IN SCIENTIA OPPORTUNITAS

The Agency of Anonymity:
Reading Women's Autobiographical Blogs

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Abstract

This thesis uses previously unstudied female authored blog narratives to explore the role the author's anonymity plays in the way they textually construct themselves and their offline experiences. It thereby reconceptualises not only what it means to be anonymous online, but also how anonymity is utilised by users regardless of their perceived level of hiddenness. Unlike previous research into the genre, it considers blogs as part of the trajectory of life-writing, which includes autobiography and diaries, and therefore examines the narratives using close textual literary analysis. The thesis also acknowledges the fact that the content of blogs is inherently influenced by the form itself, and therefore looks at the texts in the context of their online platform and its technological features. It subsequently shows blogs to be a constantly updated example of contemporary culture, which represent not just an individual voice, but new ways of examining broader social realities.

The analysis examines how the blogosphere could specifically offer a platform for women, who are often discouraged from speaking up in the offline public sphere, to share their stories and have a 'public' voice online. It therefore provides a detailed insight into a selection of female authors who have chosen this medium, interrogates the ways in which they utilise the potential anonymity that the online world offers them, and demonstrates to what extent the blogosphere could therefore be regarded as a space where women can represent alternative, and potentially transgressive, performances of self. Its methodology and theoretical framework mean that the analysis provides a more detailed insight into how and why women are seen to dominate this platform than existing research has thus far been able to. The findings therefore go beyond previous conceptualisations of female blog users, and of the blogosphere more broadly; highlighting the extent to which the medium of blogging represents a powerful place for women to write themselves.

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Introduction

As part of a 2006 reference text on New Media, journalist Ed Power states that '99% of blogs tend towards indulgent dross, churned out by writers who remain amateur for the straightforward reason that they aren't very good'.[1] Although his text acknowledges that there are amazing things being written within the blogosphere, he suggests that the bloggers who 'matter', comprise only a 'tiny percentile' of the online world.[2] The condescension in his attitude towards blog narratives epitomises the widespread perception of blogs as unworthy of academic exploration or analysis. He also argues that the success of blogs should be measured by the author's ability to become a professional blogger; ignoring the possibility that those writing within the blogosphere may be motivated by other factors, such as community, creativity, or confession. Ten years have passed since Power's text was published, but the mainstream cultural-characterisation of blogs and bloggers has not significantly changed, although picture-blogging sites like *Instagram* and micro-blogging site *Twitter* now over-shadow the text based blog in media representations. Despite this, personal journal style blogs are still attracting huge numbers of authors and readers, and their popularity shows no sign of diminishing.[3] This thesis argues against reductive views of the blogosphere such as that of Power, and explores in detail the blog narratives that are being produced. It specifically examines seventeen female authored primary source blogs, captured between 13th June 2013 and 13th June 2014, and what this sample represents about women's use of the platform, and the blogosphere more broadly. The personal journal style blogs are considered as part of a trajectory of life writing, which includes autobiography and diaries, both on and offline. By framing them as individual literary texts, and examining them using close textual analysis, the research offers new insights into the online platform, and its implications for women's writing and female self-representation.

Although often cited as criticisms of blogging, the immediacy and accessibility of the platform demonstrate how blogs have developed beyond any previous autobiographical forms. This is also emphasised by the possibilities of audience within the blogosphere, which are seen to challenge and disrupt traditional conceptualisations of the author/reader relationship. The content of blogs is inherently influenced by their online platform, and therefore the narratives are also examined in the context of their online setting and the technological features offered to users. The focus of the analysis is specifically on the role of

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[1] Ed Power, 'The Blog Revolution and How It Changed the World' in *The Reference Shelf: New Media* ed. by Albert Rolls (New York: H. W. Wilson, 2006), pp. 9-15 (p. 9).
[2] Power, p. 12.
[3] The statistics of *Wordpress* state that over 409 million people view more than 22.3 billion pages each month. *Wordpress* 'Activity' Tracker, <https://wordpress.com/activity/> [Accessed 8th June 2016]

anonymity in the construction of blog narrative self-representations. Anonymity is often represented in the media as a dangerous feature of the online world, and many prominent people in the computer industry have spoken out against it.[4] However, rather than demonising those who choose to conceal their identity, this thesis explores the way that anonymity influences the primary source bloggers' textually constructed self; specifically, the persona that they perform through the narrative, and the level of self-disclosure evident in this performance of self. The analysis is focused on the extent to which anonymity can offer users the ability to disassociate their narrative from their offline lived reality, and therefore potentially allow them to write with a greater perceived level of freedom. The exploration of the narratives looks at whether the decision to write anonymously is explicitly addressed by the primary source blogs, which allows for a comparison between the individual approaches of each author, regardless of their perceived anonymity. This exploration therefore goes beyond traditional conceptualisations of anonymity as something that is either present or absent, and offers a new way of understanding it as a spectrum of 'hiddenness'. Although the blogosphere currently holds the potential for average users, such as the primary source bloggers of this thesis, to achieve anonymity simply through the use of a pseudonym, the increase in cyber-bullying and trolling has caused a growing number of online platforms to call for an increased level of accountability for users. Given the current climate of online security breaches and the growing calls for transparency, the current availability of anonymity could soon diminish, and become impossible for the average user. This thesis contributes to the understanding of the ways in which anonymity is utilised online, and why it may or may not be important to maintain.

Given the patriarchal nature of contemporary society, this anonymity has particular significance for women, who may use it to write outside the limitations and expectations of their gender.[5] By focusing on women's experience of the blogosphere, the analysis also explores the gendered nature of the online world. Although Internet technology is not exclusively accessible to male users, and therefore not inherently patriarchally serving, the social context in which it exists means that many features still reflect unequal opportunities for women to gain access. Courtney E. Martin and Vanessa Valenti's 2013 study argues that if and when they do gain access, woman are also far more likely to be the victim of abuse or

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[4] For example: *Facebook's* former marketing director Randi Zuckerburg and Eric Schmidt who was *Google* Chief Executive for almost ten years. As quoted in Cole Stryker, *Hacking the Future: Privacy, Identity, and Anonymity on the Web* (London: Overlook Duckworth, 2012), p. 11.

[5] This thesis considers contemporary society as patriarchal because the dominant political and economic power still resides with men, a situation that may be facilitated by *both* women and men.

the object of ridicule, causing many to 'retreat offline', and thus silencing their voices.[6] This is emphasised by the many examples of online sexual harassment, cyber-bullying and trolling that is directed at women online.[7] Although this thesis does not seek to perpetuate the illusion of the Internet as a platform of equality; it also rejects the conceptualisation of the Internet as a dangerous place for women, as is often suggested in the mainstream media.[8] Jessalynn Keller argues that this protectionist discourse that surrounds female users 'fails to address societal power structures by positioning technology as the problem girls face in online spaces rather than patriarchy, sexual harassment, and violence against women and girls'.[9] Therefore, the issues many women face online are indicative of a wider social problem, rather than a fundamental flaw in Internet technology, or gendered usage. In many ways, the blogosphere replicates several of the social inequalities, limitations and challenges of the offline world. However, this study explores the ways in which the primary source bloggers use the platform to construct themselves, and therefore explores not just the limitations, but also the possibilities that the space could hold for women to transgress these limitations. The demonstration of these concepts is perceived through the blogger's textual constructions of self, and therefore also represents the opportunities that the primary source blog authors have to exhibit agency over their narrative self-representation.

The blogosphere allows the everyday narratives of ordinary people, written about whatever topic they desire, in as colloquial language as they wish to employ, to be shared immediately with the millions of other Internet users across the world. Blogs are also constantly updated examples of contemporary culture, and could therefore represent not just an individual voice, but new ways of examining broader social realities. This is particularly relevant for women, who have historically been marginalised from traditional publishing mediums, and are still discouraged from speaking up within the offline world. This thesis argues that the blogosphere could therefore offer an important platform for affirmed female authors to share their stories.[10]

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[6] Courtney E. Martin, and Vanessa Valenti, '#FEMFUTURE: Online Revolution', *New Feminist Solutions* (Barnard Centre for Research on Women, 2013) <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/publications/femfuture-online-revolution/> [Accessed 29th December 2015]
[7] For example, the backlash against founder of the *Everyday Sexism Project* blog Laura Bates. Laura Bates, 'What is the Everyday Sexism Project?', *The F-Word*, 15th August 2012. <http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2012/08/everyday_sexism> [Accessed 20th June 2016]
[8] For example: Elle Hunt, 'Online Harassment of Women at Risk of Becoming 'Established Norm'', *The Guardian,* 7th March 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/mar/08/online-harassment-of-women-at-risk-of-becoming-established-norm-study> [Accessed 20th June 2016]
[9] Jessalynn Keller, *Girls' Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 8.
[10] The authors are referred to as 'affirmed' female, in contrast to 'assigned' female, as that is how they choose to represent, but is not necessarily the gender that they were, or are, 'assigned' as in the offline world. The concept of a performative gender is explored further in the Methodology, pp. 43-45.

Critical Context

      In the early 1990s there existed online only a handful of websites that would now be considered as blogs (a contraction of the original term weblog), but over the following two decades the technology developed rapidly. In July 1999 the first free 'build your own' weblog tool was launched, meaning even those with no knowledge of HTML (Hyper-text Mark-up Language) or web design were able to create their own blogs, and the numbers of people blogging increased dramatically. Blogging was examined extensively in the years after this increase in usage, from various disciplinary perspectives. As outlined by Cornelius Puschmann in his pragmatic attempt to define the term weblog in 2009, blogging was studied using ethnography (Gumbrecht *et al.* 2004, Nardi *et al.* 2004, Schiano *et al.* 2004, boyd 2006), by communication studies (Kelleher and Miller 2006, Schmidt 2007, Stefanone and Yang 2007), political science (Drezner and Farrell 2004, Trammel 2006, Trammel and Kaye 2007), sociology (Adamic and Glance 2005, Ali-Hasan and Adamic 2007), and linguistics (Herring *et al.* 2005, Nowson *et al.* 2005, Nilsson 2003).[11] However, the concentration on the form has led much of this existing research into the blogosphere to overlook the content of the blogs, and the literary aspect of their construction. More recently, there have been a number of studies which acknowledge the narrative element of blogs, for example Aimée Morrison's 2011 examination of 'Mommy Blogging', and the collection of essays featured in Anna Poletti and Julie Rak's 2014 anthology, *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*.[12] Building upon studies such as these, this thesis considers blogs to be part of a trajectory of life-writing, and a contemporary form of autobiography. The primary source material is therefore examined using close textual analysis; something still relatively unusual within scholarly research into the blogosphere.

      In 2016, the ability to uphold a single all-encompassing definition of a blog is becoming increasingly difficult. The online world is constantly developing and changing, and the term blog is now applied to huge variety of different spheres. This includes micro-blogging sites like *Twitter,* photo-blogging sites like *Pinterest, Instagram* or *Tumblr*; as well as the possibility that sites like *YouTube* or *Vine* could represent a form of video-blogging. The widespread application of the term blog for all online user generated content sites is rooted in the fact that the creation and affiliation of the word rests entirely with the birth of

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[11] Cornelius Puschmann, 'Diary or Megaphone? The Pragmatic Mode of Weblogs' *Language in the (New) Media: Technologies and Ideologies* (2009), 3-6.
<http://cbpuschmann.net/pubs/diarymegaphone.pdf> [Accessed 22nd June 2016]
[12] Aimée Morrison, '"Suffused by Feeling and Affect": The Intimate Public of Personal Mommy Blogging', *Biography* 34.1 (2011), 37-55.
Anna Poletti,and Julie Rak, eds. *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

Web 2.0 technology. As Bonnie A. Nardi *et al.* note in their ground-breaking study of the blogosphere, the Internet is awash with 'sites calling themselves blogs'; the implication being that not all those who bear the name conform to their idea of what they believe a blog *should* be.[13] This is emphasised by the findings of Eric Baumer *et al.*'s 2005 study, which show a disparity between their own working definition of a blog, and the spaces which the various participants consider as blogging sites.[14] As more users become increasingly fluent in the creation of multimedia online platforms, the possibility of what can be generated within the guise of a blog is developing dramatically. The broad use of the term blog must therefore be challenged and a clearer understanding of its connotations outlined. As Mary Garden observes in her essay on 'Defining Blog':

> One of the reasons why defining blogs has proved so arduous is that they have evolved in both usage and technology. The early blogs as a grassroots alternative phenomenon were easily identified and defined, but this is no longer the case: blogs are now diverse and ubiquitous, and have hit the mainstream.[15]

Garden's analysis highlights how the definition of blog shifts and changes with the expanding horizon of the Internet. However, she characterises the quest for an exhaustive definition, that refers to both the format and output of the platform, as 'arduous'. This ignores the excitement of the blogosphere becoming increasingly popular, and the seemingly endless possibilities that the developing platform could offer users to create and share. In the context of academic analysis, Baumer *et al.*'s study underlines the importance of creating an outline model of a blog, in order to proceed with research into its practice and production. Instead of attempting to extrapolate one set definition across all variants of blog, Garden suggests each individual research project should establish a definition of blog that is appropriate to their particular study, and then make sure the participants and readers are aware of this from the outset.

