair-part. In this sense, an *ashiato* which function as a second pair-part response to a new *nikki* post seem incomplete: the *nikki* + *ashiato* pairing has set up expectations of performative resolution that ultimately go unresolved. And these, of course, are the cases where an *ashiato* alone (without an accompanying comment) gets labeled pejoratively as *yominige*. So how can a gesture have such divergent implications depending on context? Consider the analogy of strangers passing on the street. Some smile and nod, and perhaps after weeks of passing each other on the same rout they will slip into a kind of mild friendship. Now, however, their status as acquaintances licenses a different sort of social expectation. Imagine if one person greets their acquaintance on the street: they lock eyes for a moment but the second says nothing and continues one with a blank face. When this "eye locking" occurs, an epistemic stance of mutually "known" co-presence has been indexically guaranteed, but the social expectations that it calls forth have been left unfulfilled. Likewise, when a mixi user receives an "unvoiced" *ashiato* as a response to a *nikki* the resultant lack of acknowledgement functions like "eye contact" without a greeting (in the above example). Moreover, in this case, the mixi the page owner has revealed something potentially very personal about themselves, so the lack of response can be perceived not just as a slight but as a tacit disapproval of the *nikki*'s contents. In this sense, a *nikki* post functions as a performance of social risk (a deliberate pursuit of context clash as a kind spectacle/solicitation), but if the social risk itself is left unrecognized this function collapses—much the way a risky joke can feel awkward when no

one diffuses the tension by laughing. In this sense, the scenario is less like the proverbial public street (referenced above) and closer to a situation in which someone pokes their head into your bedroom, makes eye contact, and promptly leaves without uttering word. The problem with the *ashiato* in these cases, then, is that it indexes presence without completing the pair-part structure initiated by a solicitation *to be co-present*.

#### 4.5 (b) **Hearing Silence: *Yominige* and “My Rule”**

My understanding of *ashiato* as incomplete *aisatsu* is consistent with other sorts of obligatory performatives uttered at the breaching of spatialized boundaries. At work people must say “*ohayō gozaimasu*” [“good morning”] to their coworkers upon entering a collective office space. Then upon leaving at the end of the day there is an obligatory phrase “*osaki ni shitsurei shimasu*” [“sorry to be leaving early”] that is uttered regardless of when someone leaves (the ‘early’ here is relative and simply indicates that the speaker understands they are leaving prior to the listeners’ respective departure times). The listener in these cases is a collective body. In other words, the phrase can be uttered to an individual but in most workplace situations it is said loudly without a specifically directed interlocutor (as if to the room itself). People respond in unison with the words “*otsukare sama deshita*” which literally translates as “you are [honorific form] tired,” but more or less implies a job well done. If one plans on running an errand in the middle of the day there is another equally obligatory phrase to be uttered “*ittekimasu*” [“I’m off, but I’ll be back,” literally translated as: “I’m going and coming”]. This phrase is also uttered in the morning when one family member leaves. The expected response is “*itterashai*.”

These phrases are part of a larger category of formulaic pragmatic gestures known as *aisatsu* in Japanese. This particular subgroup all function to let people know that a speaker is

arriving, leaving, or stepping out for a bit. Their denotational meaning has much less relevance here than the fact that they function as performatives which license a particular locative change of state (i.e. the impending presence or absence of the speaker's body). For the westerner trying to adapt to a Japanese workplace this kind of collective monitoring of presence can sometimes feel like unwelcome surveillance, however, this per the speaker in these cases may in fact desire that people notice their presence/absence. If someone leaves a worksite in the middle of the day without announcing this fact, their absence can lead to unwanted curiosity and rumors. So in this case, announcing that one is stepping out for a bit curtails potential negative assumptions that one might be trying to shirk their duties without getting caught. Moreover, one's presence at a workplace (both coming early and leaving late) serves as a potent index of their desire to contribute as a willing member of the workplace social fabric. Men, especially, are often expected to leave late. To leave early without acknowledging others' presence, then, slights the extra effort that those who remain are demonstrating.

I don't want to make too much of this idea in terms of various ideological explanations of collectivism. Suffice it to say that these obligatory phrases acknowledging changes in presence-status (coming, going, going-but-coming-back) are as "naturalized" and just as free of ideological baggage as saying "bless you" when someone sneezes in English speaking countries—in the sense that both amount to performatives that function as obligatory second pair-part responses.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this study, it will suffice to say

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<sup>6</sup> For most English speakers, when someone sneezes and there is no reply of "bless you" we "hear" the silence. However, this "bless you" doesn't have to necessarily entail allegiance to the religious ideology of Christianity. Just as we might not experience "bless you" as a specifically religious statement, likewise, Japanese do not experience every instance of spatiotemporally-delimited *aisatsu* as somehow an instantiation of Japanese collectivism. In this sense, I prefer to avoid a direct ideological reading of these obligatory performatives—a reading that Silverstein calls "naïve Whorfianism" and contrasts with the more sophisticated treatment of Whorf which sees the relationship between language structure and ideology as something more *ad hoc*, invoked indexically in the here-and-now (1998).

that Japanese can *hear* the silence when someone leaves work without acknowledging their departure. This silence sometimes “sounds” like the footsteps of someone arriving late or someone trying to leave early without their coworker’s noticing—and these ideological associations are certainly available as fodder for workplace gossip if a coworker starts to seem like they are shirking their duties. But the phrases themselves, in this sense, are only “heard” when they are not uttered.

To “hear” the silence, however, requires sufficient metapragmatic discourse surrounding the contextual appropriateness of the form itself. In the case above, we can think of this kind of gossip about a co-worker’s failure to use *aisatsu* as this kind of discourse—i.e. talk *about* talk, or, put more exhaustively: talk that negotiates the social function of certain explicit performatives. The emergence of an explicit metapragmatic discourse surrounding *yominige* seems to represent this kind of active social construction of palpable silence. There may be some disagreement over whether this discourse will succeed in constructing *yominige* behavior into a universally experience of silence. But it is worthwhile to note how non-Japanese users of social media seem more comfortable with the silence of invisible audiences. Or perhaps, it is the impossibility of being a invisible “audience member” (i.e. the fact that *ashiato* are unavoidable) that makes this silence felt in the first place. In this sense *ashiato* introduce a potential first pair-part that has no contextually licensed reciprocation.

#### **4.4 Tone in Mixi**

One particularly salient aspect of mixi profile pages tends to be their consistency of tone. Mixi profiles tend to project a single unified voice that aligns certain “informational” content of self-presentation with a particular grammatically coded register.

If, for example, the page owner wants to present a professional image of themselves, then, all information on the page will coordinate with this presentation. I have even been told anecdotally that people may lie about their blood type in order to present a more positive image of themselves. Likewise, if the page owner wants to present a more relaxed, informal image of themselves, this tone will also remain relatively consistent. Remember, here, that tone also refers not only to informational content but to grammatical consistency. Thus someone could easily describe their (high status) occupation in a way that conveyed a casual demeanor.

In contrast, profile pages on Myspace, Friendster, Facebook, etc., can come off as almost schizophrenic in their willingness to jump between high status and low status registers. Furthermore, mixing of “voices” can extend beyond this simple notion of formality to encompass a wide ranging pastiche of identity. Sentimental proclamations are juxtaposed against ironically aggressive sounding language, salacious party photographs appear on the same page as more formal family pictures. Bakhtin refers to this kind of hybridity, in the novel, as dialogical voicing (1934-35, trans. 1981). Bourdieu, likewise, takes up this issue of register performance as a kind of symbolic capital—a performance of social flexibility for socially famous study of voice onset timing for words beginning in ‘th’ (i.e. looking at the tendency to mobile French (1979). Likewise, in relation to what might vaguely be called “American culture” (in politics, business, etc.) one could argue that there is an ideology of anti-intellectualism that places a premium on high-status individuals who can switch between high and low register, and this ideological stance maps onto linguistic practice. Labov’s famous study of voice onset timing for words beginning in ‘th’ (i.e. looking at the tendency to reduce this consonant to a ‘d’ sound) found that upwardly mobile classes hyper-corrected for this phoneme, yet the highest echelons would actually try to make themselves “sound”

more working class. The ability to code-switch to a lower register seems equally valued in social networking environments. Perhaps then, the pastiche of “voices” that one sees in social networking identity performance could be thought of in terms of the kind of parodic hybridity that Bakhtin associates with the modern novel. Others have made this point in relation to personal homepages in general. Androutsopoulos points out that “[p]ersonal homepages have been theorized as reflections of fragmented post-modern identities, which enable the reflexive construction of multiple selves through a *bricolage* of word and image (Chandler 1999; Miller and Arnold 2001)” (2006: 423).

In contrast to this notion of fragmentation (identity as pastiche), mixi profiles tend to seem quite unified in their voice. In informal discussions with friends, I’ve also been struck by how much initial time mixi users put into choosing the tone of their profile—the implication here being that once they choose their “voice,” this decision cannot be reversed. This manifestation of tone includes grammatical features such as politeness level as well as decisions about what kind of “information” to be performed. Mixi encourages users to select categories from various interests: hobbies, music, food, shopping, etc. Other information such as blood type, location, handle (i.e the question of whether to pick an obvious pseudonym or something more ambiguously “name-like”) also play into the subtle play of identity performance in mixi.

