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Concepts and Trends

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Chapter 25

Women Bloggers Seeking Validation and Financial Recompense in the Blogosphere

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ABSTRACT

Previous researchers investigating motivations for blogging have suggested mainly intangible benefits: for instance, documenting the author's life, providing commentary and opinions, expressing deeply felt emotions, working out ideas through writing, and forming and maintaining communities and forums. The research detailed in this chapter focuses on the materialistic motivations of women bloggers in the U.K. and U.S. The author suggests that a need for validation and a strong financial stimulus should be added to this list of incentives.

INTRODUCTION

This is not going be one of those spiritually uplifting blogs in which I name every fetus I've ever lost and then derive comfort from the fact that I have so many little angels looking down on me from heaven. No, this is going to be an angry blog, so please spare me the lectures about my attitude....I get plenty of opportunities to be a smiley-faced trooper in my real life. This is the only place where I get to be plain old pissed off at the universe.

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the motivations of women who blog, and the audience for whom they consider themselves to be writing. What makes a woman, like the one in the passage quoted above, write about her anguish, her hopes, her feelings of loss and pain and her plain anger in a publicly accessible website, where her words can be read by total strangers all over the world? What makes writing a blog different for a woman from simply writing in a diary or constructing a personal web page? And what, in particular, attracts women to journal blogging – North American studies suggest that more than half of all journal blog authors are women, that they persevere longer and write more (Henning, 2003) and that at least 50% of bloggers

in particular are female (Herring, Kouper, Schiedt, & Wright, 2004).

This chapter summarises research into the motivations of women bloggers in the U.K. and the U.S. undertaken between 2005 and 2007 (see also Pedersen, 2006; Pedersen & Macafee, 2007; Pedersen 2007a). It suggests that female bloggers in particular are motivated by a need for validation and that there is a growing financial motivation to be found in the blogosphere, amongst men and women, but of particular interest to women looking for ways of earning income from home.

BACKGROUND

From a handful of link-driven, internet-filtering sites in 1997 (Blood, 2000), blogging has taken off rapidly. The basic form of a blog is generally accepted to be brief, dated posts, collected on one web page. They are chronologically ordered rather than by topic or argument. At first, the use of blogs was restricted to those who had the necessary advanced programming skills. Such early blogs were primarily link-driven sites with editorial commentary – so-called *filter blogs*. However, with the introduction of free or inexpensive and easy-to-use blogging services, such as Blogger since 1999, the number of blogs has expanded rapidly (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004). In 2008, the blog-tracking directory Technorati claims to be tracking over 112 million blogs. Filter sites have been joined by a second type of blog – the *journal blog*, which is essentially an online diary. The newer journal blogs have a commentary concentrated style, which may also include links and reader responses, depending on the theme and purpose of the blog. Whereas filter blogs are heavily reliant on links to and from their site and the comments of readers, researchers have suggested that journal blogs tend to have smaller audiences and fewer links to other sites (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2003 Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright, 2004). Links-driven

filter blogs tend to be focused on external events, while journal bloggers write about events in their own lives. However, it is important not to make too rigorous a distinction between the two types of blog – *filter bloggers* often write about their own lives and thoughts and *journal bloggers* will comment on external events such as politics and international affairs.

While blogging as a form of online social interaction has attracted a growing amount of academic investigation in recent years, until recently the majority of such research has focused on the North American experience. This imbalance is now being redressed in relation to non-English language blogging. For example, examination of the state of the Polish blogosphere by Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmokl, and Sapp (2006), Tricas-Garcia and Merelo-Guervos' work on the Spanish blogosphere (2004), and Abold's (2006) discussion of the use of blogs in the 2005 German election campaign. Work on the Asian blogosphere has also developed rapidly (for example, see Hsi-Peng & Kuo-Lun, 2007; Miura & Yamashita, 2007) There has also been a limited amount of research into the U.K. blogosphere. Discussion of gender issues within the U.K. blogosphere has been undertaken by Pedersen and Macafee (2007) while Auty (2005) has investigated the blogs of U.K. politicians. Thelwall and his team have undertaken interesting research into bloggers' reporting of and reaction to events such as the London bombings and the Danish cartoon controversy, demonstrating that blog search engines offer a unique retrospective source of public opinion (Thelwell, 2006; Thelwall, Byrne, & Goody, 2007; Thelwell & Stuart, 2007).

