

“The Art of Sharing: Reflexivity in a Digital Age”

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Interpretive Biography

On April 24, 2009, I purchased my first domain name, www.AaronHagenbuch.com, with the intent of creating a blog. I wanted to do this so I could share my thoughts in an online forum, connect with other like-minded individuals, and keep up-to-date on current trends in web design. While this URL currently functions as an online portfolio to accompany my resume and provide visual elements and artifacts that speak to my professional abilities, I only really update this domain when I am looking for a new job, and tend to keep the content professional in nature. For eight years now, I have been mulling over the idea of starting a personal blog to document my life experience, however, I have yet to take that all-important first step.

While I understand that there are many benefits to starting a blog, I soon encountered several drawbacks that halted forward progress. At first it was a concern over aesthetics, spending most of my time trying to get the look and feel of the site just right. Moving toward the mobile web changed everything, and my focus remained on the design of the blog itself vs. content creation. However, even after achieving the desired design, I ultimately discovered that I was uncomfortable with sharing my perspectives in the blogosphere. Extending evaluation of my participation within traditional social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter, my level of interaction diminished. It wasn't until I was in pursuit of my master's degree in Learning, Design and Technology at Penn State, and the emphasis on these digital mediums for learning and personal reflection, that I started to question why this was the case? With so many blogs in existence today and my ability to create a website from scratch, why was I unable to follow through with sharing my thoughts while so many others were comfortable doing so?

With the conscious act of sharing physical experiences over a digital platform and the

augmentation of social interactions that emerge from the transparency of cyberspace, there are negotiations associated with personal identity as it relates to the act of blogging. The increased control over messaging within the blog format and the separation from existing social networks, provide no insights or limits on what could - or should be shared. Considering these two dynamics, every post therefore becomes a direct representation of the creator, blurring the lines that exist between the digital and physical self.

Exploring the societal constructs that surround online identity construction, and attempting to move past the potentially negative ramifications that come with sharing in a public space, I felt as if I adopted a mechanism of self-censorship. By choosing to share only fragmented aspects of my life, I have been able to selectively develop personas shaped by the goal of the social networks themselves, instead of attempting to bring all of these elements together to create unified identity. Just as my LinkedIn profile is for sharing professional updates, and Facebook is used to announce more personal life events, I always thought of a blog as a way to merge these various aspects of my life under a single online space that I could call my own.

In this proposal, I will attempt to elicit positive takeaways that can aid myself and others in not only identifying, but navigating the challenges associated with sharing in a digital space. By examining the motives and obstacles that exist in the everyday lives of current bloggers, it is possible to recognize the multiplicities associated with online identity construction that must be confronted on a regular basis when one moves beyond the walls of established social media networks. Once identified, these findings will be used to aid non-bloggers in evaluating the pros and cons associated with maintaining a blog in order to consciously move toward marrying isolated instances of digital personas that exist on current social media networks.

Conceptual Framework

Statement of the Problem

Despite the benefit of social media networks in bringing real life experiences into the digital realm and aiding in the development of an online identity, there exist clear divides in expression of the virtual self and the actual self. Shared practices and the isolation associated with social networks that are becoming increasingly niche, inadvertently limit and dictate *how* and *what* one ultimately shares online. Additionally, many platforms employ reward-based actions in the form of likes or shares that influence what one wants to post vs. what one actually posts in an attempt to elicit positive responses from a wider audience. From a postmodernist perspective, the idea of a “cultural supermarket” informs the capacity for individuality through the influence of overarching power dynamics that dictate what one values vs. what society values, and the limitations that are imposed by the majority.

"As the consumer market is more dynamic than the older ways of regulating identities, much more fluidity is apparent: people can change their identities more frequently, experiment with them, select more options from a cultural supermarket with far less commitment than before." (Harris, 1996, p. 207).

Technology augments this idea further, and the resulting contradictions highlight a conflict in social identities similar to compartmentalization, in which individuals separate various aspects of oneself and opt to fulfill these roles by managing separate versions of themselves in context-specific fashions. While this may be viewed as a viable mechanism in achieving social acceptance within fixed circles or to attain increased popularity, it represents missed

opportunities to develop lasting autonomy through the self-directed practice of reflexivity, as it exists outside oppressive constructs evident within confined social network structures.