As mentioned earlier, Japanese tends to emphasize relationally specific grammatical coding, so in other words, the *relationship* between the addresser and the addressee is more strongly determinative of the appropriate register than are parameters of situational specificity such as time and place. This grammatically relational specificity sets up an interesting conundrum for the mixi users, because a profile page, in effect, speaks to no one and to everyone at the same time. While public oratory in Japan carries a very specific

expectation of polite register usage, in this case, the relatively intimate and personalized “space” of a mixi profile tends to undermine this expectation of public politeness. This tension between intimacy and public projection is, in fact, precisely the issue that *shishōsetsu* authors were trying to resolve by writing as if their reader were peering over their shoulder. In this, sense, the addresser and the addressee are the same person (i.e. the writer), and instead, the reader is positioned simultaneously as intimate friend as well as voyeuristic eavesdropper.

#### **4.5 Mixi in Relation to Other Kinds of Public Eavesdropping:**

In off-line contexts, this problematic phenomenon of intimate voices in public spaces can cause substantial discomfort. In fact, despite the Japanese language’s emphasis on relational specificity, there is a long tradition of cultural critics voicing their discomfort with public displays of private language. As I have mentioned earlier in Inoue’s account of women’s language and Ito’s account of *keitai* language, discourse critical of intimate language has made the commuter train into a subject of intensely contested public space. In both cases a discourse of prohibition emerged around people’s (especially older men’s) discomfort with “overhearing” intimate language of young women and youth in general—in this sense, a performance to an in-group in a public setting can be experienced as a kind of *de facto* exhibitionism. In both cases, the grammatical affordances of relational specificity purport to license the speaker’s language, but the very *knowledge* of this relational intimacy became problematic—i.e. the knowledge that a subaltern has a voice of intimacy (and isn’t ashamed to broadcast it in public) creates a moment of discordant uncanniness for the resentful eavesdropper.

In contrast, while the virtual space of mixi is more or less public (like the train) no one is forced into a position of resentful eavesdropper. No one *has* to peruse another's page or read their *nikki* posts, so the onus of justification is on the visitor rather than the page owner. In this sense we could add another feature not included in boyd's four significant features of SNSs: specifically, the *absence* of incidental audiences. In social networking sites we don't have the kinds of resentful audiences that one finds on a Japanese train.

Interestingly, these resentful audiences, as a kind of social imaginary, serve a very specific function that seems to be lost (or at least mitigated) on social networking sites. In "real life" contexts people seek out public spaces of recreation (restaurants, parks, etc) with the purported reason that crowds provide a kind of exciting/excitable ambience. But potentially resentful public bodies can also serve the important role of authorizing social risk as just that: risky. In this sense, the threat of context clash itself may be kind of performative substrate. Put simply, while the person who can speak in front of a potentially eavesdropping audience may be construed as inconsiderate, to the members of their in-group, they may be understood as empowered. In particular, humor in public places often trades on this mediation of social risk as a kind of spectacle. The disconnect between the kinds of performances that a public space hegemonically "authorizes" versus the kinds of behavior that a subject actually "dares" to perform represents, in itself, a kind of risky play—a negotiation of the boundaries that separate mildly dangerous forms of context clash from its more risky cousins.

So, while the space of a mixi profile or even a *nikki* entry seem to represent unproblematically intimate spheres of performance, the fact that these performances "extend" metonymically into the semi-public space of a newsfeed makes them simultaneously a kind of risky spectacle like the scenario described above. Perhaps an

analogy to Tōson's *Shinsei* is apropos here—insofar as this particular strategically calculated confessional was deliberately inserted into public space through the medium of a newspaper.

Interestingly, though, what seems unique to new media version of this phenomenon of intimate extension into public space is that the kinds of instantly synchronous collective crowd responses to spectacle never occur. There is never an explosion of laughter or a collective gasp. Thus while an individual's risky public performance might garner various negative reactions from a collective group of loosely affiliated friends (and here we might imagine the “real life” version of a *matsuri*), the *nikki* format in contrast allows people to respond asynchronously, and thus the risk associated with context clash seems to be dissipated. Moreover, the friend groups themselves (the *nikki* “audience”) is of course itself not a real “group” (in the sense of consistent cohesiveness) but rather a loose collection of subjects around an ego-centric node. Thus, different combinations of friends (who might otherwise not be able to interact smoothly in “real life”) seem to be forced into a kind of virtual contact—a subtle violence that ultimately empowers the performer to take greater risk. In other words, the performer is free from the somewhat involuntary negative reactions of a live audience (embarrassment, awkward silence, etc), and instead receives comments exclusively from those who are willing participants in the parameters of the *nikki* (as performance) itself.

#### **4.6 Code Switching and Context Clash in Mixi:**

In public responses to their *nikki* commenters, *nikki* authors often engage in a mode of rapid code switching as they direct a string of replies to each of their respective commenters. The relationship between the *nikki* author and the commenter seem to determine the parameters of “voice” that the *nikki* author employs in each successive

response. For example, if the commenter is older or has a more professional persona presented on their blog, the author will respond to the commenter using polite (or sometimes honorific/humble) grammatical constructions. In the next line, however, they might orient themselves in a much more casual manner as they address a different commenter (whose online persona is either younger or less professional). Furthermore, these rapid shifts also correspond to whether the response expresses agreement or disagreement in relation to its antecedent comment. If the response disagrees, for example, its register will be more polite (using either *-masu* form verb endings or humble form constructions).

It should be noted that this kind of code switching, while not at all an aberration in the larger context of Japanese language use, stands in marked contrast to the kind of consistent unity of voice that one finds on mixi profile pages (and to a lesser degree on *nikki* entries themselves<sup>7</sup>). A very common scenario for this kind of code switching emerges when an author adds a comment to their own *nikki* post, structuring the body of the comment so that it forms a list with each commenter's handle as a new paragraph. Each paragraph, then, clearly directs itself towards a specific individual's comment and grammatical features of voice can shift accordingly.

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<sup>7</sup> Nikki entries themselves seem to vary register somewhat as a specific narratological device, but this variation tends to pivot upon various authorial "frames" rather than around alternating addressees.

It should also be noted that this sort of code switching functions quite differently from the kind of hybrid pastiche that one finds on western profile pages. In the Japanese case, shifts of voice are specifically lined up with shifts in orientation towards address. In this sense, the code-switching seen in response to *nikki* comments is closer to Goffman's notion of shifts in 'footing' (1979), while in contrast the multi-vocal pastiche on Myspace profile pages, for example, might better align with a Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia (1930s, trans. 1981). In essence, the relational obligations of Japanese grammar allow people to vary tone, without this variance seeming like a deliberate performance of hybridity. That said, this gesture of public code switching may nevertheless be a highly self-conscious act, in the same sense that overheard "talk" on a public train can be a kind of deliberate performance of exhibitionism.

In the example described earlier, Akira takes the opportunity to add a comment to his own *nikki* in order to address many new members of an unexpectedly large (mini-*matsuri*-like) audience of readers. Many of these new readers came to Akira's *nikki* via the *shinbaku nikki* search function—in other words, they read Akira's *nikki* during the time that it was included within a "recently posted" list of mixi diaries. Many introduced themselves with the formulaic greeting "*shinbaku nikki kara kimashita?*" [lit: "I came via recent-arrival *nikki*?"]. A few of the commenters provided opinions or offered advice to Akira.

One older user (Ruru) compliments Akira saying: "you would be good in a [the hospitality] service job, no?" Akira responds saying "Does it [hospitality field] really fit me? That's important I suppose, but whether I like or dislike it is more important." He ends this statement with '*to omoundesuyo,*' using the hedging phrase '*to omou*' ['I think'] plus a polite verb form '*desu*' and a feminizing final particle '*yo.*' He also adds musical notes indicating a levity of tone. He then continues: "Either way, I [*boku*] will definitely try hard [+ *masu* verb

ending]!!” Here, notice both the polite pronoun *‘boku’* as well as sentence ending, and slightly obsequious sounding, “go-getter” verb *‘gambaru’* [lit: ‘I will try hard’]. This statement ‘I will definitely try hard’ is the kind of thing a *kobai* [younger club member] would say to a *senpai* [older club member] in a school sport context. Additionally, both the music notes, the verb *‘omou,’* and the polite marker *‘desu’* all point to a similar posture of deference. Part of this stance owes itself to Ruru’s position as an elder, but an additional factor is surely that Akira is somewhat disagreeing with Ruru’s advice here, and thus needs a certain amount of hedging and linguistic/typographic “lubrication” in order to mitigate this confrontational stance.

This comment to Ruru can be contrasted to the one directly above it (to Kiko) a younger female user who commented on Akira’s sudden popularity with a very relaxed and cutely teasing. Kiko specifically uses the cute (or feminine) sounding word *‘suteki’* [“wonderful”] to describe Akira. Akira responds to Kiko’s comment with a response heavily laced in Osaka vernacular: *“Nanka hazukashii kara!! [wara] sutekite... kuchi ni dashita ka to nai shi na”* [“Don’t embarrass me [laugh], ‘wonderful’ you say? I don’t think I’ve ever used that word”]. Here, Akira ends his sentence entirely with abbreviated, plain-form (i.e. highly informal), grammatical constructions. He also ends the response with a mirrored emoticon face ( º ≡ º ) meant to indicate the shocked “double take” that he experienced (i.e. when he first saw the number of comments made in response to his original post). While he is also clearly disagreeing with Kiko as well, this situation is different because his disagreement also functions as a polite denial of her compliment (a highly prescribed response in Japanese).