From the outset, journal blogs have been associated with women. The research of teams led by Herring, for example, suggests that women write more diary-like blogs while male bloggers write more of the opinion-focused ones (Herring & Paolillo, 2006), and that journal bloggers are at least 50% female (Herring et al, 2004), while Henning (2003) suggests that women bloggers

persevere longer and write more. The number of journal blogs is growing and now accounts for around 70% of all blogs on the Internet – meaning that the number of women bloggers is rising. In fact, according to a Nielsen/Net Ratings report published in the U.K. in May 2007, young women aged between 18 and 34 are now the most dominant online group in the U.K., marking a major shift from traditional male internet dominance. It is suggested that British women in this age category spend, on average, around 60 hours a month online (Nielsen Net Ratings, 2007).

However, a substantial number of women bloggers has not necessarily lead to female dominance in the blogosphere. Here, popularity is measured in terms of links and it has been remarked that men tend to receive more links to their blogs from other bloggers (for references to the extensive online debate, see Pollard, 2003; Ratliff, 2004; Garfunkel, 2005). Ratliff has also produced evidence that men's postings receive more comments than women's (2006). Meanwhile, women's blogs make up only 15% (Henning, 2003) of all *blogrolls* (the list of recommended links on a blog), and women bloggers are more even-handed in their blogroll linkages than male bloggers, who demonstrate a clear preference for linking to other male bloggers (Pedersen, 2007b). It has also been claimed that a greater amount of attention is given in the media to male bloggers (Herring et al, 2004; Pedersen & Macafee, 2006), while the apparent lack of women bloggers on political issues prompted Taylor (2004) to ask, "Is Blog a Masculine Noun?" One of the reasons suggested for such an imbalance is that blogs about technology and politics, which are popular subjects throughout the Internet, are more likely to be authored by men. It is suggested that men are more likely to blog about external events, rather than personal ones, and are therefore more likely to be found by prospective readers when using a search engine. Such discussions have lead to the establishment of the BlogHer movement in the United States with the mission to create oppor-

tunities for women bloggers to pursue exposure, education and community.

WOMEN'S MOTIVATIONS FOR BLOGGING

The work of teams led by Schiano and Nardi on the motivations of bloggers suggested five main reasons for blogging (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2003; Schiano, Nardi, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). These are: documenting the author's life, providing commentary and opinions, expressing deeply felt emotions, working out ideas through writing, and forming and maintaining communities and forums. The research detailed below focused on women bloggers' motivations for blogging; it suggests that a need for validation and a strong financial motivation need to be added to this list of motivations.

A pilot analysis of 50 U.K. and U.S. women's blogs focused on women's reasons for blogging. The blogs were selected using the randomizer function from the blog directory Globe of Blogs. The criteria for selection were that: (1) the blogger had to have posted on her blog within a month of the start of the selection process; (2) the blog was written in English; (3) the blogger was resident in either the U.K. or the U.S.; and (4) the blogger was a woman over the age of 18. It was decided to exclude teenage blogs from the sample. A large proportion of blogs is written by adolescents: bloggers under 19 made up 58.3% in Henning's 2005 figures (2005b), up from 52.8% in 2003. This population of bloggers is usually studied separately, since teenage blogging is acknowledged by most researchers to be a very different type of online communication from that of adult bloggers, associated generally with the use of community sites such as Bebo and MySpace. Therefore, it was decided to focus only on bloggers over the age of 18, which also avoided many ethical issues (Huffaker, 2004; Kumar et al., 2004; Lenhart & Madden, 2005). The analysis focused on reported

motivations for blogging stated either in the "About Me" section that most blogs offer or in the blog itself. Blogs usually contain an archives section where all previous blog entries can be read, and the majority of the blogs analysed for this research contained two or three years' worth of entries in such archives.

A second, larger, blog analysis plus a survey was undertaken in two stages the following year. Overall 160 U.K. and U.S. bloggers (equal numbers of men and women and equal numbers from each country) were surveyed about their approaches to blogging, including blogging techniques, habits, motivations and rewards. At the same time, data was collected directly from respondents' blogs and by means of online tools. Statistics for the sampled blogs were obtained from a range of blog-monitoring sites. These included: the ranking of the blog on two blog directories: Technorati and The Truth Laid Bear; a figure for the number of inward links, averaged from Technorati and BlogPulse figures (over variable periods of time depending on the content of the blogs' feeds); and the number of outward links and images in the current feed, expressed as figures per 1000 words, based on data from SurfWax. Characteristics of the blog that were visible to inspection were noted, following the grounded theory approach of Herring and others (2004). These included: (1) the age of the blog (in months), based on the starting point of the archives; (2) links in the blogroll; (3) the number and nature of enhancements to the blog, such as site meters and logos or links for other blog services; (4) if there was a site meter, whether visitor statistics were hidden; and, (5) where available, the average number of visitors per day. The bloggers were identified through the use of the blog directories - Globe of Blogs and BritBlog. Both directories offered the opportunity to identify a blogger's home county or state, which meant that it was possible to ensure a wide coverage of both countries.