Comparing such practices of sharing on social media to dynamics associated with work, one can argue that a breakdown in character occurs.

“In the flexible, fragmented present, it may seem possible only to create coherent narratives about what has been, and no longer possible to create predictive narratives about what will be.” Sennett (1998, p. 135).

The closed ecosystems of social networks paint a distorted portrait of real life, as users collectively tend to only share positive experiences that maintain status among contacts. Separate from the larger constructs of the world wide web and popularized by the recent development of “fake news,” the value of social media sites is put into question as publishers begin to discover new ways to manipulate what content is distributed and consumed by increasingly large populations. Limiting network participation to members of a respective platform hinders the ability to expand beyond the confines of a particular network, and connect with individuals who may not be members. While membership does provide elements of safety for vulnerable communities by enacting and enforcing rules, guidelines, and community standards; the user base is also cut off from discourse existing outside of that social network. This bubble increases exposure to content generated by influencers, and is perpetuated by a trickle down effect via viral methods, placing emphasis on content types that ultimately reward conformity and deter individual expression.

Though social media sites may aid in providing a scaffold for a user to develop the digital literacy skills required to express oneself online, many structured platforms fail to propel one

toward greater autonomy outside of these community-based constructs. Algorithms are configured to curate content that increases time-on-site metrics and in-turn advertising revenue, and they create invisible barriers that stifle autonomy toward facilitating more meaningful connections over the course of sharing original user-generated content. Only by expanding beyond the walls of the network and exploring new forms of expression through blogging, may individuals be afforded the opportunity to better reflect on who they are, what they are doing, and move toward merging elements of their online and real-life identities on a digital property that they can truly call their own.

Rationale

In the most basic sense, a blog is a regularly updated website composed of posts written by an individual or group of people, and the act of blogging refers to the activity associated with making updates to the site. Though there are existing studies that deal with the construction of identity through blogging, they often examine such behaviors through more tangible forms of oppression to highlight the learned habits of respondents, as documented in *Veiling and Blogging: Social Media as Sites of Identity Negotiation among Saudi Women* (Guta, Hala and Karolak, Magdalena 2015). In such instances, posting anonymously is used as a means to subvert injustices encountered in the physical world. Instead, this study will look exclusively at bloggers who choose not to use avatars or aliases to hide their identity. The behaviors examined will not be framed by activities associated or motivated by formal institutions such as the classroom or the workplace, but rather, the individual self-directed motivations of a blogger to craft messages that align with physical elements of the self through a publicly visible online medium.

The importance of studying bloggers can be rationalized by examining the prevalence of emerging technologies and their ability to infiltrate even the most mundane aspects of everyday life. Connected infrastructures provide increased convenience and efficiency by communicating with one another, and personal blog websites are one of the most effective and visible ways to represent one's own interests and associate it with their real-life identity. The ever-expanding ecosystem of the online realm is actually becoming increasingly fragmented, as information overload disconnects individuals from the idea of creating a more unified sense of self in favor of more contextualized understanding. Hall (1996) argues that identity is "a narrative of self," and is therefore constantly negotiated through our everyday experiences. Personal blogs offer a platform to develop that narrative, increase opportunities to align the digital and physical self, and achieve self-direction through participation in reflexive online activities rooted in the real world. This practice, further legitimizes online behavior, as they yield physical outcomes.

With social networks leveraging big data to inform artificial intelligence to make decisions and automate processes based on several variables that may never even be known to the end user, we see negative aspects of collective consciousness emerge. Simply, the line between fact and fiction is becoming increasingly blurred, and sharing without the act of self-reflection creates a rift in how people construct identity and meaning in the real world. This precipitates the need to expand beyond the constructs of existing social media networks, and more importantly, to reflect on the content that one is consuming. By creating content that resides within one's own webspace, it is possible to subvert more fleeting forms of social interaction online, and develop lasting methods of expression through realizing the benefits that these activities have on determining and completing goals forged in real life. Operating within

the blogosphere lifts content restrictions and democratizes individual expression by not relying on friend counts or interaction metrics (i.e. likes or shares) to dictate the quality or quantity of exposure that one receives.

Widely used in business and education, the blogging channel has been extensively studied. By providing the maximum amount of customization, owners are able to exercise total creative control from the look of a blog, to the way that content is presented. Analysis of these digital artifacts provides key insights into the driving factors that motivate bloggers to engage in this activity, and in-depth interviews provide context that inform why one chose to engage in the practice of blogging in the first place.