While my central point here may seem somewhat obscured by the particularities of linguistic phenomena, but I would like to reemphasize the significance of this dramatically

different manner in which the Japanese language constructs audience. In particular, the fact that in Japanese the relationship between speaker and addressee is coded in the grammatical form of an utterance itself ensures that identity performance is not as constrained by the presence of an eavesdropping audience as it is in an English speaking context.

As a counterpoint, here, Meyrowitz's notion of the relationship between "voice" and audience provides a useful illustration of how differently the relationship between "voice" and audience operates in English. A central figure in Meyrowitz's historical account is Stokely Carmichael, a leader in the civil rights movement and the black panther party. When faced with the uncomfortable experience of speaking for a mediated audience via radio and television, Carmichael was forced to choose one particular "voice" among two that he had used previously: (1) a voice he had used in front of black audiences to energize the base of the civil rights movement vs. (2) a voice that had diplomatically recruited the support of sympathetic whites).

When black power advocate Stokely Carmichael found himself attracting media attention in the late 1960s, for example, his access to a larger social platform turned out to be a curse rather than a blessing. In the shared arenas of television and radio, he found himself facing at least two distinct audiences simultaneously: his primary audience of blacks, and an "eavesdropping" audience of whites. In personal (unmediated) appearances, he had been able to present two completely different talks on Black Power to black and white audiences, respectively. But in the combined forums of electronic media, he had to decide whether to use a white or black rhetorical style and text. If he used a white style, he would alienate his primary audience and defeat his goals of giving blacks a new sense of pride and self-respect. Yet if he used a black rhetorical style, he would alienate whites, including many liberals who supported integration. With no clear solution, and unable to devise a composite genre, Carmichael decided to use a black style in his mediated speeches. While he sparked the fire of his primary audience, he also filled his secondary audience with hatred and fear and brought on the wrath of the white power structure. (Meyrowitz 1985: 43—drawing heavily from Brockreide and Scott, 1970)

Speaking at UNC, danah boyd updates Meyrowitz's account of Stokely Carmichael dilemma of exclusionary identity performance in order to connect this anecdote to the pressures experienced by users having to decide upon a particular "voice" for their online identity.

Owing to the features of searchability, replicability, persistence, and invisible audiences, identity performance in online settings seems rife with the potential for Carmichael-like scenarios of context clash.

However, such scenarios seem to have different sorts of parameters in Japanese contexts. Explicit coding of (speaker-to-addressee) relational information in Japanese grammar seems to foster in Japanese speakers a sophisticated metapragmatic awareness about the inherent situatedness of voice itself. One cannot utter a sentence in Japanese without conveying some amount of information about the social relationship between the speaker and the utterance's intended addressee. Thus eavesdropping audiences have much less recourse to claim offence.

I should qualify this claim, however. In Japan, there are certain modes of oratorical speech which are more or less restrictive. A speechmaker cannot address an audience *en mass* and expect to code-switch by addressing different audience members at different times (or even different partitioned groups of audience members). Likewise, the *nikki* entry itself represents a miniature version of the Stokely Carmichael dilemma of voice. That said, it is the particular recruitment of the Stokely Carmichael example into the realm of online identity performance which I think merits a closer look when applied to a Japanese context. In particular, in the comment forums of *nikki* posts, a reader's comment and an author's responses to various comments have a much greater degree of situational specificity than their western analogues. This difference manifests itself in very specific differences about what kind of register switching practices are appropriate in what context. While in an online forum in English, one would probably not respond to an elder with polite language in one line and then respond to a peer using profanity. But in Japanese, that is precisely the kind of extreme code switching which the language licenses by specifically indexing an addressee

within the very grammar of a statement itself. This is possible because in Japanese the notion of a swear word makes less sense. While indeed there are certain taboo words in Japanese, the register-shifting function of swear words actually maps much more easily onto certain kinds of modular changes in verbs and adjectives. For instance, one can modify a typical vowel+[i] type adjectives (*keijoushi*) in a highly systematic way such that the final vowels “sound” rude. Furthermore, various verb endings and grammatical variations for ending verbs can index whether the speaker is addressing peers (i.e. rudely) or elders (i.e. politely).

One interesting ramification of this comparison is that it raises the question of how the design of English-based social networking sites may be changing the metapragmatic awareness of English speakers who use this kind of interface. In particular, the “wall” or message board on a facebook or myspace page, functioning much like the Japanese language, allows for a kind of explicitly coded partitioning of various respective addressees. This spatialized partitioning itself in some ways mimics the structure of Japanese grammar insofar as it explicitly indexes a specific addressee and thus preempts the criticism of potential eavesdroppers by excluding them from the context of a particular “wall-to-wall” conversation.

#### **4.7 Genres of Memoir (the *shishōsetsu* and the intimate stranger):**

In the following section I would like offer a close reading of a particular *nikki* post in order to trace some of the stylistic parallels between the online *nikki* and *shishōsetsu* modes of writing. The following piece of writing is translated from a *nikki* (diary) in mixi. I have included the comments below. (Reference to emoticons has been included in the translation where possible.)

### **Taoru's Nikki:**

*While traveling cross-country on my motorcycle I stopped for lunch at a convenience store. While I was eating lunch positioned in front of my bike, a guy riding a Honda pulled up in front of me.*

*"Cool bike!" he remarked, looking at my motorcycle. "Did you just get it? It looks new," In this way, we started to make small talk.*

*Cross-country bikers often chat with each other like this. And yet, while this sort of conversation would often take place at a rest stop, it was a little unusual to be having it in front of a convenience store on a local main-street.*

*I usually don't initiate this kind of biker-to-biker small talk.*

*Or maybe more truthfully I should say that I imagine that I might look strange through others' eyes, or that they would feel imposed upon if I were to start a conversation.*

*At first I didn't really engage with the Shadow rider, but gradually he got me talking about my motorcycle.*

*As the Shadow rider drew me out of my shell I started to realize what a good person he was.*

*After our conversation I finished eating my meal but on the way out I felt like it would have been rude if I didn't at least acknowledge our conversation by saying goodbye.*

*Ultimately I did manage to catch his eye with a small bow of the head.*

*It's these kinds of brief connections are the little pleasures that make cross-country biking so enjoyable.*

*And thinking about it now, I'd like to become the sort of person who can engage others comfortably in casual conversation even if it's just to say "Hello" [note: "hello" written in katakana w/ quotes]*

### **Comments:**

(1)**Mika:** *"And thinking about it now, I'd like to become the sort of person who can engage others comfortably in casual conversation"*

*I'm the same.(><)*

*At work someone told me I was hard to approach. When I heard that that was my image (@\_@)to, narimasu! [lit: I was quite surprised].*

(2)**Taoru [responding to Mika]:** *Definitely this [meaning being friendly] is important!*

(3)**Anko:** *Maybe being approachable isn't as desirable as you think. I can't speak English except for "kono densha Shinjuku, ok. Ok!" I wouldn't be able to say anything.*

*When I used to ride a bike I would make small talk. I'd make friends, talk with them for a little while. Then he would go right. And I would go left.*

*I don't know their names but they were important friends.*

**Taoru** [*responding to Anko*]:

*Anko, that was some emotionally rich content. (Shimijimi... [sentimental])  
I'll report your feeling to Nami. She hasn't come yet.*

(4) **Kenta**: *But it's hard to imagine you're unapproachable* [responding to Taoru's *nikki* post].

This *nikki* follows a *shishōsetsu*-like rhythm of dramatic pacing. Small details—sometimes seemingly irrelevant details—accrete around an isolated encounter serving more as narrative beats than as essential plot points: (1) the protagonist is specifically positioned next to his bike as the Shadow rider approaches; (2) their small talk is illustrated by specific examples of relatively banal conversation in quotative construction; (3) certain commercial terms such as Honda are introduced without background as if the writer is relating a shared experience to a fellow motorcycle aficionado; (4) the location of convenience store is specifically described as along a local mainstreet (thus it is somehow both local enough to not qualify as a rest stop yet transitory enough that its liminal geography licenses their small talk as fellow bikers). All of these elements operate in concert to convey a sense of exhaustive, over-the-shoulder excess of detail recounted chronologically from the perspective of a particular unfolding here-and-now. Some details seem to be recorded out of an almost obsessive sense of loyalty to the diary as document—and like Barthian “reality effects” (1986) it is their seeming arbitrariness or tangentiality which allows them to function of tropes of “the real.”

Nevertheless a distinctive narrative arc emerges here. A slow build up of dramatic pacing seems to be marked by narrative beats as successively proximate side comments and explanatory digressions (serving as a ellipses) simultaneously punctuate the flow of “action.”

And yet, despite this semi-narrative trajectory one might ultimately conclude that, according to western standards, *nothing much really happens*.

However, as the dramatic arc progresses, various elements emerge from the minutiae to take on greater relevance: the fact that the protagonist is sitting next to his motorcycle when the man approaches becomes significant because it is the only reason that the Shadow rider can identify him as a motorcyclist. This proximity to his vehicle also further emphasizes the protagonist's discomfort in this liminal space (he is outside ready to “escape” at a moment's notice).