One of the starting points when defining what counts as a blog, is to establish whether they represent a genre, or a medium. For blogs, the distinction is not as simple as it might appear, as Nardi *et al.* note, 'While the uniform format of blogs suggests genre conventions, the extraordinarily diverse content of blog posts would seem to burst the boundaries of a single genre'.[16] Although there are various arguments like this on both sides

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[13] Bonnie A. Nardi, Diane J. Schiano and Michelle Gumbrecht, 'Blogging as Social Activity, or, Would You Let 900 Million People Read Your Diary?', *Proceedings of the 2004 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (Chicago: Association of Computer Machinery, 2004), p. 222.
[14] Eric Baumer, Mark Sueyoshi and Bill Tomlinson, 'Exploring the Role of the Reader in the Activity of Blogging', paper presented at the *ACM: Human Factors in Computing Systems Conference* (2008) <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.151.6092&rep=rep1&type=pdf> [Accessed 12th January 2016]
[15] Mary Garden, 'Defining Blog: A Fool's Errand or a Necessary Undertaking', *Sage Journalism,* 13:4 (2012), 483-499 (p. 484).
[16] Nardi *et al.*, p. 231.

of the debate, largely dependent on the context and style of the blog, it has more recently been suggested that the blog can be *both* a genre and a medium. Jill Walker Rettberg states that a blog 'is a genre if viewed as a *type* of text but a medium if regarded as an electronic *tool* for the organisation of text'.[17] In this thesis, the genre of the blog is used as a criterion for the identification of primary sources.[18] However, the analysis of the blogs and their potential for self-representation frames the blog as a medium; based on its capacity to open up channels of communication between users, and promote the sharing of self-representations. The platform also encompasses a variety of genres, which are viewed as different types of blog. These types are often used as a way of distinguishing the blogosphere into smaller, more comprehensible sections; although this can cause the types to become homogenised as sub-groups. For instance, Sarah Pedersen and Caroline Macafee wryly observe that: 'female bloggers are usually represented as a minority in discussions of British blogging, unless the subject under discussion is sexual confession, in which case 100% of the bloggers discussed are women'.[19] This demonstrates the misrepresentative nature of defining blogs through a 'type', as it ignores the differences between individual narratives, and the unique features that distinguish blogs from other forms of writing.

More sophisticated definitions of what constitutes a blog use these unique features to establish a set of structural characteristics that exemplify a blog, in order to be able to apply the definition as a bench mark. One of the most commonly associated features of a blog is the reverse chronological, date-stamped posts which present the newest material first. However, as blogging becomes a potentially lucrative business, the element of competition means that many users are keen to utilise self-marketing techniques to promote their own posts. This has led to a trend of removing date stamps from blog posts, in order to counter the user prejudice towards material that is perceived to be out of date in the rapidly changing online world. The way in which users engage with blog narratives also renders the issue of date-stamped posts less significant. Baumer *et al.* argue that, 'While readers experience blog posts in temporal order, the exact times of the posts does not significantly impact the reading activity. The recency of a post has more to do with the number of posts that have

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[17] Jill Walker Rettberg, *Blogging: Digital Media and Society Series* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 20.

[18] The use of genre as part of the criteria for data capture is outlined in more detail in the Methodology, pp. 27-32.

[19] Sarah Pedersen and Caroline Macafee, 'Gender Differences in British Blogging', *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 12:4 (2007), 1472-1492. <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue4/pedersen.htm> [Accessed 21st October 2015]

occurred since the post in question than with the amount of time that has passed'.[20] This is also reflected in Walker [Rettberg]'s 2005 definition of the term blog:

> Readers may start at any point of a weblog, seeing the most recent entry first, or arriving at an older post via a search engine or a link from another site, often another weblog. Once at a weblog, readers can read on in various orders: chronologically, thematically, by following links between entries or by searching for keywords.[21]

The interactive nature of the blogosphere is therefore seen to facilitate a less structured form of engagement with blogs, as users are encouraged to move freely between posts and pages, meaning date-stamps become secondary in navigating the material. The feature of date-stamps can therefore no longer be seen as essential to the understanding of a webpage as a blog. Even without the familiar date stamp, the content of blogs is recognisable through the combination of text, images and links to other blogs or webpages. They are also presumed to be focused on the opinions, experiences and knowledge of the blog author. Although these features represent part of a general understanding of what a blog is, they are not obligatory or consistent, and therefore not a reliable way of defining the term.

The developing nature of the medium means that attempts to apply a static definition to the term blog is almost impossible, as each attempt rapidly becomes out-dated, or is rendered inadequate by the changing technology. Academics such as Rettberg and Garden have instead looked to the online community for a clearer definition, and chosen to utilise *Wikipedia*'s description of a blog. As Rettberg argues, 'Wikipedia's entry began in 2001 and since then has been subsequently edited by hundreds of users, this perhaps representing a consensus, albeit in flux'.[22] The emphasis of her argument is the fact that the definition is non-static, constantly being changed and developed alongside the technology it describes. The first line of the long and thorough outline given by *Wikipedia* states: 'A blog (a truncation of the expression *weblog*) is a discussion or informational site published on the World Wide Web and consisting of discrete entries ("posts") typically displayed in reverse chronological order (the most recent post appears first)'.[23] The definition as a whole acknowledges the variety of features that can potentially be part of a blog, but does not include prescriptive ideas of what a blog *should* be. When captured on 20th July 2016, the entry had already been edited fifty-six times since the start of the year. This emphasises the importance of a flexible definition of 'blog', that is suitable to the particular context in which the term is being used, and is able to adapt with the technology as it develops. In this thesis, the capture of

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[20] Baumer *et al.*, p. 8.
[21] Jill Walker [Rettberg], 'Weblog' in *The Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. by David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 45.
[22] Walker Rettberg (2008), p. 19.
[23] 'Blog', *Wikipedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog> [Last Accessed 20th July 2016]

blog posts is facilitated by blog hosting site *Wordpress,* which means that all the material is framed as a form of blog, and therefore the definition of a blog is not a strict part of the methodological criterion.[24] However, by using the term blog to frame the analysis, the thesis must be explicit in the definition of the term, and the connotations that follow the usage of it. A blog is therefore classified as a regularly updated, user-generated, webpage which focuses on the individual bloggers' own life and experiences, and which also allows for outside commentary and discussion with readers.

The primary source narratives specifically represent personal journal style blogs, which overwhelmingly dominated the blogosphere in the early stages of Web 2.0 technology and still account for a large percentage of blogs being produced today. They are generally associated with confessional self-representative narratives and were therefore labelled by Vivienne Serfaty in 2004 as a form of 'online, or public, diary'.[25] This definition is based on the personal content and regular updates often presented through this style of blogging, but also alludes to the element of confessional writing that is commonly associated with the platform. Building on Serfaty's conceptualisation, this thesis considers personal journal blogs as an example of autobiographical life writing, akin to the memoirs and diaries that have been written and consumed for hundreds of years. There is a range of ways to classify the genre of autobiography, although many critics refer back to French theorist Philippe Lejeune's description of 'a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality'.[26] However, Lejeune's insistence that autobiography must focus on a person's 'own existence' does not reflect the narratives of many people's lives; which interweave the experiences of themselves and others within different external circumstances and relationships. The emphasis on retrospection is also limiting, as it reduces the temporal proximity between the event and the narrative description, which inherently changes how a story is told, and the extent to which it reflects the reality of the experience. Lejeune's definition therefore represents a narrow view of what constitutes a work of autobiography; excluding memoirs or diaries, and consequently blogs. The rejection of memoir and diaries as serious elements of the autobiographic genre is largely based on a hierarchy rooted in condescension. Laura Marcus argues in her 1994 theoretical anthology on autobiography: 'The autobiography/ memoirs distinction – ostensibly formal and generic – is bound up with a typological distinction between those human beings who are capable of

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[24] The criteria and process of selecting primary source blogs is outlined in detail in the Methodology, pp. 27-32.

[25] Viviane Serfaty, *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004)

[26] Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Contract' in *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 192-222 (p. 193).

self-reflection and those who are not'.[27] This idea of 'self-reflection' echoes Lejeune's concept of an autobiographer reflecting on 'his own existence'; something that memoir and diary writers are deemed incapable of doing. These traditional conceptualisations of autobiography created a narrow field of life writing that was considered worthy of academic attention. Unlike this canonical model, both memoir and diaries go beyond the idea of an individual's self-development, and instead tell their story within a wider setting. As Kylie Cardell argues, they 'make visible the intimate and the personal, they blur and destabilise conventional boundaries between public and private, and they foreground processes of formation and reformation of subjectivity in self-representation'.[28] The more fluid nature of these forms is therefore much more closely aligned with the style of blog narratives, as they are written for an audience, and in the context of online and offline others.

The divide is also gendered, as the achievements documented by autobiography writers were seen by early advocates of the genre as masculine feats, and the descriptions of women's lives considered the kind of trivial domestic experiences depicted by memoir and diaries. Lejeune's use of the male pronoun to outline the nature of autobiography is therefore indicative of the canonical model he was describing, which primarily consisted of the narratives of white privileged men. Linda Anderson notes in her 2001 text *Autobiography*, that 'as with other genres, it was not that women did not produce autobiographical writing but that it was deemed to be unimportant, crude or illegitimate, to fail to live up to the necessary test of 'great writing''.[29] The texts being analysed therefore reflected a one-dimensional experience, with a fully formed and rigid sense of self, that largely adhered to conventional social standards of behaviour. However, the post-structuralist movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s inspired a shift in the way autobiography was understood, with a small number of critics beginning to consider diaries and memoirs alongside the pre-existing canon of autobiography. The influence of second-wave feminism also saw an increase in the study of women's autobiographies, which provided, as Anderson argues in 2006, 'a privileged space for women to discover new forms of subjectivity'.[30] However, female authored autobiography continued to be marginalised in academic circles, and was largely

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[27] Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 21.
[28] Kylie Cardell, *Dear World: Contemporary Uses of the Diary* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), p. 3.
[29] Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 81.
[30] Linda Anderson, 'Autobiography and the Feminist Subject' in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* ed. by Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 119-135 (p. 119).

considered under the separate neologism of 'autogynography'.[31] Although this represents the importance of self-representation for women, which Cardell argues had a 'central role in feminist consciousness-raising', it also highlights the fact that female authored narratives were still not being examined in contrast or collaboration with male autobiographies.[32] Since then both academic and popular interest in autobiography has greatly increased, with Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman noting in their 2014 *Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*, that the 'avid readership for autobiographical writing has become so widespread that it qualifies as a cultural obsession'.[33] Although the genre of autobiography now includes male and female authors alongside one another, the male dominated canon of autobiography still exists, and many female authored texts are still framed as works of memoir or diary.[34] Given the contemporary popularity of the genre, a broader interpretation of autobiography that includes both male and female authored texts, memoir and diaries, could therefore challenge the hierarchical traditions of autobiographical writing.

The consideration of blogs as an autobiographical form also highlights the importance of the female focus of this thesis, as like the genre of autobiography, computer technology and its multiple facets have traditionally been conceptualised as a masculine domain. This is subverted by the genre of personal journal blogging, which is dominated by affirmed female users.[35] The flexibility of blogging as an autobiographical platform offers female bloggers an increased level of control over how they construct their own narratives, which makes the personal journal blog more inclusive and accessible for women than traditional autobiographical forms. In her work on women's autobiography, Estelle C. Jelinek observes that female authors struggle with the rigid structure of the form, and argues that 'disjunctive narratives and discontinuous forms are more adequate for mirroring the fragmentation and multidimensionality of women's lives'.[36] However, much as memoir has been marginalised in the field of autobiography, Lena Karlsson observes in her 2007 analysis how the 'numerically dominant online journal/diary weblog has been met by neglect

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[31] Maria DiBattista, 'Women's Autobiographies' in *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*, ed. by Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 208 – 221 (p. 209).
[32] Cardell, p. 109.
[33] *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography* ed. by Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 1.
[34] For example, Caitlin Moran's *How To Be a Woman* (London: Ebury Press, 2011) is framed by reviewers and booksellers as a memoir, when it is actually an autobiographical account of her own life.
[35] As shown by Herring and Paolillo (2006), Pedersen and Macafee (2007).
[36] Estelle C. Jelinek, *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), p. 188.

or bewilderment and condescension'.[37] This reflects a hierarchy within the genre of life writing, which in this case undermines the stories of those who blog, by characterising them as popular rather than literary, and therefore as unworthy of literary analysis. In her work on different forms of autobiography, Anderson highlights a common criticism of online narratives:

> The ability to bypass the filtering processes of the publishing industry was always the promise held out by the internet, and may be viewed as either an exciting move towards democratization and the sharing of self-expression worldwide, or the inauguration of an overwhelming and confusing deluge of insignificant chatter.[38]

The dichotomy she describes demonstrates the problematic characterisation of these 'blogged' life stories as trivial based on the sheer volume of them and the lack of a review process or filtering system prior to publication. The publishing industry has historically been seen as elitist because of its exclusion of lower class, ethnic or female authors; a criticism that can also be made of early studies of autobiography. Unlike commercial publishing or traditional print media, blogs do not have an external system which decides whose life stories *deserve* to be told. The blogosphere could therefore provide a platform for conventionally marginalised voices, and their online hosted narratives seen as a form of writing back.