Framing the Problem

Everyone has a story, and the act of journaling can be seen as a technique for developing increased awareness. Just as detailed in *Learning from Dumbledore's Pensieve: Metaphor as an Aid in Teaching Reflexivity in Qualitative Research* (Gerstl-Pepin, Patrizio, 2009), the act of keeping a reflexive journal over time provides a growing document composed of several chronologically ordered entries that afford the writer the opportunity to follow the progression of where they reside at the present moment, and look back on where they were at specific points in the past from a narrative perspective. The act of reflecting on these entries, which may be applied to a number of areas that include interests and topics within educational, workplace, and personal life experiences - suggest universal application in the potential for this activity to manifest changes that extend beyond pen and paper. Journaling, however, in the traditional sense, typically exists in isolation and brings with it a unique set of limitations.

Mobile technology is all around us, and increased adoption is shaping the speed and potential reach achieved through the act of sharing personal experiences in real-time. In contrast to journaling, increased immersion highlights incentive for isolating and censoring the recollection of these experiences vs. the freedom of privacy granted through the act of reflexive journaling. The professional, the academic, and the personal self, each come with a unique set of roles, identities, and audiences that allow severed aspects of one's character to exist exclusively within specific social media platforms. Just as these networks dictate what one shares based on the audience, the overarching goal of the respective network regulates users, and makes explicit the digital divides that must be crossed in order to achieve a truly connected sense of self through a unified online identity.

The actual move from social media to blogging signals a conscious effort into the creation of a personalized space residing outside social media limitations. The construction of one's own webspace can be compared to buying or leasing a piece of property, as such an endeavor brings with it certain levels of commitment (money, repairs, time, etc.) that must be considered over the course of creating and maintaining this digital artifact. Sustaining a blog signals self-determination (Ryan, 2002) on the end of the creator, as the choice to continue participating in these activities is not typically motivated by external actors. While the act of blogging can be viewed as being part of a larger community of practice, creators are able to balance the tensions associated with emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives, and freely navigate these structures by assuming the roles and responsibilities associated with taking ownership of their online identity as it pertains to individual association with adopting the self-proclaimed title of "blogger."

Previously, the journey into the blogging arena brought with it a significant learning curve and recurring monthly expenses. Today, however, platforms like Blogger, Tumblr, and WordPress are providing the flexibility and infrastructure to allow anybody to start their own blog, enabling the research to focus on understanding the intrinsic motivations behind bringing the physical self into the digital realm. Examining the specific intent behind creating a blog will provide insights into determining if a heightened awareness existed before, or was developed as a result of constructing and regularly interacting with the online artifact.

Compared to aspects of metacognition in the construction of meaning, Ryan, Kull, and Deci (1997) suggest that self-determination theory can highlight the importance of humans' evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioral self-regulation. This study will attempt to draw conclusions that make evident the informal methods that bloggers adopt in order to navigate the conflict between the separate identities that simultaneously exist offline and online.

To better comprehend these separate designations and the conscious movement of the creator, we establish a hierarchy of merits unique to a specific activity. By comparing the benefits of reflexive journaling (offline) and blogging online (which may occur anonymously or within established social networks), we can identify the advantages associated exclusively with the act of blogging as oneself in the public space, and begin to examine the unique perks associated with striving for transparency in online sharing.

Journaling (Offline):

Identity construction

Creation and ongoing management of a physical artifact

Set goals, monitor progress, and materialize thoughts

Reflect on and connect past experiences

Promote creativity, self-awareness, self-discipline and mindfulness

Enhance communication skills and writing ability

Develop voice through expression

Blogging Anonymously (Online):

Identity construction*

Creation and ongoing management of a digital artifact

Set goals, monitor progress, and materialize thoughts*

Reflect on and connect past experiences*

Promote creativity, self-awareness, self-discipline and mindfulness

Enhance communication skills and writing ability

Develop voice through expression

Develop digital literacy

Share individual passions and existing knowledge*

Learn from others through exposure to outside perspectives, facilitating open discussion, and ability to receive feedback*