The author's digressions also seem to mask narrative ellipses (i.e. after the brief conversation their small-talk ceases while the protagonist continues eating, but we seem to skip over this part, and this gap is bridged by the explanation about motorcyclists' camaraderie). Perhaps in English such a gap would not seem like an ellipsis at all, but the exhaustive attention to detail and temporal flow makes us more aware of the absence of this flow when temporal jumps actually *do* occur). The swatches of time which garner exhaustive exploration however tend to feel arbitrarily selected. If trivial pleasantries merit full dramatic coverage why not the successive bites of food? But one could argue that this apparent arbitrariness masks a very careful narrative build-up culminating with a final dramatic anti-climax when the protagonist hesitates for a second and finally resolves to offer a small minimal recognition through an *eishaku* (small bob of the head). And yet, at the same time, the details as they emerge do not suggest a story arc at all, and in this sense the combination of exhaustive swatches of detail separated by ellipses takes on a flow that we might associate with what Durgat describes as the lurching camera work and evasive climax of Italian neorealism. In fact, the *nikei* form often comes off as almost cinematic in its beat by beat

attention to visual details especially in terms of human interaction through gesture and dialogue.

As a hypothetical contrast, consider an alternative account that might have been written more succinctly along these lines: “I took a trip on my motorcycle the other day. I don’t usually talk to other bikers but this time met someone really friendly who drew me out of my shell and made me remember what it’s like to get outside myself—it’s this kind of little pleasure (the pleasure of comradeship) that makes me love the experience of traveling by motorcycle.”

Such an account wouldn’t have given us any of the tension and expectation that the unfolding narrative arc of the original piece sets in motion. The author zeros in on the very moment of departure as a pivotal small victory (i.e. that at the very least he nodded to the man who had been so friendly). Tensions build around the question of how (and whether) the protagonist will reciprocate the friendliness of his companion. By dwelling and expanding upon this moment of supreme awkwardness the writer also manages to transform his painful shyness into a kind of dramatic obstacle over which he half-triumphs in the end. In this sense, the piece’s central dramatic tension resolves into a bittersweet anti-climax. This tendency to withhold a final triumph (i.e. to provide a dramatic resolution without overcoming the protagonist’s central conflict) aligns well with the *shishōsetsu* ideology of realism. *Shishōsetsu* writers clung to the trope of sincerity as a kind of ultimate trump card—even, and especially, when sincerity amounted to masochistic self-representation. In this sense, willingness to venture into abject self-deprecation helps construct faithfulness to reality, because this stance sets up an implicit implication that *no one* would present themselves so unflatteringly, so wretchedly, if they weren’t tapping into a kind of profound faithfulness to direct and unmediated truth as a kind of redemption. In some ways then, in

both the online *nikki* and the *shishōsetsu*, we can look at self-deprecation as a narrative device which cloaks (or purports to erase) the function of writing as mediation.

I should point out that this is not necessarily a normative example. I have chosen it for various reasons, but one is surely to show the lines of continuity between the *shishōsetsu* tradition and the kinds of writing found in mixi's *nikki*.

In some ways, Taoru's *nikki* seems to map metaphorically onto the very kinds of social interactions that occur within mixi. In particular, the mixi architecture seems to capitalize on the kinds of role slippage that occurs when people interact due to mutual interest in a hobby or a recreational activity. Taoru's account of meeting fellow bikers while he travels cross-country in Japan calls forth the kinds of fluid and ephemeral interactions initiated in community forums in mixi.

In other cases when two conversational participants must perform the “getting to know you” genre of interaction in Japan, the language itself often dictates that features of pre-inscribed social context must be ascertained in order for the conversation to function smoothly: Are we meeting at work? If so who is superior/inferior? Who is “new” vis-à-vis the relevant in-group within which we are meeting? Are we meeting as an extension of one or more familial relations? Which party is designated as host and which as guest? Within all these questions the speaker's relationship to place emerges as a central mediating anchor of social context. In contrast, both cross-country motorcyclists and non-proxemic mixi users are able to develop intensely personal connections while interacting within a domain of transitory placelessness. While mixi is often not used this way (since many people friend only those with whom they have a pre-existing connection) part of the allure is surely the feeling of potential that one could run into a stranger, or connect with someone new via a community forum. In this sense, mixi draws from *deai* and *merutomo* traditions that

preceded it, except that a new emphasis is placed on the kind of role slippage that occurs when friends circles expand beyond anonymous one-to-one relationships. Moreover, the phenomenon of *ashiato* makes mixi lurking an extremely public and potentially transformative act, not unlike like the classically Japanese gesture of entering someone's *genkan* without knocking—poking one's head into their private space. Both the insider and the intruder are completely exposed: figured as both intimate and distant in the simultaneously.

The comment made by Taoru's mixi friend (a former biker) underscores the phenomenon of the intimate stranger within *ad hoc* recreational communities common to Japan. He remarks that:

*When I used to ride a bike I would make small talk. I'd make friends, talk with them for a little while. Then he would go right, and I would go left.*

*I don't know their names but they were important friends.*

We can see how the commenter here is drawing upon the feelings of anonymous intimacy generated by meeting those with whom casual conversation flows easily (precisely because it can center around a contextually salient topic: the motorcycle).

I would conjecture that in general, Japanese first-person confessionals tend to focus more on a separation between the narrational frame and the reported frame (Kuroda 1979). And specifically, the narrational frame aligns the reader with the insider (*honno*) status of the reported frame (i.e. the here-and-now of the event being recounted as oppose to the here-and-now of the recounting itself which I am labeling the narrative frame). In contrast, English tends to encourage more play of various registers in the here-and-now of the “telling.” In particular, the English version of the confessional mode seems to license a kind of performative code-switching (a play of various Goffmanian shifts of footing) within the narrational frame of the story itself. For example, the Goffmanian notion of shifters applies to somewhat self-deprecatory epistemological changes of stance towards the addressee—as

in phrases such as: “I’m not lying when I tell you that...” or “listen to me complaining about...” Both phrases imply here that narrational frame has suddenly shifted towards a stance of self-doubt towards a previous incarnation of this frame (immediately prior)—as if to say “before was bullshit, but *now* I’m really going to be sincere.” It is my conjecture then that the English language, which is a language that capitalizes on a kind of implicit voicing frame hybridity through selective (i.e. non-modular/non-grammatically-coded) mapping of language forms onto “voice.” As oppose to a language like Japanese, English has many selective lexical forms which map onto “voice” in multiple or ambiguous ways. In other words, while Japanese grammar requires shifts of narrational stance to be more explicit, English allows these shifts to reveal themselves covertly or retroactively, thus allowing for more ambiguity, more ebb and flow, more subtle risk and recovery, in the very telling of a story itself as a kind of sliding scale of performative winks.

## **Part V Interface Pragmatics: design, practice, image, and ideology in social networking sites**

### **5.1 Shifting From What Media Means to What Media Does:**

The following discussion will attempt to introduce a notion of interface pragmatics by drawing upon W.J.T. Mitchell's understanding of the image as a solicitation (rather than as a receptacle for meaning). I would like to extend this understanding of the image to encompass a working model for all media production. I will also attempt to refine Mitchell's ideas by underscoring the *specificity* of particular pragmatic contexts which surround the exhibition space of a media object. In particular, I will argue that media objects don't just position themselves in a state of "desire" (as Mitchell argues) but they do so in a given space within a particular constellation of relational agents and behavioral parameters (dictating the "rules" of exchange). I will focus this theoretical approach upon webpage interfaces in order to frame the gesture of a media object's solicitation in terms of, what one might call, a pragmatics of online navigation. Reconfiguring media as a kind of agent in an online pragmatics of navigation will allow me to talk about how media objects attempt to solicit a *desire for the unknown* by withholding key revelations (about the worlds which they metonymically figure)—that is, until a spectator (i.e. user) responds with some sort of behavioral reaction (manifested as either a shift in attention, or as a specific navigational decision, or both).

I will also draw from Marc Davis's conception of networked systems as marketplaces (or ecosystems) of attentional competition and propagation. Such an understanding of images shifts the locus of Mitchell's interests to raise different sorts of questions: What is an image's relationship to a larger ecosystem of attention-solicitation? What kind of navigational

desires do images illicit? What kind of knowledge do they promise and how do they position a viewer as desiring the fulfillment of this promise? In response, to these questions, I have argued that specifically in hyperlinked media we can think about the image as a kind of opaque mystery doorway which elicits the need to “know” more about a certain scopic world or body. Moreover, within the context of social media, I would argue that an avatar’s hyperlink itself seems to subsume the image as the locus of solicitation. (And here ‘avatar’ should be extended as a concept to include *any* metonymic extension of a subject’s domain, thus text itself can function as a kind of avatar in the right context.)

Lastly, and most central, to my argument, I will talk about how key variations of interface-design and user-practice in social networking sites can serve to dramatically alter the strategies made available to media objects as they attempt to solicit a desire to “know the unknown.” In particular, I will look to mixi’s *nikki* (diary) feature as a key site where images and text become embodied as performative agents. *Nikki* pages create a forum for response comments, ensuring highly explicit (and therefore safe) interactional context (due to the specificity of a diary entry as a central provocation). This reassuring context consistency mitigates the treacherousness of improvised performance.