By adopting a fluid conceptualisation of autobiography, personal journal style blogs are placed within the spectrum of autobiographical life-writing; allowing critics to consider and compare the differences between the mediums, alongside their similarities. As Jelinek notes in her ground-breaking anthology of female autobiographies, the very nature of life-writing means that the genre will vary dramatically depending on the story being told and the individual telling it. She considers that: 'Autobiography is an amalgam of one's self-image, one's process of thinking and feeling, and one's talent as a formal writer. Each autobiography, therefore, is unique and defies a formal definition that subsumes all autobiography'.[39] Blogs are often written by an individual about their own lives, contain an examination of self, the documentation of events, and the telling of stories; all of which are undeniably autobiographical. As Serfaty observes, 'for all their apparent and sometimes actual novelty, online diaries and weblogs are but the latest avatars in the long history of self-representational writing'.[40] Despite the technological advancements since her text was published, the definition of personal journal style blogs as a form of diary is still widely used

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[37] Lena Karlsson, 'Desperately Seeking Sameness: The Processes and Pleasures of Identification in Women's Diary Blog Reading', *Feminist Media Studies*, 7:2 (London: Routledge, 2007), 137-153 (p. 138).
[38] Anderson (2001), p. 123.
[39] Jelinek, p. xii.
[40] Serfaty, p. 1.

in discussion of the platform, both academically and culturally.[41] However, the notion has been repeatedly challenged by research into the form, such as Nardi *et al.*'s highly influential 2004 study, which specifically rejects this definition of personal journal style blogs. They argue instead that blog narratives contain a variety of 'social actions [that] would not occur in a diary'.[42] The interpretation of personal journal style blogs as online diaries is potentially limiting as it ignores not only the social aspects highlighted by Nardi *et al.,* but also the technological elements that contribute to the uniqueness of the blogging platform. The understanding of personal journal style blogging used within this thesis therefore incorporates the theoretical implications of blogs as a form of autobiography, whilst also exploring the elements of audience and multi-modal self-representation that contribute to the process of writing online.

One key element that marks the blogosphere as unique, and developed beyond its physical text based predecessors, is the ability to write anonymously; and the role of anonymity is explored in depth throughout this study. The perceived importance of anonymity lies in its ability to offer users an increased level of 'freedom' over their writing, as they are able to share information without the narrative being linked to their offline life. Although other mediums may allow users to conceal their identity in some way, the computer mediated nature of online communication allows anonymity to be more easily achieved and maintained. It is this premise that has led to the blogosphere becoming a platform for confessional, as well as self-representative narratives. Hua Qian and Craig R. Scott's 2007 research outlines how: 'computer technology has greatly facilitated anonymity by providing many channels for communication between people separated in time and space'.[43] This allows blog authors to write without accountability to their offline identity, which inherently influences the way that they construct their narrative self-representations. Qian and Scott's study, like that of Monica Whitty and Jeff Gavin (2001), and Samantha Henderson and Michael Gilding (2004) before them, found that blog authors share more intimate details with their readers if they do not know them in the offline world.[44] They argue that this is because those who self-disclose 'feel secure in that whatever is shared under such circumstances is unlikely to be shared with actual friends and acquaintances who may have some material

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[41] The definition of personal journal style blogs as online diaries was used in studies such as Armadeep Singh (2008), and Thomas Chesney and Daniel K. S. Su (2010).

[42] Nardi *et al.*, p. 223.

[43] Hua Qian and Craig R. Scott, 'Anonymity and Self-Disclosure on Weblogs', *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 12:4 (2007), 1428-1451 (p. 1430).

[44] Monica Whitty and Jeff Gavin, 'Age/Sex/Location: Uncovering the Social Cues in the Development of Online Relationships', *Cyberpsychology and Behaviour* 4:5 (2001), 623-630.
Samantha Henderson and Michael Gilding, '"I've never clicked this much with anyone in my life": Trust and Hyperpersonal Communication in Online Friendships', *New Media and Society*, 6:4 (2004), 487- 506.

impact on the discloser's life'.[45] This is also emphasised by Sarah Pedersen and Janet Smithson's 2013 research which argues that 'Users are able to confide in anonymous but empathetic 'listeners' who share their problem […] and advice from strangers can be accepted or rejected more easily than advice from real-life friends and family'.[46]

A review of this existing research into anonymous blogging shows that the majority of studies use the term anonymity without qualification, and rely on an assumed understanding of its meaning. The dictionary definition of anonymity precedes all forms of publication and is described as the state of being 'unknown' or 'unacknowledged' by an audience; a broad definition that includes all forms of disguise, from pseudonyms to masks.[47] The interpretation of anonymity used in previous research therefore frames it simply as something that is either present or absent. This is a problematic binary as it ignores the wide disparity in the levels of information sharing and self-disclosure shown by individual bloggers. The definition of anonymity used within this thesis is therefore rendered more complex and fluid, acknowledging the intermediate area between being fully anonymous and fully identifiable. It is instead focused on the extent to which the primary source bloggers are able to disassociate their offline persona, from the persona they construct online. Using this approach, this study examines how anonymity functions within the blogosphere to allow bloggers to enact a variety of identity performances, which may or may not align with their offline lived reality, for different purposes of self-promotion. The majority of existing research also relies on the quantitative data of a survey into blogger's self-assessed levels of anonymity, and self-disclosure. This limits the significance of their findings, because it ignores the content of the blogs, and is vulnerable to the bias of the different blogger's perspectives. In contrast, this thesis examines what stories the authors are telling through this platform, using close textual analysis to explore the blogs as literary texts. This allows a more complex analysis of the role of anonymity in the writing process of the primary source bloggers, and how it can be seen to influence the construction of their self-representative narratives. The findings of this research therefore challenge pre-existing ideas about the definition and use of anonymity, and offer a new way of conceptualising a user's constructed level of hiddenness.

The possibilities that the blogosphere offers for anonymity have prompted a fascination, in both academic and popular analysis of the blogosphere, with the issue of authenticity. This is primarily focused on whether the online persona being performed is

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[45] Qian and Scott, p. 1431.
[46] Sarah Pedersen and Janet Smithson, 'Mothers with Attitude—How the *Mumsnet* Parenting Forum Offers Space for New Forms of Femininity to Emerge Online', *Women's Studies International Forum,* 38 (2013), 97-106 (p. 100).
[47] 'anonymous', *The Oxford English Dictionary* <http://www.oed.com/> [Accessed 3rd June 2014]

'real', i.e. the same as the offline lived reality of the author. However, the term 'authentic' is widely utilised within a variety of different fields, and is therefore imbued with wider theoretical significance. In his 1995 book, *In Search of Authenticity:* Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus, Jacob Golomb argues that because the term authenticity is used in so many different contexts, 'it may very well resist definition'.[48] This points to the difficulties of defining something that appears inherently subjective, and which can therefore be interpreted differently depending on the specific context. The desire to define authenticity has prompted much philosophical debate as to what the term actually denotes, with academics such as Bernard Williams suggesting that authenticity is the ineffable idea 'that some things are in some sense really you, or express what you are, and others aren't'.[49] The overview provided by *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* is similarly ambiguous, stating that 'To say that something is authentic is to say that it is what it professes to be, or what it is reputed to be, in origin or authorship'.[50] An existential interpretation of the concept builds upon this idea and defines authenticity as 'the degree to which one is true to one's own personality, spirit, or character, despite external pressures'.[51]

Although these interpretations of authenticity differ, the framework upon which the notion is described relies heavily on the concepts of honesty and sincerity. *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*'s definition specifically highlights these terms as comparable to authenticity, but differentiates between the older concepts which refer to 'being truthful in order to be honest in one's dealings with others', and what it considers as the relatively new concept of authenticity, which is understood to mean 'being true to oneself for one's own benefit'.[52] In her 2012 text, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, Sarah Banet-Weiser analyses the value of authenticity in terms of branding, and reflects a similar concept of the 'authentic self' as having cultural value for individuals, specifically in 'how we understand moral frameworks and ourselves, and more generally how we make decisions about how to live our lives'.[53] She argues that constructing an online (or offline) public persona requires self-branding strategies, in which she argues authenticity becomes about 'external gratification' as 'in order to access one's authentic self, one must be true to

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[48] Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 7.
[49] Bernard Williams, interviewed by Stuart Jeffries, 'The Quest for Truth', *The Guardian*, 30th November 2002.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/nov/30/academicexperts.highereducation> [Accessed 13th June 2016]
[50] 'Authenticity', *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy,* 11th September 2014.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/authenticity/> [Accessed 14th June 2016]
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] *Ibid.*
[53] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2012), p. 5.

others. To be authentic to yourself, one must first be authentic to others'.[54] Despite further emphasising the elusive nature of the term, Banet-Weiser's work is particularly relevant to the role of authenticity in the self-representative narratives explored within this thesis. The primary source blogs are considered as textually constructed performances of self, and her framework highlights how the concept of mediating an 'authentic' persona can be both examined as something of personal significance and as a way for bloggers to 'market' themselves.

It is clear from this brief overview that providing a single succinct definition of authenticity would be reductive. As Alice E. Marwick notes, 'Authenticity is not an absolute quality, but a social judgement that is always made in distinction to something else'.[55] Therefore the term represents something different depending upon the context in which it is being used. In literary terms, the features associated with authenticity are what frame the reliability of the narrator, and the extent to which their narrative can therefore be considered an accurate representation of the events it describes. This is a consideration when reading any texts, although generally it is in self-representative narratives where the authenticity of the narrative, and therefore of the author, is scrutinised most deeply. In her 2014 text, *Dear World: Contemporary Uses of the Diary*, Cardell suggests that this is the attraction of reading all forms of life-writing, which appeal 'directly to readers seeking the "real" […] unvarnished story'.[56] She argues that a text's perceived 'status as diary', 'confirms this expectation will be met'.[57] Although the style of writing is no guarantee of authenticity, her analysis outlines the way in which the perception of diary style narratives can act as a persuasive signal to readers of their content. As outlined above, personal journal blogs are part of a trajectory of life-writing and autobiography, which means they may also benefit from this perception of their content as inherently authentic. Cardell suggests that blogs actively utilise this association: 'Tapping into a contemporary aesthetic for immediacy and transparency in representation, […] blogs claim and register their authenticity through an association to the genre of the diary'.[58] Although in many ways blogs are developed beyond the traditional diary form, they do reflect many similar features. For example, they are largely written in the first person, which can make the voice seem more realistic; although it can also signal to the reader that the perspective being offered is subject to the bias of the individual.

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[54] Banet-Weiser, p. 80.
[55] Alice Marwick, 'Conspicuous and Authentic: Fashion Blogs, Style and Consumption', Prepared for ICA 2011 (Boston, MA), p. 12. <http://www.tiara.org/papers/marwick_conspicuousauthentic.pdf> [Accessed 14th December 2016]
[56] Cardell, p. 96.
[57] *Ibid.*
[58] *Ibid.*

Within the blogosphere, the perceived authenticity of a blogger's narrative is influenced by many factors, including the level of anonymity with which the blogger is writing, which is often considered to undermine the authenticity of the writing.[59] In his exploration of the ethics of online anonymity, Robert Bodle highlights this perspective as the 'common misunderstanding […] that anonymous online communication encourages people to lie, misrepresent, and deceive'.[60] Although this perception is indeed common, research into the blogosphere has found evidence to the contrary. Several studies suggest that the use of anonymity to conceal identity can actually make bloggers *more* inclined to disclose 'honest' information.[61] Therefore, a blogger's authenticity is not inherently undermined by the use of anonymity to conceal all, or part, of their identity. Karlsson develops this idea and argues that instead of anonymity, 'Consistency over time emerges as the most important check-up point for measuring the authenticity of the autobiographical self'.[62] This is supported by research such as Thomas Chesney and Daniel K. S. Su's 2012 study which assessed the reader's perception of a blog's credible authenticity, and found there was 'no difference in perceived credibility when the blogger was identifiable and when they were anonymous'.[63] Within this framework, even fully anonymous blog narratives could be considered as authentic, as long as the textually constructed self is consistent and coherent. This disrupts the presumption that increased levels of information sharing, or collusion with the offline lived reality of an author, mean a higher level of authenticity and instead suggests that the perception of a narrative voice as 'authentic' requires more in depth consideration. The focus of previous research on authenticity shows how the quest for the 'real' within the blogosphere has become fetishized, and imbued with a sense of moral judgment. As Internet critic Nathan Jurgenson argues, 'The notion of the offline as real and authentic is a recent invention, corresponding with the rise of the online'.[64] This is also reflected in the philosophical interpretation of authenticity, which describes it as 'a pervasive *ideal* that impacts social and political thinking'.[65]

Despite the problematic nature of the term, authenticity remains an integral part of how experiences in the blogosphere are framed, by both users and academics. The concept is therefore used within the thesis as it contributes to the analysis of blogger's behaviour,

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[59] For example: Chesney and Su (2010).
[60] Robert Bodle, 'The Ethics of Online Anonymity or Zuckerberg vs. "Moot"', *Computers and Society*, 43:1 (2013), 22-35 (p. 26).
[61] For example: Whitty and Gavin (2001), Henderson and Gilding (2004) and Qian and Scott (2007).
[62] Karlsson (2007), p. 149.
[63] Thomas Chesney and Daniel K. S. Su, 'The Impact of Anonymity on Weblog Credibility', *International Journal of Human- Computer Studies,* 68:10 (2012), 710-718 (p. 712).
[64] Nathan Jurgenson, 'The IRL Fetish', *The New Inquiry*, 28th June 2012. <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-irl-fetish/> [Accessed 8th June 2016]
[65] 'Authenticity', *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. [Emphasis Original]

and the way in which they textually construct themselves in the context of a potential audience. However, the interpretation of authenticity used in this thesis avoids connotations of 'real' or 'truth', and the perception of the offline world as the most 'authentic' version of the individual. The authenticity of the primary source bloggers is instead read through the perceived believability of the narrative as an 'honest' representation of the blogger's own offline experience. As both consistency and credibility are shown to be key to the interpretation of authenticity within the blogosphere, the level of authenticity demonstrated by each primary source blogger is assessed by examining the narratives over the entire data capture period, and considering the extent to which the authors present a consistent portrayal of a cohesive online persona. It is also interpreted through the analysis of the reader's comments, which are captured alongside the blog post, as this demonstrates the extent to which the readers of the blog appear to perceive the blog as authentic. As with many other factors of the analysis, this means that the findings demonstrate if the bloggers are performing an authentic online persona, and does not examine whether the narrative accurately reflects the offline lived reality of the author.