Establish authority, gain and verify influence and expertise*

Personal brand building*

**Denotes potential limitation in the quality of the benefit due to the anonymous nature of the activity.*

Blogging as Oneself (Offline+Online):

Identity construction

Creation and ongoing management of a digital artifact

Set goals, monitor progress, and materialize thoughts

Reflect on and connect past experiences

Promote creativity, self-awareness, self-discipline and mindfulness

Enhance communication skills and writing ability

Develop voice through expression

Develop digital literacy

Share individual passions and existing knowledge

Learn from others through exposure to outside perspectives, facilitating open discussion, and ability to receive feedback

Build and maintain real-world networks

Establish authority, gain and verify influence and expertise

Personal brand building

Theoretical Framework

In “*Who blogs? Personality predictors of blogging.*” Guadagno (2007) employs a quantitative analysis to assign generalizations surrounding internet use among the Big Five

personality types, and relates them to sharing habits in the blogosphere. While this addresses *who* may be blogging and the types of traits that they may exhibit, the narrow lens in which the study is conducted fails to address *why* they are blogging. Opting for the flexibility of a qualitative study allows respondents to share their own inferences surrounding individual motivations to blog, and the chance to personally reflect on their unique experiences by answering a number of questions that are arranged in order to elicit a narrative story.

Using the explanatory framework of Cultural-Historical-Activity Theoretical (CHAT) analysis to guide questioning, we are able to piece together a comprehensive story mapping the steps taken from the idea phase to the actual creation of a living digital artifact. Simply, the CHAT approach examines the relationship between what people think or feel (the human mind) and what they do (activity) as it relates to reaching a desired goal or outcome (Engeström, 1987). This approach affords incorporation of multiple learning perspectives in order to better support how documented instances of heightened awareness may relate to sustaining the self-direction associated with consciousness and personal intent, under the wider scope of informal learning practices (Bennett, 2012).

Activity triangles may be applied to various aspects of the blogging process. Whether looking at the creation of a single post, deciding what is deemed appropriate to share, or tracking progression of the real-world identity construction - CHAT informs the motivating factors behind overcoming challenges associated with the act of blogging transparently in a public forum. These simple diagrams aid in visualizing the journey that an individual takes in order to complete a particular action in pursuit of the motive object, and how these courses are determined by the cultural and historical influences that are often overlooked in theories rooted

in prognostication. CHAT allows for arrangement of multiple activity systems and their significance to individuals participating in object-driven activity, as it relates in this case to blogging as an arena of non-traditional learning.

The theoretical construct of motivation will be used to explain the activities of bloggers, and the driving force behind individual desires that are oriented toward continuing this practice as it relates to achieving a goal within an online environment, according to Artino & McCoach (2008). More specifically, intrinsic motivation will be explored to emphasize individual desire to participate in updating a personal blog, as it pertains to identity formation and self-awareness of how this version of oneself exists in a grander scheme. Using Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, helps to narrow the CHAT analysis by comparing bloggers to actors on a stage. Just as each have an audience, there are considerations to how one presents themselves in the digital space with regard to cultural values, norms and beliefs that are ultimately rooted in the understanding of who one *actually* is, and who one *chooses* to portray online. Digital technology mediates expression of personal experience occurring in everyday life as it relates to other people and things, suggesting that major discrepancies between portrayals of the physical and digital self should be more closely examined.

Motivation relates to informal learning theory, as the speed of technology allows individuals to make conscious decisions in order to capitalize on opportunities to immediately learn skills that hold more personalized relevance (Cross 2006). This is further substantiated by looking at the ways that learning occurs from the activities and interests of individuals and groups. Positioning blog creation as a motive-object determined by the individual rather than a formal institution or outside entity, we can begin to see the correlation between the continuous

act of blogging and the resulting identity construction as lifelong processes. The culmination of attitudes, skills, values and knowledge collected over the course of our daily experiences that occur at work, play and through social interactions, can be viewed as dynamic constructs that change over time, and these changes can be made visible through examining the activity of blogging.

Addressing social interaction through blogging in the public space, socio-constructivist learning theory looks at how individual knowledge relies on the social construction of it. Vygotsky (1978) considers the role that society plays in the development of an individual, helping to inform the potential of others to influence an individual's decision to move from social networks to blogs. Additionally, Suchman (1987) proposes that the most effective forms of learning occurs through interaction with and support from people and physical artifacts. Extending this idea toward digital artifacts created by human subjects and the potential that they have to influence actions in the real world, we can better understand the benefits that come with developing an online identity that closely aligns with the actual self, and the opportunity to increase interactions that would otherwise be limited by the physical body.