However, at the same time, the *nikki* comment forum encourages an obfuscation of *relational* context (between diarist and respondent). Knowledge about this relationship is left unsaid, positioning other spectators as potential eavesdroppers, voyeurs who may desire to solve the riddle of this inferred (but not explicitly stated) relationship between a diarist and a respondent. Thus, while a comment-avatar pairing in response to a *nikki* entry purports to be a *centripetally* oriented social performance (directed towards diarist), it also can function implicitly as a *laterally* oriented solicitation (in the sense that it is positioned to elicit attention

from other readers). The withholding of knowledge here serves as a kind of seduction in that profile avatars serving as both figurative and literal doorways.

## 5.2 Theoretical Stakes (ideology and the image):

Mitchell's methodological shift away from "what do images mean" to "what do images *want*"—i.e. in essence, position images as subaltern subjects with complex and contextually specific needs.

The keys to this modification/dislocation are (1) assent to the constitutive fiction of pictures as "animated" beings, quasi-agents, mock persons; and (2) the construal of pictures not as sovereign subjects or disembodied spirits but as subalterns whose bodies are marked with the stigmata of difference, and who function as "go-betweens" and scapegoats in the social field of human visuality. (Mitchell 2006: 46)

Here images are positioned as desiring social action on the part of their viewers (but not necessarily having these desires fulfilled). In this sense, they solicit from a position of need. Mitchell's approach, then, attempts to move away from an analytical lens which treats images texts (meant to be "decoded") in favor of more contextually pragmatic framework of understanding images—and here I use the term 'pragmatic' to evoke the *discipline of pragmatics* in linguistic fields. In other words, I would like to propose that this theoretical shift in the understanding of images aligns with the disciplinary separation in linguistics between semantics/syntax, on the one hand, and pragmatics on the other—the first which draws from decontextualized categorical frames to understand meaning in terms of a systematic code (i.e. *Saussurian langue*) versus the latter which draws upon the performative "effects" of language in use. It is the latter of these fields that interests me in relation to images, and by extension, hyperlinked avatar-media.

Coming out of an art history and visual cultures disciplinary tradition, Mitchell tends to relate his analysis to institutionally sanctioned images that circulate in larger fields of

discourse, but I would argue that this abstracted approach detracts from the incredible insight that his position actually offers.

### **5.3 Image and Desire in Networked Media:**

In hyperlinked networks images are often positioned as doorways (as substitutions for or amplifications of textual “welcome mats”) between worlds. At first glance, then, images serve somewhat like book covers or perhaps more appropriately like the pictures of entrées found on certain restaurant menus. They compliment a textual description in order to put a more specific imagined object into play—here as one among a set of potential and proximal futures within navigational real-time. Images as hyperlinks point to what is just out of reach and in this sense they function as doorways.

Here, I would like to qualify my argument to acknowledge that this figure of the doorway operates even when hyperlinks are not specifically in play. The key here being that, while media objects are positioned to “desire” a navigator’s attention, there is nevertheless more than one way for this attention to manifest itself. Just as the process of moving between hyperlinks is a kind of attention-based navigation, so too is the movement of one’s eye scanning over a page or the activity of scrolling down to continue viewing. Media, in this sense, calls attention to itself and asks the eye to linger a bit longer, perhaps pointing to something else which it metonymically figures: text, movie files, animation, a collection of associated thumbnails, etc. That “something else” need not be a piece of hyperlinked media—it can simply be “there” waiting for magnification by extended attention. However, hyperlinks allow us to think in terms of a very specific metric which has implications for larger socially mediated flows of attention.

Marc Davis argues that the exchange of information in networked systems really amounts to a market of attentional currency—meaning that any given sign, image, tag, or informational point (on a map of evolving social data) is a potential gesture of solicitation—calling attention to itself precisely in order to ask for more attention (2007: lecture). We can think of socially linked networks, then, as constitutive of an ecosystem in which attention is equivalent to propagation.

The advantage of focusing on hyperlinked images then is that they represent a Boolean representation of this propagatory act as either success or failure: in other words, regardless of the time spent lingering on a welcome mat, one either ultimately decides to go through the doorway, or not. When the doorway itself is an image, however, we have a special case—and this seems to be the situation for all social networking sites where avatar-images function as hyperlinks to personal pages.

Images as doorways also figure both metaphorically and metonymically for the worlds they promise to conjure forth. And yet as metonymic figures they not only claim to *reveal* a part of a world-just-beyond-grasp, but they also serve to simultaneously conceal that world. In other words, to offer up a figure metonymically (in a relationship of part-to-whole) is simultaneously to *conceal* other aspects of that world (i.e. the other “parts” left behind). Images as hyperlinks, then, beckon a navigator to want to scopically “know” the world beyond their portal. In this sense, images attempt to imbue in the viewer/navigator a sense of longing for resolution to this separation. Perhaps then, we can think of images as wanting to share this sense longing with potential navigators. When Mitchell talks about what images desire, he suggests that they yearn for that which they lack, and they point to this lack as a kind of incomplete blind spot in their own scopic knowledge.

Who or what is the target of the demand/desire/need expressed by the picture? One can also translate the question: what does this picture lack; what does it leave out? What is its

area of erasure? Its blind spot? Its anamorphic blur? What does the frame or boundary exclude? What does its angle of representation prevent us from seeing, and prevent it from showing? What does it need or demand from the beholder to complete its work? (Mitchell, 50)

Here, pictures point to their own “lack” and solicit the viewer to perform some action in order to fill in this hole. The performance of this solicitation, however, manifests as a kind of coquettish tease: images reveal just enough to garner a viewer’s attention but then seem to withhold this scopic pleasure so that the viewer (as navigator) is left wanting more. In this sense, the viewer appropriates (mirrors) the image’s own figuration of desire.

In a hyperlinked context, this kind of transaction sets images apart from purely textual hyperlinks in that images purport to simultaneously reveal and withhold their offering, functioning then as windows in the sense that windows not only point to the world “outside” but also remind us of the partition itself: they point to the existence of the *wall*.

Yet online media seems to lack partitions in the sense that the spatial metaphors of the internet seem to promise. As mentioned earlier, online partitions are semi-permeable—or “porous,” as boyd (2002) calls them—because, due to features of persistence, searchability, and replicability, “objects” in one “place” seem to travel freely to other locations. In this sense, perhaps we should not be talking about objects and places at all.

However, the break down of spatial metaphors in online contexts, we can nevertheless think of partitions in the sense that the boundaries between different worlds are set by assumptions about the limits of architectural power. This power can be delegated to users (as in a social networking site), but at various levels, it is taken for granted that particular subjects or groups of subjects are the only one’s who can alter the structure and content of a given environment. So while media objects can move around freely, the sites themselves are assumed to be consistent in one particular feature: an implied subject (or collection of subjects) as a disembodied owner who has exclusive control over the structure

and content of a site. This control can be shared or delegated, but only to the degree to which an “owner” of the site allows it to be. This may seem like an obvious or belabored point, but the idea that boundaries of architectural dominion provide the only solid structure of partitions in online contexts is crucial to my discussion of social networking sites.

#### **5.4 Images in Social Networking Environments:**

Extending this notion of images as doorways between subject-architectures, we can start to think about the ways that dimensions of interface-design and user-practice intermingle and play off one another in social networking sites. Along these lines several general questions seem relevant before I launch into specific examples:

- 1) How does one garner attention in social networking sites?**
- 2) What is the role of images in this exchange of attention and how do images relate to text?**
- 3) If certain spaces are delegated as “open” (i.e. positioned with in invitation for friends to post), how is this openness structured, and what are these posts directed to provoke?**

In order to address these questions I would like first to draw from an example from message board posting on Myspace, and then draw a contrast to the example of *nikki* (diary) responses in mixi.

Myspace message boards (and Facebook “walls”) offer up a designated area of the profile page as a kind of public square. This sort of figuration however has a unique feature in that it relies on what Danah Boyd calls an “egocentric network” to delineate community. This egocentric arrangement generates a centripetally directed focus of messages so that the interactional *context* of the message in some way purports to be understandable by the profile’s “ego” (regardless of the particular content of the message). Thus even if the content of a message is completely cryptic, a 3<sup>rd</sup> party (i.e. eavesdropper or voyeur) will nevertheless

make the assumption that the content of the message relates to some salient interactional context which would nevertheless be graspable were one privy to the particular interactional presuppositions being invoked. Those posting messages here understand completely that their comment has a wider audience (in fact if they wanted to send a private message myspace accommodates that completely) yet they write publically as if speaking only to the profile's "ego."

To illustrate these points I will now turn to an example. The following message was found on a myspace message board:

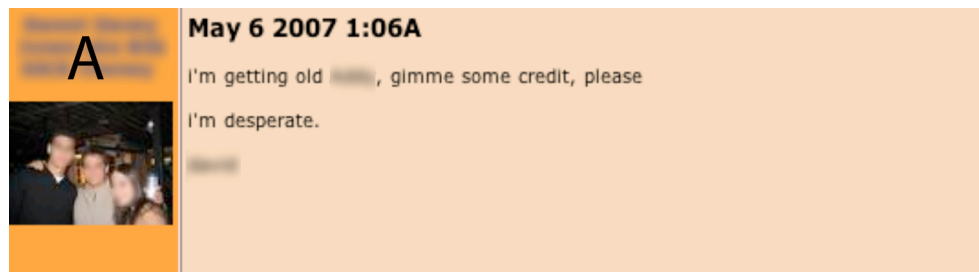


Image courtesy of myspace.com

This comment was provided without any contextual background. There was no indication of whether this was a response to some initial provocation by the owner of the profile. Instead the statement purports to assume some sort of basic awareness of contextual parameters on the part of a reader. For instance, we know that this poster professes to feel old, and this feeling emerges (and somehow contradicts) the fact that the owner of the page was not giving the message poster "credit," but we don't know why the poster feels like he/she is not getting enough credit. The line about "desperation" could likewise either point to a desire to appear older (more sophisticated, responsible, etc.), or, to the contrary, it could point to a desire *not* to be considered old. Perhaps the poster here had done something immature, in response to which the owner of the profile had made some disparaging remark (in either an on- or offline context). But whatever the actual scenario, the message seems to raise more

questions than it answers.