The research outlined above emphasises the role of anonymity in attracting users to the blogosphere, as well as the influence it has on the way in which authors construct their self-representations, and readers receive them. This thesis specifically examines the extent to which the female primary source bloggers represent anonymity as something which allows them to write more 'freely'. This is demonstrated through increased levels of self-disclosure, and the performance of alternative selves than they construct themselves as being able to enact in their offline lives. The concept of freedom, both on and offline, is often rendered more theoretically complicated than this. However, the idea of the blogosphere as a free platform is ingrained with differing connotations and possibilities for both users and researchers, and therefore, given the qualitative approach of this study, it would be reductive to pinpoint one action as indicative of what it means to have freedom online. The analysis of this thesis is also exclusively focused on the textually constructed selves of the primary source blogs, and so cannot judge the extent to which the authors are *actually* transgressing the constraints of their offline circumstances, and therefore gaining this purported freedom. It is instead focused on the ways in which the authors perceive, and therefore represent themselves as performing differently online than they could offline.

Given the opportunities for greater freedom, the blogosphere is often conceptualised as a platform where women in particular can write with increased agency. The term agency is also fraught with differing academic interpretations, and can therefore be used to denote a variety of different things. The concept is rooted in the theoretical understanding of a human's capacity to make choices, and act upon those choices; something that is explored

within many different fields, including law, philosophy, and sociology. The ability to have a choice and to be able to act upon one's own choice has particular significance for women, who are often subject to the constraints of their gender in a primarily patriarchal society. Naila Kabeer observes that for women, 'Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their *sense* of agency, or 'the power within''.[66] Lois McNay argues that the acknowledgement of this 'sense' of agency attests 'to the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities.[67] The concept has therefore long been a concern for feminist researchers, as it focuses on the idea that women are self-determining, and can be so even in the face of gendered constraints. In the context of this thesis, agency is not theorised as a conscious act, or something the primary source blog authors directly acknowledge. Alternatively, it is perceived through the literary analysis of their textually constructed selves, which allows for a critical interpretation of the extent to which the authors could be read as demonstrating agency. Specifically, the extent to which they represent themselves as taking control of their self-representation, exhibiting behaviour that transgresses the conventions of the social situation they suggest that they are writing within, or performing a persona online that they depict themselves as unable to enact in their offline lives.

Given the patriarchal nature of the offline world, the possibility of being freed from social expectations and limitations through anonymity could be particularly powerful for female users, providing women with more opportunities for creative freedom. This is emphasised by the number of women choosing to utilise the platform. Susan Herring and J.C. Paolillo (2006), and Pedersen and Macafee (2007) both explore the genre of personal journal blogging and demonstrate a distinct female bias.[68] This shift is generally aligned with the development of Web 2.0 social media technologies, which allow for more inclusive and accessible online activity. As *BlogHer* co-founder Lisa Stone states: 'Today, women are not only the most powerful consumers in the world, we're also the power users of Web 2.0 and social media technologies'.[69] This is supported by the growth of *BlogHer*, a women-only blog network, which now boasts over fifty-five million registered female bloggers, including America's first lady Michelle Obama. Although the analytical approaches of these studies are

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[66] Naila Kabeer, 'Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment', *Development and Change*, 30.3 (1999), 435-464 (438).
[67] Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 9.
[68] Susan Herring and J. C. Paolillo, 'Gender and genre variation in weblogs', *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 10:4 (2006),* 439-459.
[69] Lisa Stone, 'The Power of Female Blogging', *BBC News*, 1st August 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/7534249.stm> [Accessed 30th May, 2016]

different to that of this thesis, their ideas collude with the research approach, and emphasise the need for further analysis of female blog users. The findings of both studies argue that in essence 'women write more diary-like blogs, while male bloggers write more of the opinion-focused ones', or 'political blogs'.[70] The conclusions of Pedersen and Macafee also noted that women's blogs had 'lesser technical sophistication' than the male blogs sampled; and that the female bloggers had 'a greater preference for anonymity', which they suggested could be because women 'have more to fear from online stalkers and sexist abuse'.[71] Although within their small sample group (forty eight participants) their results demonstrated a marginal pattern of adherence to these ideas, their premise was based on a pre-existing gendered structure that has been applied by previous studies to distinguish male and female blogging behaviour. This framework, first utilised in American research in the early 2000s, relies heavily on stereotypical understandings of gendered behaviour taken from the offline world. For example, women are presumed to be more social and emotional, and men to be more technological and focused on information sharing. By using this model to interpret their results, Pedersen and Macafee perpetuate a binary gendered division within the British blogosphere, and ignore the fact that the differences within the bloggers of one gender were actually greater than those between the two categories of gender. Their conclusions regarding female bloggers' preferences for anonymity being rooted in the threats of the online world also demonstrates a narrow view of anonymity, and the potential it holds for those who choose to utilise it; as well as the implications of cyber-bullying on the behaviour of all users regardless of gender.

The perceived variations in the blogging activity of different genders means that many research projects have sought to examine what it was about the genre that attracted women. In her 2002 research into the psychological elements of blogging, Louis Leung points to the desire of users to gain social interaction online, often in a bid to 'mitigate the loneliness' of their offline circumstances.[72] Erin E. Hollenbaugh, in her 2011 study of the motivations behind maintaining a personal journal blog, also found loneliness to be a key feature.[73] Although these studies represent significant ideas about female users and women's use of the blogosphere, they rely entirely on quantitative data, much of which is gleaned from surveys completed by the bloggers themselves, and which therefore represents a potentially unreliable set of data. Despite the research done to analyse the motivations for female users, there have been relatively few studies focused on how women

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[70] Pedersen and Macafee, p. 8. Herring and Paolillo, p. 454.
[71] Pedersen and Macafee, p. 11.
[72] Louis Leung, 'Loneliness, Self-Disclosure, and ICQ ("I Seek You") Use', *Cyber Psychology and Behaviour,* 5:3 (2002), 241-251 (p. 242).
[73] Erin E. Hollenbaugh, 'Motives for Maintaining Personal Journal Blogs', Cyber Psychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking, 14:1 (2011), 13-20.

are actively using digital platforms such as the blogosphere, and how the nature of the medium could affect female users. In contrast, this thesis primarily focuses on the content of blogs and therefore examines the way in which the affirmed female authors are utilising the platform to self-represent. The analysis also highlights the elements of the form that contribute to women's position within the blogging platform. In contrast with the studies highlighted above, all of the findings within this research are based on the examination of the blog posts, and therefore entirely focused on the way in which each author textually constructs themselves through their narrative.

As highlighted above, previous studies suggest that higher levels of anonymity mean increased self-disclosure. However, they present conflicting ideas surrounding the gender differences in the level of self-disclosure online, whether the author is anonymous or not. The findings of Erin E. Hollenbaugh and Marica K. Everett's 2013 study suggest that women disclose 'more breadth of topics' and demonstrated a 'greater amount of self-disclosure' overall.[74] However, Jingwei Wu and Hend Lu's 2013 study disagrees with this, concluding that females divulge 'significantly lesser' information on their social network sites when compared to male users.[75] These conflicting findings are indicative of the flaws with both studies, and with research into online platforms more broadly. As with the previous studies into the use of anonymity, Hollenbaugh and Everett investigate the level of self-disclosure within the blogging platform using a self-assessment survey distributed through a pre-established blog network. Therefore, the findings of their study are subject to the misrepresentation of users, and also reflects a narrow scope of society. Although this is not an issue in Wu and Lu's study, the significance of their research is undermined by their interpretation of what 'self-disclosure' denotes. The definition used within their research is based on the outward facing privacy settings of the user, and the amount of definitive information (such as home town, high school or favourite musician) they have added to, and made visible on, their social media page. By using this broad and superficial interpretation of self-disclosure, rather than a more complicated classification that encompasses the private or confessional nature of the revelation, the study's conclusions are limited in their wider applications. Despite this issue with the study, some of the observations made about the content of the female participant's online self-representative narratives highlight precisely why gender is relevant to the analysis of the medium. Wu and Lu observe that within social media sites, 'Women tended to provide a record of the day, to discuss a memory, and to

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[74] Erin E. Hollenbaugh and Marcia K. Everett, 'The Effects of Anonymity on Self-Disclosure in Blogs: An Application of the Online Disinhibition Effect', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18:3 (2013), 283-302 (p. 293).
[75] Jingwei Wu and Hend Lu, 'Cultural and Gender Differences in Self-Disclosure on Social Networking Sites' in *Media and Public Shaming: Drawing the Boundaries of Disclosure* ed. by Julian Petley (London: I. B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 2013), pp. 97 – 113 (p. 107).

communicate feelings or thoughts more often than men'.[76] Although this may not translate in their findings as the demonstration of a higher level of self-disclosure, within the framework of this thesis the choice to share intimate details of their lives, such as memories and feelings, is what the self-disclosure of the blogosphere is all about. Despite their limitations, the fact that these apparently opposing studies both suggest that female users present more broad topics of self-disclosure than male users, and are more likely to disclose personal information and emotional experiences, reinforces the concept that the blogging platform could offer a freer way for affirmed female bloggers to self-represent.

The high levels of self-disclosure and confessional discourse highlighted in the studies above are not always seen as positive, but have also been used as a criticism of blogging as a medium, and viewed as examples of 'oversharing'. The concept of oversharing was first coined by former *Gawker* employee Emily Gould in an interview about her blogging career, to depict moments when she had shared 'too much' of herself.[77] The concept of sharing, or sharing too much, is not innovative, and theorists such as Antony Hoffman have suggested that '*overshare* is [simply] a new word for an old habit made astonishingly easy by modern technology'.[78] Despite this assertion, the term has gained popularity, and is commonly used in contemporary society to refer to an individual's online self-representation. Sociologist Ben Agger suggests that 'oversharing' is a bi-product of the Web 2.0 movement, arguing:

> People "overshare" when they interact with others through the screens of computers and smartphones. Oversharing means to divulge more of their inner feelings, opinions, and sexuality than they would in person, or even over the phone.[79]

Agger's observation that the computer mediated world of technology facilitates sharing in greater and broader ways than previous forms of communication reflects many of the studies discussed above, and the findings of this study. However, his conceptualisation of oversharing as solely negative is problematic, especially given that his analysis of how and why it takes place is focused on a moral castigation of people who use social media; a group whom he patronisingly, and incorrectly, refers to as 'the young'.[80] He insists that 'People who overshare *immerse themselves in banality*, gossiping and trading factoids', criticising 'the

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[76] Wu and Lu, p. 101.
[77] Emily Gould, 'Exposed', *New York Times Magazine*, 25th May 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/25/magazine/25internet-t.html?_r=0> [Accessed 12th January 2016] '*Gawker*' is a renowned New York based gossip blog focused on celebrities and the media. <http://gawker.com/> [Accessed 12th January 2016]
[78] Antony L. Hoffman, *Oversharing: A Critical Discourse Analysis* (unpublished master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2009), p. 12.
[79] Ben Agger, *Oversharing: Presentations of Self in the Internet Age*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. xi.
[80] Agger, p. 3.

posting or promulgating of highly personal information, such as one's relationship status'.[81] This argument shows a disdain towards social media and online narratives, and a reductive view of them as trivial and therefore unworthy of attention; much like Power's perspective discussed at the beginning of this Introduction. The medium of personal journal blogging is dominated by female users, and therefore the concept of 'oversharing' and the moral judgement that it entails, is inherently gendered. As Jill Walker [Rettberg] argues in her 2014 text, *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves*, 'blogging and selfies are not phenomena that are exclusive to women – far from it – but the accusation of blogging or selfies as narcissistic or exhibitionist is particularly common when women engage in these practices'.[82] By characterising women who express themselves, or describe emotions and experiences as 'oversharing', they can be instantly demeaned. This condemnation fuels the subordination of women online in a way that is seen within other sectors of society, and which must therefore be challenged. The characterisation of blogs as an example of oversharing also presents an over-simplified representation of the narratives that are being produced within the blogosphere by female presenting authors. In contrast, the analysis used in this study highlights the opportunities that the blogosphere presents for women to tell their *own* stories; and explores the narratives that *they* are choosing to share.