The impact of human activity mediated through forms of online expression suggests a tangible change. In this case, we examine the transformation of an individual who at one time never blogged, to somebody who now self-identifies as a blogger. According to Engeström (1987), expansive learning occurs when individuals involved in a collective activity transform an existing system to apply it to a wider horizon of possibilities. Though expanding social media practices into the blogosphere seems to fulfill this requirement, four questions must be answered to ground theory related to the learned activities of blogging: "(1) Who are the subjects of

learning, how are they defined and located?; (2) Why do they learn, what makes them make the effort?; (3) What do they learn, what are the contents and outcomes of learning?; and (4) How do they learn, what are the key actions or processes of learning?” (Engeström, 2001: 133). With no formal set of instructions to determine how one blogs, it becomes imperative to examine individual awareness of the self in relation to the activity.

Practices in metacognition can be used to inform the nature of these autonomous outcomes based on the resulting monitoring and regulation (Flavell, 1976: 232) associated with perception, action, memory, reasoning or emoting through the activity of blogging. With each post holding the potential to influence subsequent updates, and the skills related to metacognitive literacy highlighting an individual’s capacity to “learn how to learn,” the continued participation in this activity suggest that a short-term goal has been met, or that participation in these activities are necessary steps toward the completion of a larger or overarching goal. Zimmerman et al. (1992: 665) suggests that the metacognitive strategy of self-regulated learning relies on the pursuit of self-set goals, connecting the learned experiences of bloggers to outcomes that fulfil a personal desire rather than one determined by another individual or entity. Closely related to the metacognitive practice of self-regulation is the concept of self-direction in learning.

“In its broadest meaning, self-directed learning describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975, p. 18).

Hiemstra (1994) also mentions characteristics of this practice through individual

empowerment to take responsibility of learning outcomes, the ability to transfer knowledge from one situation to another, and the value and practice of reflective writing activities.

Combined, the actual practice of blogging and the self-referential nature associated with the activity itself, suggest an exercise in reflexivity. The continued practice of producing a digital artifact highlights elements cause and effect, as each post provides opportunity to improve individual capacity to question and understand the differences that exist between their offline and online identities. Once established, conscious moves toward merging fragmented identities may be incentivized through shaping their own norms outside of the influence of more mainstream social media platforms. By understanding the self-designation that comes with identifying oneself to be a blogger, as defined for the purpose of this study, it is possible to examine the motivating factors that drive activities characteristic of this population.

The assessment of reflexivity as it resides within the CHAT framework holds the potential to not only accept the biases of blog respondents, but embrace them as a means to springboard toward objectivity over time, through the continued practice of posting to a personal webspace. Foucault (1994) illustrates this further with his take on individual pursuit of knowledge, stating that "man is both knowing subject and the object of his own study," suggesting that there are various levels of truth. Activity rooted in reflexivity, at whatever level of truth one might assign, adopts subjectivity as a means of achieving a degree of personal understanding necessary to advance through engaging in the practice of discourse.

Design & Methods

Research Questions

The overarching question for this study is: “*Why do you blog?*” More specifically, the study examines the behavior of bloggers who post as themselves across cyberspace in order to uncover the motivations behind continued pursuit of this activity. When employing a CHAT analysis, goals are essential, so it will be important to distinguish between a motive-object or goal that is determined by the individual vs. one determined by society. Informal, self-driven approaches witnessed through blogging, the resulting expression, and awareness of self-identity, all inform how an individual negotiates multiplicity in favor of adopting a unified sense of self.

While code-switching is likely to occur given the change in medium and the ability to refine communications before making them publicly available, interview questions will be loosely structured to help elicit a story. Organized in chronological order and moving from general to specific, queries will allow the respondent to advance in a logical fashion by funneling questions that build off of previous answers in order to generate more meaningful takeaways related to the overarching question.

Question 1: How did you get started with blogging? This past approach allows individuals to for think about the beginning, reflect on their experiences, and piece together recurring themes characteristic to their own sharing practices.

- **Sub-questions:**

Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your blog?