In addition, a blog related to the research was

established. This gave first-hand experience of the challenges of blogging and also offered the opportunity for further data collection since the surveyed bloggers were invited to comment on the research as it was ongoing, an opportunity which they took up with enthusiasm.

Most women bloggers in the sample attempted to come to grips with their reasons for blogging at the start of writing their blogs. However, the motivations expressed at the start of a blogger's career might change and adapt over time. As one blogger wrote:

This site started as a rather sad collection of pages containing fonts, files, and a bit about me back in 1996. I started a 'Thoughts' page; a list of bulleted random thoughts updated every few months. At that point, I could count all the visitors on one hand and I knew who every one of them was. Now I get 50,000+ hits a month, so this page has become a lot less personal (e.g. I won't lament about my deepest thoughts and feelings and write sad poems about my cat). I now blog for a variety of reasons and people back home use it to see what's up with me, but it's mostly a way to sneak in some creative writing when I'm not writing software user guides.

Several of the blogs analysed were originally established as part of the writer's career or studies. However, these blogs might become less focused. A librarian who had started her blog as part of her continuous professional development, "to stay informed about changes and developments in our field," was surprised to find that this was not all she wanted to write about and that life outside the library continually intruded into her blog entries. She accepted this and adapted her blog. What was surprising is the way in which some bloggers refused to allow their blog to adapt to include references to matters outside its stated purpose. Recipe blogs were "phased out" because the blogger "rarely had anything to add"; a blog focused on the South Beach diet stopped when

the diet stopped, but the blogger reported that she would start a more general blog instead – "I have so much else to write and the topic of this blog has limited me." Some women even managed to keep more than one blog on the go at the same time to fulfil different needs. Several of these second blogs documented the writers' sex lives, although one woman wrote a separate blog about her pet hedgehog.

This brings us to the question of who these women bloggers were writing for. Many of them were writing, firstly and most importantly, for themselves. The blog was used to vent their rage or celebrate their achievements in a more formal way than merely telling their family or friends. One blogger commented: "Unfortunately for you, dear readers, I am writing to myself as the primary audience and you all as the secondary. So it might not be as interesting for someone else to read. And for that, my apologies, but I won't be changing the behaviour." This writer had not told her family about her blog, which meant an irregular approach to her entries, caused by the need to keep her blog – and the comments about her family to be found within it – a secret.

Other women, however, did inform their families and friends about their blogs and actually used them as a form of communication with loved ones, particularly if they lived away from them. Such bloggers commented as they posted that they were aware that their postings were being read by people who knew them in "RL" – real life. A student in Bloomington, Indiana, was "wierded out" to be informed by her boyfriend that his mother now read her blog, while a woman in the middle of a divorce settlement was warned by her lawyer to start a new blog under a different name so that her soon-to-be ex couldn't use any statements in the blog as evidence in his battle to be granted custody of their children.

Although most of the bloggers studied had "come out" to their loved ones about their blogs, they were still very aware, and mostly appreciative, of the total strangers who read and sometimes

commented on their posts. Many had regular readers, who became virtual friends and offered support and encouraging words on a daily basis – some even reported exchanging presents with regular readers. Those who left comments on a blog were likely to have a blog of their own, and dialogues over two blogs, with associated links, are common. Bloggers often apologize to their readers for boring them or not blogging for a day or two.

This is the essential difference between a blog and a diary – the feedback from readers, and it is argued that the validation offered by such feedback is one of the main motivators for women who write journal blogs. Readers frequently commented on the latest blog entry and such comments were almost always supportive: either contrasting the blogger's experience to their own, offering advice or simply using the oft-repeated phrase "You go, girl!" It was noticeable that commentators were usually similarly situated and therefore felt that they understood the blogger's experience. Perhaps this is not an unexpected finding. Working mothers commented on the blogs of other working mothers, ditto stay-at-home moms or home educators. Supportive comments on sites dedicated to miscarriages or attempts to conceive came from other women in the same situation. On rare occasions, a negative comment might be made. The useful thing about a blog is that the blogger is the editor and can immediately remove such a comment – thus making the "public" sphere more "private" again. However, in the time that this comment existed, the blogger was usually inundated by many more supportive comments than usual.