Aside from the potential anonymity, another element that elevates the blog beyond traditional literary texts is the possibilities it offers for interaction with other users and readers. Much of the research into the social aspects of blogging points to the idea of an 'online community' within which users separated by geography and time can interact, socialise and share with each other; a concept which has fascinated academics from many fields. Baumer *et al.*'s 2008 research explores the 'connectedness' between a blog author and their reader which is facilitated by the blogging platform.[83] This can be through visible threads of communication such as comments, and invisible threads of communication such as private messages, emails, social networking or even face-to-face meetings. The communicative aspects of the blogging platform allow bloggers to connect with their readership, and with other bloggers. However, in her 2008 study, Kimberly Chopin argues that blogging is more than just a form of communication, describing how readers 'expect to be able to give their opinions on a given post, add information to it, or just say hello to the blog author'.[84] She highlights the increased interactivity of the contemporary blogosphere,

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[81] Agger, pp. 3-4. [Emphasis Original]
[82] Jill Walker Rettberg, *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 18.
[83] Baumer *et al.*, p. 1.
[84] Kimberly Chopin, 'Finding Communities: Alternative Viewpoints Through Weblogs and Tagging', *Journal of Documentation*, 64:4 (2008), 552 – 575 (p. 557).

which makes the audience an active part of the text rather than a passive consumer of content as with previous online material, and traditional autobiographical texts. In the years since Baumer *et al.* and Chopin's studies were conducted, there have been further developments in the way users can access and communicate across multi-faceted platforms, which have generated even more ways in which the blogosphere could be considered as participatory and interactive. Social media sites have become more integrated with each other, and also with other online platforms such as news sites and image hosting sites, allowing users to disseminate a variety of content with greater ease. This has been further increased by the proliferation of smart phones, which although were widely in use in 2008, are even more prevalent and offer greater technology now than ever. Previous studies into the communicative and social aspects of blogging have primarily been based on the quantitative assessment of comments, and/or the self-proclaimed sociability of the blog authors. In contrast, this thesis examines the content of the comments alongside the original blog posts, and considers them as part of the larger narrative structure. This acknowledges how the role of the reader has changed and developed in the contemporary blogosphere, rendering the concept of audience more complicated than in traditional forms of life-writing, and considering the extent to which the wider blogosphere could be seen as contributing to the author's autobiographical performance. By examining the interactivity of blogging within the context of the current participatory culture, this thesis will therefore offer a unique insight into the way in which the technology is being used.

The majority of studies into the blogosphere, including many of those outlined above, rely on a strict gender binary to categorise users as either male or female. This excludes the possibility of bloggers who identify as transgender or gender-queer, and also fails to acknowledge the possibility that the affirmed gender of the bloggers may not align with their assigned offline gender. The findings of these studies therefore represent a narrow world view, as they do not fully take into account the range of identities that an author could be performing, or the potential of the blogosphere to allow users to perform an alternative self to their offline lived reality. The primary source blogs analysed within this thesis are written by authors presenting an affirmed female gender. However, they are analysed as textual constructions and performances of self, and therefore the extent to which they reflect the offline lived reality of their authors is not part of the study.[85] The inherent disassociation of computer mediated communication means the primary source bloggers may be presenting an online identity that does not align with their offline identity; so information such as their gender can only be perceived, not confirmed. As Niels van Doorn, Liesbet van Zoonen and Sally Wyatt argue in their 2007 article, 'Writing from Experience: Presentations of Gender

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[85] This is outlined in more detail in the Methodology, pp. 27-47.

Identity on Weblogs', bloggers may present themselves as being male or female, but 'this presentation is achieved through various performances of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', incorporating both discursive and visual means to create an image of a gendered self whose embodied identity is shaped offline'.[86] The ability to ascertain personal information such as gender is also complicated by the level of anonymity some of the primary source bloggers choose to maintain. The affirmed female self-representations are therefore read as textually-constructed performances of gender.

The idea of a performative self implies the need for an audience, as argued by Erving Goffman in his 1959 text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.[87] Goffman rejects the idea that the 'self' has an original state, and instead suggests that the self perceived by others is performed by the individual in the context within which it is being received. This echoes Judith Butler's concept of gender performance, and specifically her seminal 1990 text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.[88] What Butler highlights is how gender is performed through 'certain actions and behaviours', which are then read by others as signifiers of whether the performer is male or female.[89] The process she describes, although carried out unconsciously, therefore requires a form of audience through which an individual can validate their gender performance. Within contemporary society, the public interpretation of a performative self is complicated by the digital dimension of culture. The online performance of an individual's self, and gender, requires different signifiers than the offline world. These signifiers are read through the blogger's narrative construction, which means it is easy for users to present an alternative performance to their offline lived reality. This approach emphasises the possibilities that the online platform holds for individuals to represent multiple performances of self, and is therefore seen to present new possibilities for self-expression that go beyond Goffman or Butler's original conceptualisation.

By embracing the concept of blogging as offering a freer form of writing, the platform creates a unique opportunity for affirmed female users, and in particular offers the potential for the blogosphere to challenge the mainstream representations of women's lives. These alternative representations are not subject to the same gender based assumptions or hierarchical biases as traditional written forms, and could therefore offer women writers a higher degree of agency over their own narratives. Although the huge numbers of female bloggers identified in previous studies would appear to confirm the legitimacy of the idea that

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[86] Niels van Doorn, Liesbet van Zoonen and Sally Wyatt, 'Writing from Experience: Presentations of Gender Identity on Weblogs', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 14:2 (2007), 143-158 (p. 155).
[87] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1959), p. 26.
[88] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 25.
[89] Butler (1990), p. 35.

the blogosphere has created a unique platform for women's self-representation, the concept must be rendered more complicated than acknowledging the presence of female users based on a binary self-assessment. This thesis therefore examines exactly how affirmed female users choose to self-represent through their online narratives, and how the unique features of the genre enable them to tell their stories.

Breakdown of Thesis Structure

The thesis begins with a Methodology chapter, which outlines the criteria used to identify the primary source blogs, the method of data capture, and the analytical approach used in the study. It then sets out the theoretical framework upon which the close textual analysis of the blog narratives is based. It also gives a short introduction to each of the bloggers in order to demonstrate the geographical and social demographic of the sample, and allow readers of the thesis an opportunity to be introduced to these previously unexplored narratives. The body of the thesis is split into two sections, 'The Users of the Blogosphere' and 'Blogging Life Experiences'. The first section examines the writers and readers of blog narratives and the way in which they utilise the platform. The analysis is broken down into two categories, Chapter One: The Bloggers, and Chapter Two: The Readers. Chapter One explores the textual constructions of self present in the primary source blog narratives, within the context of more traditional literary forms, such as memoir and autobiography. It specifically focuses on the role anonymity plays in the performance of personal identity, affirmed female gender, and the opportunities the medium presents for bloggers to perform an identity removed from their offline lived reality. Chapter Two explores the role of the reader in the construction of the primary source blog narratives. It examines the technological developments of the online world that encourage higher levels of audience interactivity, and the impact this has on the author and their text. The analysis utilises literary theories of autobiographical writing to characterise the reader/author relationship, and map the developments facilitated by the blogging platform. The chapter also analyses the effects the key concept of anonymity has on the relationship between a blog author and their readers, the blogosphere's wider element of community, and the specific impact these elements have on affirmed female users.

The second section is structured thematically and examines the ways in which blog authors and readers textually represent different life experiences. The analysis uses examples from the primary source blogs to examine how the construction of different themes are influenced by the anonymity of the blog author, and how they demonstrate the opportunities that the blogging platform can represent for different performances of self. The final two chapters also use the key concepts and critical framework established within the

first two chapters, echoing the ideas of self-representation and audience outlined above. Chapter Three is focused on how the primary source blog authors specifically mediate the experience of emotionally-charged events, both positive and negative, and how they portray their ever-changing emotional states through their narratives. It also discusses the gendered nature of exhibiting feelings, the performative aspects and impacts of the blogger's mood, and how the online behaviour of bloggers emphasises the offline social constructs that influence our perception of others' emotional experiences. Chapter Four examines how the primary source bloggers represent the concept of time, specifically the idea of past, present and future, and how these eras function as separate concepts within the blogosphere. It specifically considers the ways in which the nature of blogging as an online medium inherently influences the time and space in which blogs are produced and consumed. It also discusses how the blog authors use their self-representative narratives to explore their own past and future selves, and examine what this demonstrates about the bloggers and the blogosphere's potential to host multiple performances of self.

Methodology

This chapter outlines the criteria used to identify the primary source blogs, the method of data capture, and the analytical approach used by the study. It also gives a short introduction to each of the bloggers in order to demonstrate the geographical and social demographic that they represent. Finally, it articulates the theoretical framework upon which the close textual analysis of the blog narratives is based, with the literary approach in particular being central to the basis of this thesis.

<u>Research Scope and Methodology</u>

As highlighted in the Introduction, the blogosphere as a platform is constantly developing and changing. The primary source blogs used within this thesis are therefore unique, as they represent a snapshot of the ever shifting and expanding wealth of blog material that is being constantly produced. However, the nature of the blogosphere as an online platform also posed a logistical challenge in defining the research scope of this thesis. In their analysis of 'The Perils of Sampling Bloggers and Their Blogs', Dan Li and Gina Walejko note that:

> Two characteristics of the blogosphere make sampling blogs and their associated authors problematic. First, as both a medium and a site of data collection, the Internet remains a challenging domain in which to survey individuals […] Second, several characteristics of blogs, including the prevalence of spam blogs and abandoned blogs, further complicate their sampling.[90]

Their research highlights just some of the problems with analysing online material such as blogs, and indicates the level of consideration that must therefore be applied when approaching the platform. This thesis acknowledges these potential difficulties, and embraces the unpredictability of the blogosphere as part of the uniqueness of studying an emerging field. Although existing research into the blogosphere suggests a variety of methods that could be used to approach the material, this thesis uses a specifically designed methodology in order to both collect and analyse the primary source materials, which is outlined below.

Attempting to encompass the whole of the online world into the study, or to try and extrapolate findings onto the whole blogosphere, would be virtually impossible and extremely reductive. Therefore, the first task was to reduce the scope of the research to a specific area, and establish a clear set of criteria through which to rationalise the blogs which would be used as primary sources. This began with the decision of whether to utilise a blog hosting site, and if so which hosting site to choose. Although there are various service providers

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[90] Dan Li and Gina Walejko, 'Splogs and Abandoned Blogs: The Perils of Sampling Bloggers and their Blogs', *Information, Communication and Society*, 11:2 (2008), 279-286 (p. 280).

from which sources could be taken, the normative features are often notably different, the standard options for the levels of personal information vary, and the facility to comment is not always available or compulsory. The analysis of structure and content would therefore be inconsistent if comparisons were being made between different hosts. In order to decide on the most appropriate host site, the most popular English language blog hosting sites were identified, and then the normative features of the top three were compared.[91] The blog hosting site subsequently chosen was *Wordpress*, which currently hosts over fifty-eight million individual sites, and whose features are most suited to the analysis. The language element of the host was particularly important as the entire collection of primary source blogs had to be written in clear English in order to be accurately interpreted.[92] Although *Wordpress* is not limited to any nationality of contributors exclusively, the majority of posts (66%) are written in English.[93] Another significant feature of the *Wordpress* site, in contrast to other hosting services, is the compulsory comment function that is included in all the blog 'themes' that are used to structure a new blog.[94] The ability to receive comments was essential for this thesis as they play a unique role in understanding audience, and the analysis specifically explores the effect they have on the self-representation of the primary source bloggers.

The data capture included all posts produced on the blogs identified as primary sources, and all subsequent comments made on the posts, within the course of a year. The data was captured within the research period of the thesis, and therefore represents material that is current to the social and cultural context in which the research was done. The period of capture commenced immediately after the project was granted ethical approval, and therefore ran from 13th June 2013 to the 13th June 2014. The initial data capture was done by setting up an email address on behalf of the project, through which it was possible to register with the host site *Wordpress* in order to access and explore the blogosphere. Once registered, *Wordpress* allows users to filter lists of blogs by various different criteria, and view the most recent posts within specific topic 'tags'. The thesis is focused on female authored blogs, and therefore the primary filter applied to the lists generated by *Wordpress* was the gender of the author. However, the gender that the author textually constructs themselves as being through their blog may not align with the gender they identify as in their

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[91] The three most popular English language blog host sites are *Blogger, Blogspot* and *Wordpress.*
[92] Although the primary source blogs are all written in clear English, the narratives are not without spelling and grammatical mistakes. In order to represent the most authentic version of the text within this thesis, the names of the bloggers and the titles of their posts are reproduced as they were originally written by the author. When quoting passages from the main body of the blog narrative, any errors are highlighted using [sic] to acknowledge the mistake as that of the author.
[93] 'Stats' on *Wordpress* <http://en.wordpress.com/stats/ > [Accessed 29th November 2015]
[94] Blog themes are a series of design patterns created by *Wordpress* for their blogs, which can be chosen by the blogger when they create their blog and changed whenever they want to make their blog appear different in layout or style.

offline lived reality, and the blog authors must therefore be perceived as those who present an affirmed female gender.[95] This still represented a huge number of blog narratives, and the next step was therefore to utilise the topic tags in order to narrow down the number of blogs. This topic categorisation is chosen by the author and can be used individually, or as one of many topics that the particular post is perceived to be covering, and is therefore tagged with. The *Wordpress* generated list showed the most common topic tag for female authored blogs to be 'relationships'. Given that the thesis is focused on not only how female bloggers mediate themselves and perform their persona through the text, but also with what exactly female bloggers are choosing to share through their narratives, the popular topic of relationships was chosen as another applicable criterion. However, this topic category was only used to identify the first post of blogs that were to be included within the data capture, and was not used to filter any subsequent posts. Although the topic of relationships was an important way of highlighting the primary theme addressed by the female bloggers being sampled, the categorisation of the primary source blogs as 'relationship' blogs is not sufficient to demonstrate the varying intricacies of behaviour and bonds that are included in the narratives. The primary source bloggers' use of the term 'relationship' is therefore interpreted as indicative of how they *relate* to their audience, themselves, their offline acquaintances and the wider social setting that they write into. This concept of relation includes both the visible and invisible connections that are present in the narrative, as well as the connotations of connection and intimacy that the term relationship portrays.