Why did you start a blog?

How did you get started with blogging?

Why did you choose blogging vs. other social media channels?

What were the biggest obstacles that you encountered when starting your blog?

What personal traits have helped you gravitate toward blogging?

What skills do you feel are necessary to participate in blogging?

What skills have you developed as a result of blogging?

Were there any social media channels that you used before you had a blog?

How did you use those channels?

What kind of content did you share?

Has blogging affected the way that you use social media today?

How have things changed since you started blogging?

Question 2: What is the purpose/intent of your blog? Most blogs include an “About” page, When posting as oneself, this feature provides unique insights that can be referred to during an interview. Separate from the creator, this section essentially allows prospective readers to determine if the site’s content is worth reading. Just like judging a book by its cover, thinking of myself as the research tool, it is possible to offer an outside perspective into what I feel the blog is about in order to elicit more rich and in-depth answers.

- **Sub-questions:**

What is the purpose/intent of your blog?

What kind of content do you typically share on your blog?

Do you use any forms of promotion to increase traffic to your blog?

What do you strive for in order to provide a quality experience to your readers?

Have you met anyone interesting/famous through blogging?

Do you feel that your blog is an accurate representation of you?

How do other people view your blog?

Do you use Google Analytics to track the behavior of your visitors?

What are the top visited/most popular areas or sections of your blog?

Do you feel that your online voice differs from your actual voice?

Have you ever thought about the concept of your online voice and actual voice?

Question 3: Could you explain the process by which you blog? Understanding the scope that the act of blogging occupies in an individual's life is quite revealing. Additionally, the time taken to routinely create unique content is always a compromise. Outside influences and motivating factors, including monetization, interaction, or other personal metrics for success could also highlight driving forces that inform answers as they relate to the overarching question.

- **Sub-questions:**

How would you describe your blogging style?

How much time do you spend blogging?

How frequently do you post?

What blogging best practices have you developed?

Who has inspired you to continue blogging?

Can you name some of your favorite bloggers and why they are your favorites?

Could you describe your blogging style?

What was your greatest blogging success and what did you learn from it?

What was your greatest blogging failure and what did you learn from it?

Could you describe the biggest challenges associated with maintaining your blog?

What are you currently working on?

Question 4: Where do you see your blog in the future? The more developed this response, the better it informs the respondent's current perspective of the blog, as well as the level of awareness associated with how and where an individual would like to grow. The closer the alignment that one has with their offline and online identities, the less they may think about achieving this very end goal, as the act of blogging and maintaining the title of "blogger" can be the end goal in and of itself. Aside from the separation of identities becoming damaging to oneself, it can also prove problematic, as the management of multiple identities requires more time in the selection of content and careful consideration of what is being shared at a given point in time.

- **Sub-questions:**

What would you like to improve about your blog in the future?

Where do you see your blog going in the future?

Where do you see your blog taking you in the future?

What is your biggest motivation to continue blogging?

In your case, do you feel that blogging could become a profession?

What gives you the greatest satisfaction from blogging?

Would you encourage other people to start a blog of their own?

If so, what advice would you give them?

Research Design

The study will be a descriptive ethnography, using Spindler and Spindler's (1987) nine criteria for a "good ethnography." Observations will be contextualized, and questions will be geared toward understanding the beliefs, values, awareness, and driving forces that determine the actions of the participants. By interviewing bloggers, cross-examining their digital artifacts, and referencing their social media profiles, it is possible to gauge their level of participation and ultimately serve up sets of sub-questions that are unique and relevant to individual participants.

The overarching question "*why do you blog?*," is aimed at moving toward a conceptual understanding of the motivations that propel bloggers beyond posting anonymously online, and outside of structured social media networks. By identifying the roadblocks one must negotiate in order to achieve a sense of comfort with sharing personal and identifiable experiences, it is possible to explain the actions and behaviors from the participants' point of view, and elicit takeaways that could aid outsiders moving toward the construction of developed online identities that more closely align with the physical self.

Outside the constructs of activity facilitated by educational or workplace settings, goals in this case are self-determined. Through examining the objectives and perceived benefits that drive participation in the activity of blogging as oneself, it is possible to communicate these findings to others who have not yet reached the level of comfort required to engage in similar

pursuits.