Bloggers asked their readers for comments and frequently thanked individuals for making a useful, wise or just funny reply. One woman urged readers to seek out her mother's new blog and to leave a comment so that she knew that people were reading her. Another, an administrator from Minnesota, ruminated on how her attitude toward blogging had changed in the two years she had been writing:

Suddenly it feels like it has become less of an outlet, less of a "journal" and more of an opportunity for me to seek the opinions of others - opinions that I'd never come across in offline-life, due to my fairly small circle of friends. I crave comments. I crave support. I crave attention. I crave the feedback.

A Financial Motivation

As part of the survey, bloggers were asked about the usefulness of blogging: 29 respondents (18 of whom were women) agreed that blogging was useful because it brought customers for their business and 31 indicated that one of their reasons for keeping a blog was the hope that it would generate income. Such a financial motivation was particularly strong amongst women bloggers who were looking for ways in which to generate income as an alternative to full-time employment outside the home. Of the 31 respondents who mentioned a financial motivation in their written responses to the survey, 21 were women, and their responses showed very clearly that they were hoping that their blogging would lead to some sort of financial gain. As one U.K. woman respondent stated: "I hope to eventually make enough money from my blog to support my family; I see it as the beginnings of an online business."

The ways in which bloggers hoped to make money through their blogging differed. Some bloggers used their blog as a marketing tool for themselves or for their businesses. For example, one U.K. woman explained: "I started the blog as a way of promoting my online business, enhancing online word-of-mouth marketing … and developing my brand." Her business sold home furnishings online and the blog described how she tracked such objects down. Another U.K. woman, who blogs about parenthood, stated that her blogging had started as a leisure activity but was now opening up serious work opportunities. One respondent, who worked as a children's book illustrator, reported that she showcased her work and sold associated greetings cards through her blog. Another respondent, who described herself as an English courtesan, stated that many of her clients came through her blog, which offered details about her rates and specialisms.

Direct financial reward was reported less often, but at least two women bloggers had managed to turn their blogging into a career – one U.K. respondent worked as a freelance blogger, setting up blogs for West End shows and individual actors. As she put it herself: "instead of blogging to moan about my lack of a decent job, I blog for money!" An American woman respondent reported that her blog of film criticism, originally set up for her friend's amusement, was now syndicated across three newspapers in her home state.

Of course, blogs can also make money through carrying advertising or requesting subscriptions. Heather B. Armstrong, the writer of the blog Dooce.com, famously supports her entire family through the advertising that her blog carries. As well as carrying advertisements on their blogs, bloggers might also earn money through "pay-per-post" advertising where bloggers write about certain products or services in their blogs in return for payment, although there is unease about this development in the blogosphere, which is seen as a morally ambiguous area because of the damage it might do to the editorial integrity of a blog, and no respondent in this study admitted to such activity.

Bloggers might even hope for income through the printed publication of their entire blog. Blogs which have been successfully published as books include: *Belle de Jour: Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl*; Tom Reynolds' *Blood, Sweat and Tea: real life adventures in an inner-city ambulance;* and *The World According to Mimi Smartypants*. In spring 2007 press coverage in the U.K. focused on the £70,000 book deal given to ex-*Sunday Times* education correspondent Judith O'Reilly for her blog *Wife in the North*. In August 2007 award-winning blog *My Boyfriend is a Twat*

written by Belguim-based Zoe McCarthy was also reproduced in book form. There are now so many of these blog-to-book publications, also known as *blooks*, that a prize, the Blooker Prize, has been established. While none of the respondents to this survey had been approached by publishers yet, one admitted: "I also started blogging a young adult novel I am writing, to create interest in it, and hoping that by some chance an editor will happen across it and offer to publish it!" Another reported:

I have aspirations to write a book about the food industry and I believe that writing the blog is a tool to (1) exercise my writing muscles and developing a voice; (2) distinguishing or creating a unique voice; (3) offer me opportunities for credibility and to be viewed as a subject matter expert.

In 2006 *Julie and Julia*, a blook chronicling a woman's attempt to cook all the recipes in Julia Child's classic 1961 cookbook *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in a tiny New York apartment kitchen, beat *Belle de Jour: The Intimate Adventures of a London Call-Girl* to win the first Blooker award. However, it was *Belle de Jour* that went on to be serialized on British television the following year.