Once the list of blogs had been reduced to female authored blogs with the topic tag of relationships, the most recent posts at the beginning of the data capture period were reviewed for their suitability to the study, until twenty anonymous and twenty non-anonymous blogs had been identified. Although it was acknowledged that the analysis would not necessarily require this level of resources, the capture of material included forty blogs, which represented a large enough sample to guard against the possibility that some of the primary source blogs would either have been abandoned or no longer fit the criteria by the end of the data capture period. The probability of longevity was increased by the stipulation that all blogs being used as sources must have been created and in use for at least a month prior to the beginning of the project's capture period. The original criteria for the blogs also stated that all blogs used as primary sources must be updated a minimum of twice a month during the capture period to ensure that they provided plenty of material for analysis. However, during the on-going analysis of certain primary source blogs that initially updated frequently, there were significant breaks in the narrative that were rationalised afterwards by

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[95] The implications of this are explored further within the analysis of the thesis, but for the sake of brevity, the authors are referred to using female pronouns.

the blogger. The user's choice to remove themselves from the blogosphere, but return to the narrative again after an allotted time, demonstrates their relationship with the medium and their approach to the activity of blog writing. Therefore, these primary source blogs were not removed based on this criterion. However, blogs that were inactive for more than three months were excluded from the data capture, as this presented a significant section of the twelve-month period of data capture for them to be absent. The implication of these criteria and the foreseen abandonment of several of the initial primary source blogs meant that only seventeen of the forty blogs survived the entire period of data capture.

Another essential foundation for the blogs examined by this thesis was that they were created by an individual, rather than by a group (excluding all multi-authored blogs, or MABs) and that they must not be sponsored by an organisation. This reduced the chance of coercion in terms of the subject matter, views or opinions of the blog being produced. They also had to be personal to the individual, and focused on the blogger's own life, as it is the self-representation that the analysis of this thesis is focused on. Given the approach to the material, the analysis was not concerned with verifying the information provided by the author with their offline reality, but focused on the textually constructed reality of their narrative. All information provided must therefore be considered as what the blogger is presenting as part of their online persona. The authors of the blogs consequently had to present an affirmed female gender, and present as over eighteen; beyond these two definitive conditions, the narratives that were chosen represent a variety circumstances. As some of the blogs are considered anonymous, and even those that are not considered anonymous do not always convey definitive information, statistics such as age are hard to attribute to many blogs; a more accurate trajectory pin-points life stages or positions.

Once the forty primary source blogs had been chosen, another feature of the hosting site was used in order to begin the capture of data itself. Using a registered email account on *Wordpress* it is possible to 'follow' specific blogs, which acts as a form of subscription to all future activity on the chosen blog. Using the 'Blogs I Follow' section of *Wordpress'* site, this subscription can then be adapted so that the registered email address is sent an immediate copy of all posts made on the blog, and all subsequent comments published on each post. This creates an electronic record of each blog's activity and material, which can be kept within the specially created email account and viewed at any time using the specific log in details. This was therefore done for all forty of the blogs, and sub-folders created within the email account in order to record all of the blogging activity on each one.[96] One feature of the

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[96] The email address blogphd@yahoo.co.uk is still valid and can be logged onto at any time in order to access electronic archives of all the primary source blog materials, as well as the material they

primary source blogs that was not included in this method of capture was the 'About Me' pages of each author. Like the comment function on *Wordpress* hosted blogs, an 'About Me' page is also compulsory within the themes of the site and therefore each blog includes a signposted page designed to give readers an introduction to the author. In many cases this is written when the author first starts the blog, and then potentially updated during the course of their writing.[97] As the blogs were all started prior to the beginning of the capture period, the 'About Me' pages had already been written, therefore a copy of each blogger's 'About Me' was made to record the content at the start of the data capture.[98] Any subsequent changes made to the 'About' page after the subscription were then included in the email documentation alongside other posts.[99] All of the primary source material of this project was therefore captured instantly as it was produced over the course of a year, within the research period. This means that the material being analysed had only just been written, and never before been analysed. The potential significance of the narratives was therefore completely unprecedented, as the nature and content of the primary source blogs only revealed themselves as the research developed.

The original intention of the thesis was to divide the primary source material into two categories, anonymous and non-anonymous. However, during the development of the research and the early analysis of the primary source blogs, the designation of anonymous and non-anonymous progressed beyond the design of the original criteria. Some of the primary source blogs initially categorised as anonymous began to include potentially identifying features such as photos, locations or 'real' names. Although it did not adhere to the original categorisation, this deviation represented an alternative understanding of how anonymous narratives are textually constructed and therefore offered an important contribution to the thesis. These primary source blogs were therefore kept as part of the data capture, but an alternative sub-group entitled 'post-anonymous' was created to distinguish them from the anonymous or non-anonymous narratives. This term recognises that some of

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have published since the end of the data capture period. [Accessed at www.yahoo.co.uk/mail, Password: edgehill]

[97] The way in which authors use the 'About Me' as part of their self-representation is explored in Chapter One: The Bloggers, pp. 65-72.

[98] This was done by copying the blog content onto a word document, in order to create a 'hard' copy of the post in its original form. The same process was later repeated for all of the primary source blogger's posts, in order to create a permanent offline record of the narratives. In order to provide readers with long-term access to all of this blog material, the hard copy of this thesis will contain a CD-Rom in the appendix.

[99] Some of the primary source bloggers therefore have multiple versions of their 'About Me' included within the data capture. The URL for this page remains the same despite any changes made, and therefore the site referenced may not include the information referred to in the text. All versions of the 'About Me' are therefore included in the documented material. The references to the 'About Me' sections within the body of the thesis also include the date that the page was last accessed, so it is clear whether the page represents an earlier or later version of the author's 'About Me'.

the blog posts produced during the period of capture could still be considered as anonymous narratives, as they were written under the conditions of anonymity outlined by the original criteria; but that the posts written after the addition of identifying features to the blog were produced within the context of an identifiable author, and were therefore not anonymous. The data captured for the final thesis analysis therefore consists of six anonymous primary source blogs, eight non-anonymous primary source blogs, and three primary source blogs that were considered to be post-anonymous. Although some of the primary source bloggers choose to include their 'real' name within their narrative, all of the primary bloggers are referred to by their blog name throughout the thesis. This maintains consistency, and also emphasises that the analysis is focused on the textually constructed selves performed through the blog, and not their alignment with the blogger's offline lived reality.

Ethical Considerations

The project was granted ethical approval by the University Ethics Committee on 12th June 2013. Although the analysis of this thesis approaches the primary sources as literary texts, the fact that the material is captured from an online platform dramatically changes the ethical considerations of examining and replicating the content of each author's work, and therefore the methodology of the research. Barbara Sharf suggests in her work on 'netiquette', that the primary ethical concerns when approaching online material are: 'issues of privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, and appropriation of others' stories'; all of which are considered as important in the context of this project.[100] All of the primary sources were taken from blog hosting site *Wordpress,* the guidelines of which state that the user surrenders ownership of the material once it is published into the 'public' domain of the blogosphere. The data capture of this thesis therefore only utilises information that has already been released into this 'public' domain, and been published online. Despite this, the issue of online privacy is not definitive, as acknowledged by the Association of Internet Researchers' Ethical Guidelines, which recognise that many people 'may operate in public spaces but maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy'.[101] They argue that 'Individual and cultural definitions and expectations of privacy are ambiguous, contested, and changing', and therefore 'Social, academic, or regulatory delineations of public and private as a clearly recognizable binary no longer holds in everyday practice'.[102] This means

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[100] Barbara Sharf, 'Beyond Netiquette: The Ethics of Doing Naturalistic Discourse Research on the Internet' in *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net* ed. by Steve Jones (Sage: London, 1999), pp. 243-256 (244).
[101] Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan, *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the Association of Internet Research Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0),* Association of Internet Research (2012), p. 6. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf> [Accessed 12th December 2016]
[102] Markham and Buchanan, pp. 6-7.

that although the material appears within a 'public' online space, the author may still consider their writing to be 'private' in some sense. However, the form of data collection used within this thesis requires open access, and the criteria for selecting the blogs to be primary sources therefore excludes any bloggers who stated that their narrative was not to be reproduced without their permission, despite this not being enforceable. In order to be alert to this issue throughout the study, the primary source blogs were regularly checked for any privacy or copyright requests made by the authors, which would place them outside of the original criteria of openly published blogs.

In keeping with the openly published nature of the blog narratives identified by the methodological criteria, the data capture of the thesis was conducted without explicitly seeking the authors' permission. This meant that the narratives were written with the same perception of freedom that the authors considered themselves to be writing with before the capture period began. By informing the authors during the research process, it could potentially have altered the way in which the blog was written; unintentionally influencing the narrative, and therefore undermining the analysis of the thesis by shaping the source. This approach also reflects the identification of blogs as a literary text, which as with any published literary text, can be read, analysed and reproduced for academic purposes as long as it is appropriately referenced. All of the blogs used in this thesis are referenced via URL to the original blog post, are presented how the author intended it to be read, and therefore attached to the already public identity of the blogger. This blogger identity exists whether a blogger is anonymous or non-anonymous, as the blogger identity refers to the name, nickname, or pseudonym, associated with their blog. As with any of the material being shared in the blog, all the personal information that is made visible through this research project is already available on the Internet, and so by referencing it in this way the project does not expose any sensitive data, but merely reproduces information from an acknowledged and referenced source.

Another ethical consideration of the study was the visibility of the researcher; which also has the potential to affect the narrative, and was therefore avoided. This meant that there was no involvement with the primary source bloggers, their online communities, or in the wider blogosphere. As highlighted above, the primary source bloggers were not informed of the data capture process and therefore it was important to stay entirely removed from the narrative to avoid shaping it in any way. This was achieved by observing the online behaviour of the primary source bloggers without making comments on their posts, or any other blogs or forum discussions, and by avoiding blogging anything personally across any online platform. By using the hosting site Wordpress, the blogs are purposefully not affiliated with any subject, gender or nationality, which reduces the premeditated assumptions that

could be made about their content. This 'human' element of the researcher is also reflected in the online world, where the bloggers' narratives are often considered to represent 'real' people, and therefore require the ethics of traditional human subject protection. As Charles Ess outlines in his 2014 text, *Digital Media Ethics*, 'our online behaviours and expressions are closely tied to our offline lives and selves' and therefore 'some version of human subjects' protections should apply to online research'.[103] However, he suggests that the majority of those who examine the online world, in 'virtual' environments and communities, contend that 'no 'real' human subjects were involved' and hence the ethical guidelines for human subjects do not apply.[104] This perspective is also reflected by the Association of Internet Researchers' Ethical Guidelines, which state that the concept of human subjects is 'ill-suited for models of inquiry that follow non-biomedical procedures for interacting with people or don't interact directly with people at all, for example, studying published texts'.[105] Therefore, the study of blog narratives should not be subject to the ethical implications of dealing with human subjects, as it is focused on the analysis of text, and the online medium does not inherently change that. In her 2002 text 'Representations or People?', Michelle White discusses this issue in depth, and further claims that 'calling Internet research 'human subjects research' designates the disciplines that can work in this area, the appropriate discourses that can be employed and prevents Humanities scholars from participating'.[106] This potential limitation may be one reason that few studies into the blogosphere have approached the material as a literary text. The importance of framing blogs as a narrative form also highlights the fact that they are *constructed* representations of self, and this too is not addressed by many of the traditional ethical approaches. White argues that the perpetuation of this narrow view encourages academics and other users 'to presume that the Internet settings provide access to the truth about individuals or are a direct conduit to people', which can be misleading given that 'Internet settings abound with ageist, classist, homophobic, racist, and sexist imagery and ideas'.[107] The analysis of this thesis is concentrated on the content of blogs, which may well be constructed within these constraints. However, the narratives are considered as performances of self which may or may not align with the lived reality of the individual, and therefore are not superficially interpreted as 'real'. The primary source blogs analysed within the thesis are listed below, with brief introductory biographies.

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[103] Charles Ess, *Digital Media Ethics: Digital Media and Society Series* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 23.
[104] *Ibid.*
[105] Markham and Buchanan, p. 6.
[106] Michele White, 'Representations or People?', *Ethics and Information Technology*, 4 (2002), 249-266 (250).
[107] White, p. 249.

Anonymous Primary Source Blogs

1 Year of Single <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/>

1 Year of Single is an American based blogger, who started a blog to chronicle how she coped with her decision to avoid romantic relationships. Despite this initial intention, the blog documents various failed relationships and the author's repeated attempts to try and stay single. The narrative is presented as a confessional outlet for the author to describe her dating experiences and desires for future sexual and romantic connections.

29 to Life <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/>

29 to Life is based in America and began the blog to celebrate and process turning thirty. The blog describes the changes in the author's life as she passes this milestone, her dating life and her experiences as a black woman. The narrative is not presented as confessional, but as a form of information sharing associated with friendly conversation; dealing with personal and political issues.

Evening Light <http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/>

Evening Light is an American based blogger, who uses the platform as an extension of her previous journal writing. The blog describes the feelings and experiences of the author as she deals with becoming fifty and the implications of an undiagnosed brain injury on her life. The author frames the blog as an intimate confessional space in which she can share her thoughts and feelings, and give herself a voice.

Fertility Doll <http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/>

Fertility Doll is based in Britain, and writes about her struggles with infertility. The posts depict various treatments and experiences of infertility, and specifically explores the issue in the context of her religious beliefs, her marriage and the social pressures on her as a woman. The narrative is framed as confessional, and as a form of escape from her offline lived circumstances.