Site & Selection Process

For this study, six Pennsylvania-based bloggers were contacted via email to participate in audio recorded, face-to-face interviews, at a quiet and mutually agreed upon location. Using critical case sampling, and pulling from personal contacts and a list of existing bloggers who participate in the annual “NEPA BlogCon” event, ensured relevance to the study and participant understanding of the questions being asked. Preliminary research surrounding respondent blogs, social media profiles, and level of activity, was used to determine viability for participation in the study, and further aid to inform individual motivations in relation to the overarching research question.

Methods & Procedures

To ensure credibility and rigor, observation and initial analysis of online artifacts aided in verifying that the participant is indeed a blogger, and a laptop was utilized to provide visual points of reference that guide the direction of face-to-face interviews. Participant observation occurred during the interviews, and notes were collected as they relate to further document the responses and reactions on the end of the participant. Pointing out elements of the blog during interviews, helped glean more thorough insights that either proved or disproved initial assumptions with regard to the individual motivations associated with blogging as oneself, and triangulation of data through referencing multiple sources was achieved through careful analysis of the responses and corresponding digital artifacts.

All interviews were recorded via USB microphone, in order to evaluate and reference participant answers after the interview, and follow-up questions were facilitated through email communications to address any inconsistencies that arose in applying data to inform the overarching research question on a case-by-case basis.

Nicknames were offered in the event that participants wished to remain anonymous. Slight variations of the same set of interview questions were asked to all respondents in order to identify commonalities among narratives, and solidify research findings.

Data Analysis

Questions were organized to construct a narrative story of each blogger's journey, and answers help to provide insights into self-direction residing in past, present and future versions of each participant. Asking about the past, addresses the motivating factors that led them to pursue the act of blogging in the first place, and overcome the obstacles associated with transitioning from a non-blogger to a self-identified blogger. Moving into the present tense and current practices, aids in ascertaining the reasons that one continues to engage in the practice of blogging, and helps to highlight the benefits that respondents currently associate with blogging as themselves. Looking at where this activity will lead them in the future, helps to map goals related to who they want to be in relation to continued engagement in this activity, and the increased responsibilities that they assume in voluntarily taking on this role.

Examining this data as it relates to individual awareness of how close their online and offline identities actually align, will be a challenge, as participation in the act of blogging does not necessarily elicit reflexivity. However, emphasis on understanding the self-reported goals

surrounding past, present and future variations of themselves will all aid in identifying the common benefits that may be achieved through the act of blogging as oneself across individual narratives.

Ethical Considerations & Limitations

Ethical considerations must be taken into account when conducting a qualitative research, and the purpose of the study will be presented to all participants before any consent forms are signed. The data collected will be stored on password protected servers, and pseudonyms will be assigned should any respondents prefer to remain anonymous.

Major limitations of the study will surround the qualitative nature of the information collected. Based on existing participant awareness of their own processes prior to the interview, validity of responses will depend on their ability to answer the overarching question, “*why do you blog?*,” may vary substantially within the allotted amount of time. The spectrum of responses, however, will aid to inform the various motivations that naturally differ from person to person.

Admittedly, the fragmented nature of the internet can lead to phenomena that could be classified as leading a “double life.” Such instances may cloud respondent data, and hide underlying motivations to participate in blogging. By overcoming the learning curve associated with sharing limited facets of real-world personas online, such practices could eventually become second nature over time, and warrant additional investigation. Additionally, blogging for one’s own business, for example, may inform the desire and resulting actions to expand outside of one’s comfort zone. While this is not detrimental to the aims of the study, it suggests

motivation driven by the promise of a socially constructed reward through financial gain or notoriety through achieving certain levels of fame.

Finally, the aim of this study is meant to understand the benefits and motivations behind why one chooses to blog as oneself in the public space, so limited consideration surrounding the negative aspects of engaging in this activity has been included due to the increased scope of such an undertaking. While a study to closely examine potentially harmful characteristics would prove informative, negatives in this case are self-reported and positioned as obstacles that are unique to experiences of individual respondents.

Due to the interpretive nature of this study, my bias as a researcher is another potential limitation. By never participating in the activity of maintaining a personal blog, and my continued desire to examine the reasons for this, I have attempted to communicate my own perspectives over the course of this proposal, and have initiated follow-up interviews to ensure validity of responses when necessary.

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