Research into the motivations of bloggers has previously focused on intangible rewards. However, financial motivations for blogging were found on both sides of the Atlantic. The business press has already declared that blogs have the potential to be effective marketing and communication tools for small businesses. In 2005, both *Time* and *Business Week* ran special issues devoted to blogging while *Fortune* put blogs as number one in its "10 Tech Trends to Watch for." In 2008, would-be bloggers can buy books entitled *Start Your Own Blogging Business* and *ProBlogger: Secrets for Blogging Your Way to a Six Figure Income*. So far though, there has been limited academic investigation assessing the financial rewards of blogging, in particular for the lone blogger rather than large

corporations. Hill (2005) investigated the attitudes and experiences of small business bloggers using blogs as a marketing and communication tool in his MBA dissertation. However, this was a small-scale research project surveying only 15 bloggers and focused solely on the marketing possibilities of blogging rather than direct income generation through advertising sales or other opportunities. Overall, Hill's findings suggested that blogs were used for relationship building with the business's clients rather than direct sales. Only one respondent was making any money through the sale of advertising and most found that the main constraint that acted upon their use of the blog was lack of time. The situation seems to have changed since, with more bloggers at least expecting to raise a small amount of money from hosting advertising on their blogs, and many others hoping that their blogging will lead to greater things.

FUTURE TRENDS

At present, the blogosphere continues to expand, although it must be noted that a high proportion of blogs are abandoned. Sifry (2005) estimated 45% in August 2005. Huffaker (2004) likewise found that 43% of teenage bloggers had abandoned blogs. As Henning (2003) puts it, "the majority of blogs started are dissolving into static, abandoned web pages". Some are never used, but are created as tests or as automatic features on social networking sites (Henning, 2005a). While much of the early research into blogging focused on the North American experience, the expansion of the blogosphere into Asia and Europe is already providing new areas of research. In April 2007, Dave Sifry of Technorati reported that Japanese had now overtaken English as the most popular language for blog posts – 37% of posts tracked by Technorati were now in Japanese with English-language posts falling from 39% the previous year to 36%. He also reported that Farsi had joined the top ten most frequently used languages in

the blogosphere, pointing to a growth in blogging in the Middle East (Sifry, 2007). Such an internationalization of the blogosphere offers new opportunities for researchers throughout the world and may well suggest new and different motivations for blogging dependent on different cultures and different international situations.

Financial motivations for blogging appear to be a new and growing trend in the blogosphere demanding further investigation. It is also suggested that the rise of the "blook" and a reliance on advertising income, will repay further investigation, possibly from researchers in publishing and book studies. With the success of blooks, such as *Julie and Julia* and the dramatization of *Belle de Jour,* the book industry is developing a growing interest in cherry picking the most popular or innovative blogs – which after all come with their own established readership and marketing channels. The publication of books aimed at would-be 'probloggers', aiming to get rich from their blogging, also suggests that blogging is beginning to be perceived by some as an opportunity for those who need or wish to work from their own home, which of course includes many women.

CONCLUSION

Women who blog do so for a variety of reasons, some of which have been documented by researchers. Such reasons might include: a need to publish their creative writing; to keep a diary; to communicate with family and friends across distances or to vent their feelings and emotions about particular problems or events in their lives. However, the important overall factor in all of these reasons is that they do this *publicly*. All the blogs studied were publicly accessible on the Internet and made even more available to the general reader through joining a blog-tracking directory. These women did not just want to write down their thoughts and feelings; they wanted the validation of their opinions which only comes from being read by

others and receiving feedback. They could have chosen to write a diary or even to keep their blog private, accessible only by password by a chosen few. Instead, they chose to publish their lives and experiences to the world and welcomed comments, feedback and even the occasional criticism.

In addition, a growing financial motivation can be identified. Such a motivation is not restricted to one sex, but does seem to be particularly appealing to women bloggers looking for a way to earn income from their home. In recent years, publicity about publication deals for blogs has also tended to focus on women bloggers. Such a financial motivation deserves further investigation.

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NOTE

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Blog: Derived from the term "weblog**."** A website, usually maintained by an individual (although there are also group blogs) with brief, dated posts. The posts are chronologically ordered rather than

by topic or argument. Usually contains links to other blogs and web pages with commentary. May also contain readers' comments.

Blogosphere: A collective term for blogs and networks of bloggers.

Blogroll: A list of favorite blogs recommended by the blogger.

Blook: A book published as a blog or a printed book derived from an original blog.

Blooker Prize: A literary award for blooks, sponsored by Lulu.com, a print-on-demand publisher. The first prize was awarded in 2006.

Filter Blogs: Proto-typical blogs. Links driven blogs with editorial commentary. More focused on external events than a filter blog.

Journal Blogs: In comparison to filter blogs, more of an online diary. Usually less reliant on links and readers' comments than filter blogs. More focused on the bloggers' life than a filter blog.