Free Chick <http://freechick.wordpress.com/>

Free Chick is a British based blogger who documents the present and history of her dating life. The blog is framed as a space in which the author can share and discuss her experiences through confessional discourse. Although the blog is primarily focused on the author's romantic and sexual life, the narrative also describes her experiences as she travels, and discusses different political and social debates.

Quarter For Her Thoughts <http://quarterforherthoughts.com>

Quarter For Her Thoughts is a Canadian blogger who uses the blog as an 'honest space' in which to discuss her life and relationships. The narrative discusses various different aspects of the author's life, from her familial and romantic relationships, to her relationship with alcohol. It is framed as confessional, not only in the context of her current life, but also in documenting her past life experiences.

Non-Anonymous Primary Source Blogs

A Life Unexamined <http://alifeunexamined.wordpress.com/>

A Life Unexamined is written by an Australian based a-romantic asexual blogger. The blog aims to add to the public voices of the asexual community, and represent the author's asexual activism. The blog also depicts the personal experiences of the author as she deals with the everyday issues surrounding her sexuality and the wider social understanding of asexuality.

Dorky Mum <http://dorkymum.wordpress.com/>

Dorky Mum is a British blogger who is now living in Tasmania with her family. The blog is focused on her experiences as a wife, stay-at-home mother and new resident of a very different country. As well as her own blog, the author also writes for other online media and uses her site to review items sent to her by companies hoping to gain publicity, although she states she does not take payment for this.

I've Never Robbed A Bank <http://corzgalore.org/>

I've Never Robbed A Bank is a blog by an American-based author, which was subsequently renamed 'Life is weird and so am I'. The blog consists of text and video posts that describe the everyday experiences of the author, often framed using self-deprecating language. Despite being identifiable, the blog frames the narrative as confessional and repeatedly divulges information or discusses issues that are said to be private.

Not Just A Mum Blog <http://notjustamumblog.com/>

Not Just A Mum Blog is written by an Australian based author. The blog describes the experiences of the author as a wife and mother, and how she copes with the changes to her body, her life and her autonomy after having her children. Despite being identifiable, the blog frames the narrative as confessional as she uses the posts to share her own personal insecurities.

Psychobabble <http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/>

Psychobabble is a blog by an American based marriage and family therapist. It depicts the everyday experiences of the author and her partner, who during the period of capture she has married and they are now expecting their first child. It also refers to her experience as a therapist and how this affects her view on the world. The blog has been featured on *Wordpress'* 'Freshly Pressed' list of recommended blogs.

Sheryl's Pearls <http://sheryleigh.com/>

Sheryl's Pearls is an American based blogger who uses her blog to share her own life experiences and find life lessons in them to guide her readers. Although originally a *Wordpress* hosted site, the blog is now part of the author's own website which also includes other aspects of her work such as a book that has recently been published. Although the blog discusses her everyday life, the narrative is not framed as confessional, but as a public discussion of collective issues.

Tracey Louise <http://traceylouise.wordpress.com/>

Tracey Louise is a British based blogger who used to be a successful glamour model but has had to find an alternative vocation in life as she is getting older. The blog describes her past experiences and her new discoveries as she makes this transition. The narrative is not strictly confessional but is framed as a place where she can share her feelings about the changes in her life and how it has affected her relationship with herself, her body, and her boyfriend.

Where The Light Is <http://wherethelightis.org/>

Where The Light Is is a British based blogger who also spends a period of the data capture writing from her temporary home in Gran Canaria, where she has gone to pursue her dream of being a scuba diving instructor. The blog is used as a platform on which she can discuss her own feelings and experiences both when she is at home and wishing to be somewhere else, but also when she is away and not surrounded by an offline support network.

Post-Anonymous Primary Source Blogs

Mum and More <http://judieannrose.wordpress.com/>

Mum and More is a British based blogger who started blogging to fulfil her ambition to be a writer. The narrative focuses on her other life ambition of becoming a mother (something she achieved just before starting the blog), and what effect this has on her life and her relationships. During the period of data capture, she chose to add her daughter's name to

the title of her blog (becoming 'Rose and Mum and More'), her own name to the web address, and include an image of herself and her daughter as the blog logo; the blog is therefore considered to be post-anonymous within the context of this project. The change in the level of anonymity was not acknowledged within the narrative and the posts still do not reveal large amounts of personal information, despite being framed as confessional.

Seattle Poly Chick <http://seattlepolychick.com/>

Seattle Poly Chick is an American based blogger who shares stories about her life as a polyamorous bisexual woman, within an extended polyamorous network. She also discusses her everyday experiences of work, family and relationships. She was originally categorised as anonymous, but has since added identifying features such as a photo to her blog and used her 'real' name, so is therefore considered to be post-anonymous within the context of this project. Her narrative is framed as confessional, and contains some explicit sexual descriptions.

What Kate Did Next <http://whatkatedidnext.wordpress.com/>

What Kate Did Next is an Australian blogger who started writing as a way of dealing with and discussing the death of her daughter, and how she and her family have been affected by the loss. The blog 'About Me' and general posts still appear anonymous, but the blog author uses a separate user profile named 'kate4sam', which includes an image of her, in order to reply to comments. She also includes photos of her deceased daughter in several of her later posts. The blog is therefore considered as post-anonymous within the context of this project. Her narrative is framed as space in which she can share her grief and discuss her pain in a way which is not accepted in her offline circumstances.

Theoretical Framework for Analysis

The textual constructions of self that the primary source bloggers perform online are considered by this thesis as self-representative narratives, and are explored through close textual analysis. By choosing to frame the narratives in a literary context, this thesis demonstrates a consideration of the online hosted narrative as a text, as well as a computer-mediated performance of self. To represent the female voiced narratives, the analysis of the primary sources blogs explicitly uses a feminist critical framework to examine the potential that blogging could hold for women to self-represent in alternative, and potentially transgressive, ways. The primary focus is on feminist theory from the 1990s onwards, for example Nancy K. Miller, Robyn Warhol, Leigh Gilmore and Susan Sellers. This represents the period immediately before, and during, the rise in popularity of Internet technology, and the data capture of this thesis. This timeframe also includes the impact of postfeminism on

women's position in society, often seen as a contrast to traditional feminist ideals, as explored by the work of theorists such as Angela McRobbie and Stéphanie Genz. Although there is a contemporary focus, the feminist theoretical model also acknowledges the importance of earlier theorists, especially those grounded in second-wave feminism, which provide a platform for many of the key ideas explored in the study. By focusing on female-voiced narratives and using a feminist literary framework of analysis, the project places the narratives within the tradition of life-writing and autobiography as platforms for female subjectivity. By examining the blogs in this way, especially in the context of women's writing, this thesis therefore offers a unique perspective on a digital medium that is still relatively unexplored as a narrative form.

The feminist literary theory used by this thesis is primarily concerned with the ability of women's writing to impact on the wider position of women in society, as well as the individual female author; an idea which has been explored by several leading feminist theorists. For example, Hélène Cixous, who was part of the French feminist movement *écriture féminine,* repeatedly wrote about the connection between a person's sexuality and how they communicated with society, either orally or through writing. As Susan Sellers notes in her 1998 volume on Cixous' work, she saw in women's writing 'the potential to circumvent and reformulate existing structures through the inclusion of other experience'.[108] She believed that by women gaining a literary voice and documenting female lives, they could disrupt the male dominated public arena, and therefore challenge the existing expectations and understanding of gendered experience. Cixous particularly saw the potential of this in women's life writing, and commented in 1997 that: 'all biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another'.[109] She suggests that by producing autobiographical and self-representative narratives women are able to supplant the pre-existing narratives that focus on men, or a certain trope of woman, and re-write themselves, and by default all women, to create a diversity of stories. However, this diversity is still limited by the personal, social and economic boundaries that prevent some women, and men, from being able to write, or to subsequently publish their work. This is where Cixous' concept of female autobiography intersects with the hypothesis of this thesis, which suggests that the blogosphere has the potential to create alternative ways for women in particular to self-represent. One thing that provides the blogging platform with this potential is the accessibility of the medium to anybody with access to the Internet. Although this encompasses a huge section of society, it still has limitations; not everyone has the

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[108] Hélène Cixous, *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, ed. by Susan Sellers (New York: Routledge, 1998)
[109] Hélène Cixous, '*Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing' ed. by* Mireille Calle-Grubar *and* Hélène Cixous (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 170-80 (p. 177).

knowledge, ability or resources to access the Internet. However, the inclusiveness of online publication is dramatically higher than traditional forms of publication, and it therefore represents broader possibilities for authorship.

As highlighted by Cixous' work, and other historical analysis of women's writing, a key genre within the field is autobiography. Although this thesis considers the blog narratives as a unique form of self-representation, it also acknowledges that the foundations of the medium lie in traditional forms of textual self-representation and life writing, such as autobiography. The genre has always played a significant role in the representation of women, and offered some of the first and most influential opportunities for women's voices to be publicly heard. Anderson believes that the genre has developed and adapted to the changing dynamics of feminist discourse. She argues that: 'Rather than "constructing a self," autobiography could now be seen as providing, through material images, a point of view which allows new ways of interrogating social reality'.[110] This idea again refers back to Cixous' concept of women being able to contest the socially constructed ideas of being a woman through the depiction of real-life female experience. The importance of the genre to feminist theory is also highlighted by Maria DiBattista in her 2014 anthology *Autobiography*, in which she states that 'within the precincts of *écriture féminine*, women's contribution to the autobiographical tradition was seen as unique and transformative enough to merit its own neologism: "autogynography."'.[111] Although in this context the term is framed as a positive recognition of women's writing within this field, it is still being highlighted as a niche, and as representative of an area of literary studies not widely explored. This emphasises the need for further exploration of women's autobiographical writing, and the importance of feminist theory in contemporary analysis of the genre. This theoretical framework is therefore used as a background to the analysis of the primary source blogs within this thesis.

By placing blog narratives within the wider trajectory of life-writing, this thesis argues that the conception of autobiography as a key medium for women could also be applicable to the blogging platform. This is explored by cyberfeminist theorist Deborah Silverman Bowen in her 2009 text 'e-Criture Feminine: Women's Online Diaries and the New Female Discourse'. Within her analysis she outlines the importance of autobiography for female writers, stating:

> Through the very acts of re-presenting and representing women as *subjects* and *speaking subjects*, women's autobiographies resist external authoritative versions of

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[110] Anderson (2006), p. 130.
[111] DiBattista, p. 209.

themselves even as they allow their authors access to self-representation, to authorship, to authority and to agency.[112]

This highlights not only the subjectivity that the genre could offer women, but also frames the medium as inherently able to offer women a higher degree of agency over their self-representations given the authorial control they have over the narrative. Bowen believes that this element of freedom is further increased by the new digital mediums of autobiography such as blogging and online diary writing. Here she describes the possibilities that she believes the Internet holds for women's writing:

> When a woman writes herself on/to the Web, she is, to a great degree, free […]. There are no guidelines, parameters, or restrictions; she can write herself in any colour ink she chooses. There is no structure to her art; there is no instruction to her design. […] The entire enterprise is subject to her own whim; she can choose to add or remove content at will, she can choose to rearrange documents, she can choose to pull the whole thing down and start afresh.[113]

Here, Bowen highlights the importance of the creative freedom that the blogosphere offers users, allowing them to construct a narrative entirely of their own choice. Her ideas also reflect back to the feminist literary theory of the second wave; for example she describes how Cixous 'demanded a paradoxical writing *from* the body, even as the body is left behind, de-com-modified' and suggests that 'on the Internet, this paradox is achievable, even necessary for the creation of autobiography'.[114] Although Cixous' concept of writing from the body was focused on the idea of narratives being influenced by the gender and sexuality of the author, Bowen highlights how the computer mediated nature of online writing automatically creates a boundary between the body and the text, which can be aligned or fragmented to differing levels by the author themselves. The potential lack of embodiment in the online world is utilised in the analysis of this thesis, as the research explores the role anonymity plays in the textual constructions of the primary source blog narratives.

As well as Bowen's notions of autobiography, the analysis of the thesis also utilises other cyberfeminist theories. This contemporary branch of feminism, which has grown exclusively out of women's relationship with technological advancements, is particularly relevant to the analysis as it frames the complicated connection between gender and online media. In their anthology on women in technology, *Reload: Rethinking Women and Cyberculture*, Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth state that:

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[112] Deborah Silverman Bowen, 'e-Criture Feminine: Women's Online Diaries and the New Female Discourse' in *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice: Communities, Pedagogies and Social Action* ed. by Kristine Blair, Radhika Gajjala and Christine Tulley (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2009), pp. 309-326 (p. 314). [Emphasis Original]
[113] Bowen, p. 314.
[114] Bowen, p. 315. [Emphasis Original]

Grounded in both practice and theory, cyberfeminism can be thought of as a new wave of feminist theory and practice that is united in challenging the "coding" of technology and in investigating the complex relationship between gender and digital culture.[115]

They suggest that the core concept of cyberfeminist theory is that 'new technologies open radical possibilities for women's politics, for exploring ideas of agency and subjectivity, and for creating a uniquely female space'.[116] These ideas reflect key elements of this thesis, and therefore represent the importance of cyberfeminism's contribution to the analysis of the primary source blogs. The exploration of the relationship between identity, body and machine is a significant theme of cyberfeminism, and of this thesis. As Flanagan and Booth note, 'Questions of identity are clearly bound up with questions of the body in both the material and the virtual worlds. Just as cyberculture forces us to ask what constitutes identity, it forces us to ask what constitutes a body'.[117] The key theorists used to explore this area are Rosi Braidotti, Anne Balsamo and N. Katherine Hayles, all of whom 'examine issues around the body by exploring the cyborg as a metaphor in feminist theory and within popular narratives'.[118] Their ideas are focused on female experience and the unique position of being a woman in the online world; as emphasised by Braidotti's claim that 'being a women is always already there as the ontological precondition for my existential becoming a subject'.[119] The ideas explored by these theorists are all applicable to the analysis of the female voiced primary source blogs, as they contribute to the discussion of female embodiment and whether blogging can create a platform that is free of bodily connotations, and therefore of gendered readings. In relation to the idea of embodiment, the analysis of the blog author's textually constructed descriptions of their offline bodies also utilises non-cyberfeminist theories of female subjectivity. For example, Naomi Wolf's 1991 text *The Beauty Myth* and Susie Orbach's 2010 text *Bodies*, which specifically focus on the self-representation, objectification and modification of female bodies in contemporary society.