We also don't know much about the relationship of the adjacent picture to the message, except that photorealistic pictures of bodies in myspace normatively stand in for (and align with) the actual myspace subject's body. So here we can guess that one of the three people depicted in this picture map onto the author of this post. While the poster writes in a voice that assumes background knowledge on the part of a reader, in actuality essential background information is withheld, and in fact the lack of background information, I would argue, actually serves to position the image as a vehicle for underscoring this lack of interactional context. So while the purported "effect" of this comment as a performative gesture is to construct intimacy through shared background, the collateral impact upon those outside this conversation (the public eavesdroppers per se) is quite different. Instead, from the perspective of a "lurker" this comment carries both a promise of potential intimate knowledge (as a resolution to the questions it raises) as well as a kind of nonchalantly covert tease—as if to say "come view my page if you want to know so badly!" On the surface, then, the poster seems to be drawing an inclusive boundary around him/herself and the page owner in order to exclude potential 3<sup>rd</sup> party readers. However, the fact that this post is public suggests that the exclusionary act also operates as a powerful solicitation.

Specifically, I would argue that this exclusionary act presents a kind of "riddle" and beckons any 3<sup>rd</sup> party reader to solve this riddle by clicking on the poster's avatar. Indeed, if we click on **A**'s avatar, we are led to another profile page where, if one scrolls down the avatar from original page, the profile owner from the previous paragraph (**B**), has posted the following:

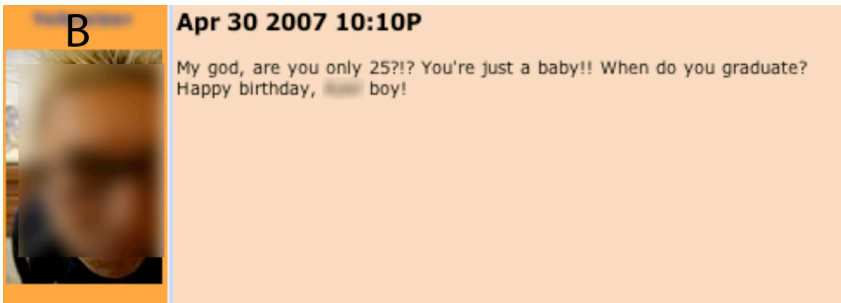


Image courtesy of myspace.com

Here we can now infer that the original message was part the second pair-part of an exchange that started on **A**'s page. We also know that the original poster, **B**, had remarked (either sarcastically or sincerely) that **A** was “just a baby,” and since **A** had just had a birthday, the implication is that **B** wants to reassure his friend that he is still in fact “just a baby.” We still don't know whether **A** here is actually miffed at being labeled young or was sincerely worried about feeling older. Regardless, a certain amount of interactional context has been unlocked, and as 3<sup>rd</sup> party readers of myspace here, we have experienced an instantiation of the normative promise that revelations of interactional context lie “just a click away.”

### 5.5 Mixi Diaries and the Shrouded Avatar

As I have noted earlier, in contrast to myspace (and facebook), mixi offers no free form message board, but rather (like friendster) delegates the space at the bottom of a profile for a collection of testimonials (*from* friends, *about* the profile owner). These testimonials are usually arranged as part of the fixed architecture of the main profile page (i.e. don't evolve rapidly over time the way the analogues in myspace and facebook do). And for the most part, these testimonials fit into relatively rigid normative patterns. Thus the kind of free-form contextless conversation fragments that play such a large role in social interaction on myspace and facebook are absent in mixi.

However, in contrast to mixi profile pages, *nikki* posts provide room for improvisational response comments. The structure of this comment forum facilitates much more focused and contextually transparent interactions. Specifically, response comments (to *nikki*) are isolated on a single page along with the specific diary entry to which they purport to respond, so there is less impetus to stray from the context of this initial diary entry as central provocation. Compared to myspace message boards which encourage asynchronous and decontextualized interaction (bouncing between profiles as in the example above), mixi's design features<sup>8</sup> seem to discourage such contextual chaos in favor of more ego-centrally defined conversations. This transparency of interactional context in *nikki* response forums seems to make obvious the very thing that the structure of myspace comments tends to obfuscate.

*Nikki* response comments, nevertheless, seem to obfuscate a different aspect of context, specifically: the *relationship* between the *nikki* poster (diarist) and the responder. In contrast, in myspace (and facebook) message board comments public messages often (perhaps deliberately) serve to *reveal* details about this relationship via (1) reference to real or figuratively shared events and (2) statements of social affirmation, it is the actual context of interaction (i.e. the pair-part flow of interaction) that is obscured.

In mixi, though, this context of interaction is made explicit while the *relationship* of the interactants is obscured. Responses often relate directly to the events or problems described by a *nikki*, and yet a response's tone hints indirectly (through relationally coded grammatical cues) at the particular deference relationship and level of intimacy existing between the respondent and the diarist. The respondent's name presents itself as a

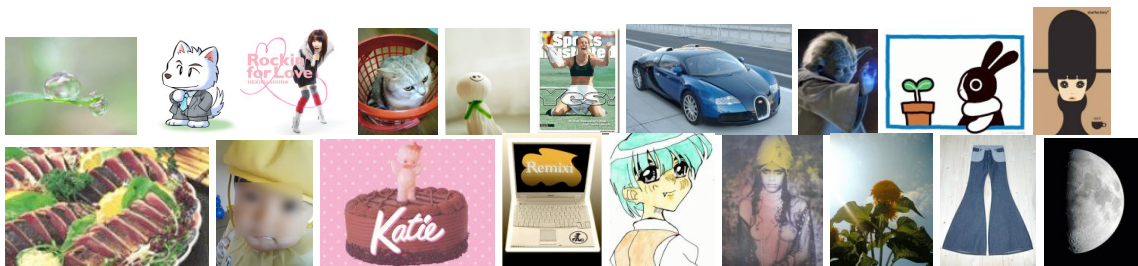
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<sup>8</sup> These features would include the use of testimonials (as oppose to message boards) on the profile page as well as regular updates about friends' *nikki* posts on main profile pages. Such features structure the mixi interface in a way that makes conversations more egocentrically focused.

hyperlinked doorway into potential resolutions to the questions raised by these implicit clues to the relationship between diarist and respondent. But here, avatars are not directly attached to a message. This is important, because many *nikki* writers set up their diaries so that anyone (in the mixi network) can comment on a *nikki*. The lack of avatars attached to *nikki* responses, then, seems to ensure context control—in the sense that centripetal emphasis is placed again on the writer and the writer’s particular self performance. (Also, context control is maintained in the sense that the *nikki* writer doesn’t have to endure inappropriate visuals on their *nikki* pages). Instead, if one wants to discover the relationship between a respondent and the profile owner, one has to check to see if the respondent is listed as a friend of the diarist’s friend list page. It is here, on the main friend list page, that we see avatar-based hyperlinks.

Drawing from Mitchell we could argue that the avatar itself points to a lack of scopic knowledge, and a desire to complete or resolve questions which arise about the nature of a diarist and respondent’s relationship. The avatar beckons a viewer/navigator to appropriate this desire for knowledge.

Avatar selection in mixi seems to encourage this kind of withholding of relational details. Clues that would normally be offered by a photorealistic avatar are instead obfuscated by the selection of very different sorts of avatar images: pets, anime, sports, natural scenery, celebrities, and babies, food, products, etc.



Images courtesy of mixi.jp

These images obscure the age, gender, or social position of their subjects-in-flesh. They nevertheless hint though at possible resolutions to this masking: an avatar image of an anime character could index a younger user, an avatar image of a young baby could indicate that the user is a young parent, a cat image could point to gender, a celebrity's image could say something about the user's personality. These clues can stir up curiosity in a potential 3<sup>rd</sup> party reader without fully disclosing of the relationship between diarist and respondent.

Since relationships in Japanese are highly contextually contingent (with identity performance often varying depending upon the specific social parameters of a relationship), a great deal of popular discourse revolves around short-cuts for ascertaining someone's character "type," through various personality markers (cleanliness, energy-level, easygoingness, punctuality, blood-type, etc). But these cues can map in complicated ways onto actual (contextual contingent) identity performance. Thus, there is a tension between relationally determined performance indices vs. contextually independent indices (such a blood-type)—which are often invoked in Japan as markers that supposedly supersede contextual variation.

The structure of *nikki* responses in mixi underscores this tension between relationally specific cues (such as grammatical coding) vs. contextually independent cues (such as avatar selection). By posting a response to a *nikki*, mixi friends put themselves on display as a kind of social riddle to be solved, and their avatars are positioned as gateways to potential resolutions—resolutions to the tensions that their multi-modal identity performances indirectly raise. In this sense, the lack of photorealistic avatars in mixi avatars may point less to the dangers of self-exposure and more to the positioning of avatar as

veil<sup>9</sup>—an object which both distorts and reveals its wearer. I invoke the figure of the veil here to suggest how an avatar seduces by withholding scopic knowledge; it shrouds its subject in mystery and takes pleasure in the delayed gratification exposure—all the while offering a tantalizing promise that there *is*, after all, something to be revealed (and protected).

But mixi de-emphasizes the display of the veil by placing comments within scenarios that purport to be contextually transparent. In other words, in contrast to the kinds of “riddles” which Myspace facilitates, mixi positions responses as explicit pair-part compliments of equally explicit provocations (i.e. *nikeki* posts). This assumption of contextual transparency makes *nikeki* responses very different from Myspace comments.

In Myspace, the ambiguity of interactional context creates a kind of textual mystery, positioning potential lurking friends as the proximate “other”—i.e. the uncanny “other” who lies only one degree removed from familiarity, one degree away from being able to understand the interactional context of a particular message board comment. In other words, the structure of Myspace positions the lurking friend as only slightly outside, “looking in” to a conversation they only half understand. The role of avatars in this context underscores the uncanny strangeness of this lack of interpretability. Photorealistic images emphasize the certificate of presence of an embodied voice—a voice that clearly “knows” the profile owner. These kinds of decontextualized comments then purport not to recognize their decontextual nature—they act as if the onus is on a 3<sup>rd</sup> party reader (the lurking friend) to “get it”—to understand the interactional context of this conversation. The avatar, then, tempts the reader with the promise of intimate knowledge just beyond reach.

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<sup>9</sup> My goal here is not to reify orientalist readings of Japanese exoticism, which place the gaze in a position of masculine intrusion and consumption, but rather to point to modes in which this practice of incomplete exposure as a kind of self performance manifests itself in various Japanese communicative practices.

In mixi, however, the “conversation” itself is completely interpretable. Instead, in this case promise of knowledge fulfillment is shifted to emphasize questions about the *nature* of the *relationship* between respondent and diarist. The desire to “know” the context of this relationship emerges as a kind of shrouded figure which offers various clues for the determined voyeur/eavesdropper (i.e. lurking friend) who is willing to navigate. Here, then, the existence of variously figured relationships towards the profile owner creates a kind of seductive context-clash which invites a “reader” to click to commenters’ profile pages as a way of resolving mysteries about these relationships. As mentioned earlier, this emphasis on shrouded relationship distinguishes mixi’s *nikki* comments from myspace or facebook wall posts where, in contrast, conversational context is what gets shrouded while relational status is often explicitly invoked through various “teaser” lines such as: “let’s hang out soon,” “you’re the crazy one,” “I haven’t seen you in forever!” etc. These kinds of comments leave the contextual parameters of the conversation itself unresolved but point to potential resolutions about relationship status. Sometimes *nikki* comments also invoke “insider” information that points to decontextualized conversational topics between commenter and poster, however,

### **5.6 Diary Comments, Shared Performance, and Shrouded Relational Context:**

As explained above, *nikki* comments orient themselves—in contrast to myspace/facebook wall posts—towards an explicit conversational context. Moreover, this specific conversational topic is put in play by the *nikki* itself, and so in this sense, we can say that the “voice” of the *nikki* situates the “voice” of the comments. I would like to push this notion of situated context a little further to argue that the *nikki* post authorizes a particular kind of genred identity “play.” As an example, I will return to Taoru’s *nikki* post (in which

he details his experience riding cross country on a motorcycle). I am interested, here, in the way that Taoru's confessional voice licenses one of his commenters to harness this confessional mode as a framework for their own nostalgic revelations about a desire for intimacy.

(3)*Anko*: ...

*When I used to ride a bike I would make small talk. I'd make friends, talk with them for a little while. Then he would go right. And I would go left.*

*I don't know their names but they were important friends.*

*Taoru [responding to Anko]:*

*Anko, that was some emotionally rich content. (Shimijimi... [sentimental])*

*I'll report your feeling to Nami. She hasn't come yet.*

This somewhat unusual comment seems to go beyond a simple affirmation of Taoru's *nikeki* post. Anko, here, takes up a "voice" that diverges from the affirmative metapragmatic commentary of the other comments, and instead, uses Taoru's post as a springboard for his own confessional performance. In effect, Anko has quite literally borrowed the kind of literary style that Taoru modeled in his *nikeki* post. Perhaps, then, we can think of Taoru's confessional gesture as an invitation—a beckoning of his readers into his own performative "space." In this sense, we could imagine that *nikeki* can also serve as instigations of performative interaction, authorizing identity play for their potential audiences.

To reiterate a point made earlier, the *shishōsetsu*-like literary style that Taoru has modeled here carries with it an ideology that privileges sincerity over the potential dangers of reckless exposure. Sincerity, then, is a kind of tenuous performative achievement, that—if successful—manages to "trump" the dangers of context clash. And at the same time this mode of sincerity also seems to mobilize the risk associated with context clash as a source of dramatic energy.

On the surface, Anko merely “riffs” on the topic at hand—motorcycle-riding as a kind of fluid yet intimate social space—but in relating his own experiences to this theme, Anko reveals his own longing for a kind of anonymous intimacy, vis-à-vis memories of “important friends” whose names he never knew. Juspe’s *nikki* post, then, seems to have provided a model for a mode of confession that is much more directly conscious of its audience than a typical “affirming” *nikki* comment might be. Grammatically, the comment avoids an explicit addressee and instead assumes the stance of a private voice oriented for public consumption. Like *shishōsetsu* writing, the narrative gesture here invites a reader to experience the author’s voice *as if* they were reading over his shoulder.

The comment is also highly structured according to a set of *shishōsetsu*-like narrative beats. For example, rather than merely reporting that he separated from his motorcycle friends, he stretches out the duration of this moment through a spatialized emphasis on the different directions of departure, giving equal metric weight to the initial meeting, the brief encounter, the exit of the acquaintance (stage right), and finally his own exit in the opposite direction: “I’d make friends, talk with them for a little while. Then he would go right. And I would go left.” The next line also sets up metric beats with opposing sense categories: “I don’t know their names” (i.e. they were strangers) *but* “they were important friends.” This line reverses the conventional expectations about friendship by deploying an ironic pairing of intimacy and unfamiliarity.

This deliberate juxtaposition seems to map, again, onto a connection between the kind of “intimate strangers” that one meets while a riding motorcycle cross-country and the kind of “intimate strangers” that one encounters online. The subtext of Anko’s comment is that “they were important friends” precisely *because* their names were unknown. Like Tomita’s notion of the “intimate stranger” and Walther’s notion of the hyper-personal

effect, Anko seems to be pointing to the ways that brief anonymous interactions can mobilize intensely intimate experiences. In this sense, the comment seems rife with metaphorical implications about the mixi platform itself—where pseudonymous handles, non-photorealistic avatars, and semi-anonymous encounters characterize the user experience.

Taoru's response to Anko is also significant. After Anko's comment, Taoru responds without returning to his *shishōsetsu*-like language of confessional performance and instead orients himself towards Anko *as if* he were responding to Anko's *nikki*—i.e. by approving of the “emotionally rich content.” Taoru's approval here seems to treat the comment itself as a performative media object in its own right (deserving of semi-detached commentary) rather than as merely another salvo in an ongoing conversation. Taoru also suggests that he will convey some sort of “feeling” to a third person whom both Taoru and Anko know. This is significant, not only because it draws upon Japanese discourse of social “go-betweens,” but also because Taoru has put into play a non-explicit conversational context (leaving potential 3<sup>rd</sup> party readers in the dark as to who this Nami is and why she would want to know about Anko's presumably hidden feelings of nostalgic longing). Interestingly, then, we have a situation that mirrors the conversational ambiguity of myspace and facebook posts. However, this digression from explicit topic has been initiated by a profile owner as oppose to by a commenter (as would be the case in myspace and facebook wall posts). Moreover, the digression is also relatively “visible,” because it takes place within the context of the original post and continues the theme of hidden longing as its subtext. In this sense, the conversational context here remains explicit: i.e. that Taoru intends to convey the very “feeling” that Anko achieved in his comment. We know “what” Taoru intends to convey (insofar as this “what,” while not explicit, has been set in play by the performative thrust of

Anko's comment). Instead, *again* what is left unsaid is the particular relational context that connects Taoru, Anko, and Nami. It is this relational background information which contains the seeds of potential context clash. The conversational context, here, points dramatically to unanswered questions of relationship status. How do Anko and Nami know each other? Why would Nami want to know about Anko's longing for the bygone intimacy of strangers? Is Anko trying to breach some new ground in his relationship with Nami, and if so, how would Taoru's transmission of Anko's hidden romantic side? Is Nami going to read these posts? Is she a friend of either Taoru or Anko? It is these kinds of questions about relationship status that might make a 3<sup>rd</sup> party ("eavesdropping") navigator want to click on commenter's hyperlinked profile pages in hopes of narrative resolution. In this sense, the commenter's hyperlinked name serves as a kind minimal avatar—an image in its own right that beckons the attention of others even as it presumes to be preoccupied with more pressing concerns.

### **5.7 What do hyperlinks want?:**

Focusing this discussion around social networking sites (and specifically the position of avatars in relation to *nikeki* posts in mixi) I have argued that the question "What do pictures want?" can be shifted to ask: "what do social media avatars want?" and then refocused again to ask "what do hyperlinks—as a generalized form of avatar— want?" And the answer, I have suggested, is that these avatars want you to believe that they have secrets to offer: secrets which are always just beyond reach, secrets which emerge out of the specific contextual parameters, and structural features, of social media "sites." In this sense, these avatars want "you" to desire the knowledge which they claim to keep shrouded behind one more layer of obfuscation... always one more "click" away.

## **Conclusions:**

In conclusion, I would like to offer some general observations about the role of this kind of research approach within a wider discussion of ethnographic methodology.

Typically, ethnographic practice relies on the ability of a researcher to abstract normative categories as a heuristic guide to understanding token instances of cultural practice. The notion of an ethnographic description of ritual, for example, assumes that epistemological value resides in being able to abstract the prototype case—the *legisign* in Peircean parlance (1960) from a mass of mimetically interrelated examples. All ethnography to a certain extent makes assumptions that enable an abstraction of normative patterns across *intra-group* partitions of social space. This is the conceit that allows us to draw various boundaries around groups of people and claim that such-and-such a group has a set of communicative practices which are more-or-less mutually intelligible among its members—even as this very mode is actively being (re)constructed in and by everyday cultural practice. In this sense, while pan-cultural abstraction requires some sort of qualified biological (or technological) explanation, other sorts of more group-specific cultural abstractions are embraced as (at the very least) heuristic necessities.

This conceit also allows us to talk about macro-level categories such as nationalism, race, gender, etc. with the confidence that cultural construction is something that happens at the level of the community itself (usually a geographically determined unit of analysis). While these macro-level categories are invoked, negotiated, revised, contested, and reshaped, they nevertheless must ultimately pass through the substrate of micro-level community interaction. We take this assumed leap between micro- and macro-social levels of analysis as a kind of given, a necessary leap of faith. Likewise, terminology like ‘identity,’ ‘genre,’ ‘ritual,’

‘culture,’ etc., make the assumption that there is some significant level of default intra-group consistency of experience.

However, in online environments, where geographical boundaries are less salient than linguistic ones, these issues of abstraction and cultural construction of normative categories seem to become de-anchored. When the structural “rules” of interaction (i.e. at the level of abstracted patterns) have just as much to do with particular design features—for example the decision to include newsfeeds in facebook, or the decision to include *ashiato* in *mixi*—as they do with the actual behavior of the users themselves, we seem to have an epistemological problem. How do we localize (even in virtual space) a particular set of intra-group, degree-wise-consistent, behavioral patterns and then label such-and-such a group as representing definitive examples of such-and-such a practice? Setting aside the notion of locating a “Japanese” internet practice, how can one even locate a particular practice within a particular subgroup at a particular historical moment in time and (virtual) network space? The answer I propose is two fold:

First, we must understand the dialectical interactions between design and user practice. There is a temptation to reduce explanations of design architecture to a kind of teleology of market pressure such that any successful design represents a kind of cultural “best-fit.” But such an approach ignores the degree to which designs interact dialectically with the behavioral practices of the users who adapt to (as well as alter) certain media platforms. Instead, rather than think about design in teleological terms such that a given design becomes popular in a given market precisely because it “fits” the needs of a particular user group, I think it is more useful to recognize that the presence of particular interface designs and particular usage patterns associated with such designs are nevertheless historically significant facts (which can be understood as setting the stage for subsequent

design models and evolving trajectories of user practice). In this sense, Ito looks at *keitai* behavior in Japan not as something essentially Japanese and instead thinks about this development in terms of the technological and historical milieu which immediately preceded it. Thus in the context of mixi, we can think about how mixi as a social environment builds upon, challenges, or reshapes preexisting strategies, behaviors, values, and social needs that are associated with other technologies (*deai*, *meiru tomo*, usenet, *gyaru-moji*, pagers, etc.), other interfaces (such as 2channel, youtube, etc.), and other genres (such as the *shishōsetsu* mode of confessional writing).

Second, and perhaps most significant, I would conjecture that despite the inherent incommensurability between technological determinism, on the one hand, and teleological market driven explanations, on the other, we can nevertheless learn a great deal about the interaction between design and practice when *users* voice explicit concerns about design structure itself.

The initial backlash against facebook newsfeeds, for example, represents a kind of metapragmatic discourse that tells us an enormous amount about the practices and beliefs of those who protested (boyd 2006c, 2008). The meta-discourse in facebook surrounding the newsfeed debacle represented a remarkably salient site of epistemological clarity in the sense that suddenly we had a remarkable degree of awareness about people's normative expectations about privacy and navigational behaviors (i.e. before newsfeeds disrupted these practices). We also learned that facebook designers' notions of privacy as a binary (either, or) type of value was not at all adequate to encompass the kinds of sophisticated negotiations between deliberate exposure and accidental "stalking" that had been occurring (*Ibid*). In other words, people had long been using facebook as a way of deliberately speaking to the eavesdroppers but at the same time requiring that on the surface their cultural production

was not coded explicitly as directed to eavesdroppers at all. It is the difference between saying something to a stranger in an elevator versus saying it to a friend and pretending not to notice the stranger standing behind you. The facebook newsfeed modification transformed online performances into explicit public gestures without any warning. In this sense, as boyd argues, it was like the experience of talking at a party and having the music suddenly cut out so that everyone in the room can hear what you are saying (2006e). In this sense, researchers should pay extra attention to moments of disjuncture for understanding how design platforms sometimes misapprehend (or perhaps correctly apprehend but nevertheless disrupt) existing user practice.

It is precisely at the liminal boundaries between extremes of purported technological determinism and teleological explanations that one finds the most explicit manifestation of the relationship between practice and ideology. In other words, the dialectical push and pull between design architecture and social practice reveals itself most obviously when these two poles of causality are in opposition, because it is precisely in these scenarios that pockets of micro-level metapragmatic discourse coalesce into a sudden critical mass of public discourse. Often this discourse addresses, or attempts to resolve, what I have been calling context clash.

Moreover, sudden structural modification of a social networking site is not necessarily an essential precondition for one to observe these kinds of metapragmatic responses to design architecture. As I have described, metapragmatic discourse surrounding *yominige* (read-and-flee) practice evolved independently on sites like 2channel as users began trying to make sense of the evolving social expectations of mixi. This discourse revolved around the etiquette of *ashiato* (footprints) and prompted various modes of metapragmatic

discourse—for example, in “my rule” clarifications that users added to their mixi profile pages.

Also, metapragmatic discourse about user practice often emerges out of collective (viral) action. This kind of discourse can be viciously mob-like in its impact (such as in the *matsuri* scenarios that I have described). But the responses to such action (widespread fears of online exposure, for example) also represent another kind of relevant discursive framework. In other cases, metapragmatic discourse can emerge on a smaller scale (such as in the mini-*matsuri* triggered by Akira’s *nikki* post). These kinds of online events shape people’s thinking about how to navigate the various layers of invisible audiences and anticipate potential areas of context clash.

The role of invisible audiences can also be understood in relation to the profile avatars of commenters (on *nikki* posts). Here I develop the notion of interface pragmatics, in order to argue that mixi’s structure encourages a more explicit conversational context while shrouding the relationship between poster and profile owner (i.e. reversing the structure of myspace and facebook’s wall feature). In mixi, the ambiguity of variously figured relationships towards the profile owner creates a kind of seductive context-clash which invites a “reader” to click to commenter’s profile pages as a way of resolving mysteries of relationship rather than conversational context (as is the case in myspace). In this sense then, we should not always assume that context clash is something users should want to avoid at costs. Instead, in some cases the risks associated with context clash have certain performative benefits.

Finally, throughout this project, I have attempted to illustrate how socio-linguistic categories of the Japanese language map onto lived partitions of social space. It is my contention that the theoretical implications of context-clash are intimately connected to the

pragmatic structure of language use. Various categories of relational specificity and spatio-temporal partitioning inform the way that Japanese navigate various areas of context clash. I have argued that these categories offer a tool-kit for thinking about context clash in online scenarios. As various normative cultural categories become de-anchored from the salience of geographic boundaries, linguistic partitions of social space are increasingly relevant as a way of understanding social practice online. This kind of linguistically informed investigation of context clash, then, also offers a useful entry point for thinking about comparisons to English language environments.

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## Abstract

In light of the increasing awareness of what boyd calls “porousness” in online media (2002: 25), the notion of context clash (boyd 2006b) has emerged as a key area of theoretical interest in studies of computer mediated communication (CMC). Outside of CMC, different presentations of self are often segregated by social situation, however, the porousness of digital media allows these different self-presentations to more readily “collide” with one another leaving social awkwardness in their wake. This paper argues that the parameters of context clash need to be understood within various culturally specific matrices—both discursive and sociolinguistic. In particular, the subject of context clash will be examined in a Japanese social networking site called mixi, with special attention paid to the role of mixi’s diary feature. Specific design features and patterns of usage associated with the mixi interface need to be understood within the context of Japanese language use and within a wider discursive framework of social partitioning and confessional writing genres. Finally the paper will introduce the concept of interface pragmatics in order to argue that context clash can also serve as a solicitation for visual attention (by attracting 3<sup>rd</sup> party navigators to click to a commenter’s profile page in order to resolve contextual “mysteries”).

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