However, it is not only feminist theories that have developed alongside new technology; the expansion of the blogging platform, and other interactive digital media, has also created a new area of narrative studies that analyses these digital mediums. Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas state in their 2011 anthology, *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age*, that this field of criticism engages with 'a range of narrative concepts, including questions about plot, event structures, and temporality, as well as questions about

[115] *Reload: Rethinking Women and Cyberculture* ed. by Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2002), p. 11.
[116] Flanagan and Booth, p. 12.
[117] Flanagan and Booth, pp. 14-15.
[118] Flanagan and Booth, p. 15.
[119] Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 187.

how stories are produced and experienced, debated in relation to matters such as interactivity, immersion and agency'.[120] She highlights the way narrative theories have adapted to explore the new environments within which stories and other narratives are being hosted. The key concepts highlighted by this narrative approach are encompassed within this thesis through the focus on interactivity, and the exploration of agency in the textual construction of blogs. This approach demonstrates how the analysis of both the form and content of blogs within this thesis contributes to the further understanding of the medium as a whole. The analysis of the primary source blogs as narrative forms is also influenced by the perceived gender of the blog authors, and it therefore utilises the framework of feminist narratology to specifically examine the female blog narratives. This concept was first outlined by Susan Lanser in her inaugural 1986 text 'Towards a Feminist Narratology', in which she not only suggested that feminist theory could offer narrative studies a useful critical framework, but that narratology also 'offered feminist criticism a useful toolkit of replicable parameters which could elucidate the forms and functions of women's narratives'.[121] The understanding of feminist narratology has developed and changed since this initial notion of collaboration, specifically with the influence of post-structuralist ideas about gender. In 1996 Robyn Warhol therefore defined feminist narratology in more broad and applicable terms as 'the study of narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural constructions of gender'.[122] This concept of a culturally constructed gender complicates the original idea of a gendered narrative, and Page commented in 2007 that 'rather than assuming that women's narratives will be different to those told by men, feminist narratology now seeks to come to terms with shifting, variable relations between gender and narrative'.[123] This more contemporary notion of feminist narratology which explores the complicated and intricate relationship between the gender of the author, and their text, is used in the thesis to explore how the affirmed gender of the author can be read in their textual constructions of self, and what implications this has for the gendered nature of blog narratives.

One of the things that is clear in the development of these feminist narratological concepts is that they have been greatly influenced by the notions of gender fluidity that were popularised by theorists such as Butler. In her seminal 1990 text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler argues that: 'The effect of gender is produced through

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[120] *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age* ed. by Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), p. 1.
[121] Susan Lanser, 'Toward a Feminist Narratology', *Style*, 20:3 (1986), 341-363 (p. 347).
[122] Robyn Warhol, 'The Look, the Body and the Heroine of *Persuasion*' in *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* ed. by Kathy Mezei (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 21-39 (p. 21).
[123] Ruth Page, 'Gender' in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* ed. by David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 189-202 (p. 201).

the stylization of the body and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self'.[124] Her work represents the notion of performance used within the analysis of this thesis; as the blog narratives are seen as textual performances of self, and the gender and persona of the blog authors are therefore considered as performative. The analysis also uses ideas outlined in Butler's 2004 text *Undoing Gender* to examine the primary source blogger's textual constructions of an affirmed female gender.[125] As highlighted above, the textually constructed performance of an affirmed female gender does not necessarily align with the offline lived reality of the author, who could be performing an alternative gender online to the one they identify with in the offline world. In order to theorise the possibility of multiple gender performances that the blogosphere could offer users, the thesis utilises Jennie Barnsley's theory of 'metagender' which outlines 'four aspects of gender that work together to produce the something that we think we mean when we talk about our own or someone else's sex/gender'.[126] Her four categories are inspired by Cynthia Eller's 2003 text *Am I a Woman?: A Skeptic's Guide to Gender*, which describes 'four ways society knows you're a woman', 'because you look like one, because you feel like one, because you perform like one and because people treat you like one'.[127] Barnsley's theory makes the division between these conceptualisations more explicit, allowing different performances of gender to be more easily defined. The four gender types she identifies are l-gender, which is how your body looks, f-gender, which is what gender a person 'feels' they are, p-gender, which is the gender an individual outwardly performs through dress and expression, and finally j-gender, which is how others perceive and judge your gendered performance. She argues that in a patriarchal society, metagender requires binary gender congruence of all four types in order for an individual to be classified as either male or female; which can serve to reinforce the gender binary. However, she suggests that her gender schema could also act as a 'useful tool for highlighting the complexities and even the absurdities of the binary'.[128] In the blogosphere the interpretation of all four gender types is complicated by the computer mediated nature of the platform, and the potential anonymity with which an author can write; both of which allow for alternative gender performances. The theoretical distinction between these different types of gender therefore highlights the ways in which the primary

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[124] Judith Butler, *The Judith Butler Reader* ed. by Sarah Salih (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p.114.
[125] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004)
[126] Jennie Barnsley, 'Godde and the Complexities of Gender' in *Negotiating Boundaries? Identities, Sexualities, Diversities* ed. by Clare Beckett, Owen Heathcote and Marie Macey (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 43-56 (p. 44).
[127] Cynthia Eller, *Am I a Woman?: A Skeptic's Guide to Gender* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), p. 6.
[128] Jennie Barnsley, 'Grounding Theology in Quotidian Experiences of Complex Gender: A Feminist Approach' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013), p. 48.

source blogger's performative self-representations could disrupt the gender binary, and render the interpretation of gender more complex.

In terms of performance, the critical framework of the thesis also goes beyond Butler's original definition and further explores the notion of gender performance and performativity in a computer-mediated context. For example, Lori Kendall's 2002 text *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub*, which explores online masculinities and femininities.[129] The analysis also utilises theoretical conceptualisations of blogs as a performance platform, as discussed by theorists such as Cheil Kattenbelt and Steve Dixon. Kattenbelt describes in his 2010 research how: 'A parallel world of bits and bytes has emerged adjacent to the world of atoms […] with new possibilities and opportunities of constructing one's identity and presenting or staging oneself in front of others, albeit under different conditions'.[130] Here he acknowledges the rise of an area of performance studies that is both strange and familiar, constructing traditional performances within a new and developing context. In his text *Digital Performance*, Steve Dixon argues that not only does new media and Internet technology allow for the creation of an 'immense interactive database' of performance art, but it can also function as a platform for performance collaboration and as a medium of performance distribution.[131] In particular, Dixon's work discusses online self-representation in the context of traditional theories of performance studies, suggesting that:

> Many home pages and blogs constitute digital palimpsests of Erving Goffman's notions of performative presentations of the self, with the subject being progressively erased, redefined, and reinscribed as a persona/performer within the proscenium arch of the computer monitor.[132]

His analysis emphasises the performance potential within the medium of blogging, and the possibilities that the genre can therefore present authors to perform a variety of different personae.[133] The idea that these personas are multiple and adaptable, aligns with the focus of the thesis and its examination of how women are performing a constructed identity and a constructed gender, whether through anonymous or non-anonymous self-representation. This thesis uses these ideas of performance, both of self and more specifically of gender, to explore the self-representations staged online and gain further insight into the way in which the authors are utilising the medium in order to self-represent.

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[129] Lori Kendall, *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online* (London: University of California Press, 2002)
[130] Chiel Kattenbelt, 'Intermediality in Performance as a Mode of Performativity' in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance,* ed. by Sarah Bay-Cheng, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender and Robin Nelson (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), pp. 29-37 (p. 36).
[131] Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2007), p. 3.
[132] Dixon, pp. 3-4.
[133] The theory of Erving Goffman to which he refers is outlined in the Introduction, p. 24.

The construction of a new online persona is also aided by the computer mediated nature of online communication, as the performance of self is removed from the bodily connotations of the users' offline lived reality, and could therefore be considered as disembodied. As Marie-Laure Ryan describes:

> Other body images are operated by the physical body, but the gestures of the physical body do not correspond to those of the virtual one: while one body slays dragons, flirts with a used-car salesman who poses as a hooker, or explores an enchanted forest, the other one types on a keyboard or squeezes a joystick. Such are the bodies that we take across the screen to reach fictional worlds in standard two-dimensional electronic media.[134]

What she describes are the possibilities offered by online performances of self to extend the experiences of a user beyond their lived reality. The concept of a performance platform that reflects new possibilities for expressions of self is highlighted by Victor Turner in his work on liminality. Originally an anthropological concept, liminal periods offer opportunities for social hierarches and norms to be disrupted, traditions to dissolve and future outcomes once taken for granted to be thrown into doubt. As Turner states, 'Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony'.[135] He goes on to suggest that liminality could offer a new way of understanding different performances of self, stating:

> Of course, as Goffman and other have shown, ordinary life in a social structure is itself a performance. We play roles, occupy statuses, play games with one another, don and doff many masks, each a "typification". But the performances characteristic of liminal phases and states often are more about the doffing of masks, the stripping of statuses, the renunciation of roles, the demolishing of structures, than their putting on and keeping on.[136]

He suggests that a liminal phase of performance can represent a more authentic performance of self, as the social structures that regulate behaviour and the roles that people play are removed and a more 'honest' self is revealed. Within Turner's framework, the blogging platform could be considered a liminal space; as an individual blogger can choose to mediate a performance of self free from the social, cultural and gender expectations of their offline circumstance. As Sherry Turkle observes in *Life on Screen*, 'Liminal moments are times of tension, extreme reactions, and great opportunity'.[137] This is particularly relevant to the position of female users, and the way in which women can use the blogosphere to perform their gender outside the social expectations of their lived

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[134] Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Participatory Interactivity in Electronic Media' in *Narratives as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media,* ed. by Marie-Laure Ryan (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 306-331 (pp. 306-307).

[135] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (London: Aldine Transaction, 2008), p. 95. [Originally Published in 1969]

[136] Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: Paj Publications, 1987), p. 107.

[137] Sherry Turkle, *Life on Screen* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), p. 268.

circumstance. Although this thesis rejects the notion of an original or 'true' sense of self, the concept of authenticity plays a key role in analysing the function of anonymity in online spaces.[138] Unlike previous discussions of the blogosphere as disembodied and therefore gender neutral, this concept also suggests that instead of rejecting existing structures, blog narratives can challenge and change them, and therefore represent a more progressive voice.

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[138] The concept of authenticity in the blogosphere is outlined in the Introduction, pp. 13-17.

Section One:

The Users of the Blogosphere

Chapter One: The Bloggers

This chapter looks at the authors of blogs, and is specifically focused on how the primary source bloggers construct an online persona through their self-representative narrative; including the extent to which the online platform can be seen to influence their textual performance of self. Personal journal blogs are most commonly described as online diaries due to their chronologically ordered, date-stamped posts, their sense of temporal proximity to the described events, and their focus on the textual representation of an author's own experience. Although researchers such as Karlsson observe that 'the "private" diary publically available on the web seems oxymoronic', within the genre of autobiographical writing it is not unusual for personal stories to be shared with, or even intended for, a wider audience.[139] For many of the authors choosing to write their stories within the blogosphere, the perceived public nature of the platform is textually constructed as its main attraction. Given the similarities to many previous forms of self-representation, and the focus on the life of a single individual, this thesis argues that blogs should be considered as a form of autobiography. The primary source blogs are therefore examined within the context of the genre's more traditional forms, such as life-writing and memoir, and specifically how these genres have been, and could be, utilised by female authors. However, the blog is also developed beyond many of its textual predecessors and the autobiographical narratives hosted on it are consequently influenced by several new factors. For instance, the potential anonymity of the Internet, the possibilities of audience interaction within the huge online world, and the technology available within the blog hosting sites to enhance their mediated self. The blogosphere therefore offers a unique space in which authors can share their stories. This chapter will specifically focus on the role of anonymity in the performances of self, and the opportunities the medium presents for individuals to perform an identity removed from their offline lived reality. It therefore provides an insight into the nature of online self-representation, and how the primary source bloggers construct their autobiographical selves through individual blog narratives.

Anonymous: To Be, or Not To Be

This thesis defines anonymity as the ability of a user to disassociate their offline persona from the persona they construct online. Blogging is therefore seen to offer potential freedom to authors, as it allows them to write online without accountability to their offline identity. The existing research into blogging suggests that the possibilities of anonymity are a key attraction of the blogosphere for authors, and something that marks their online self-

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[139] Karlsson (2007), p. 138.

representations as developed beyond previous textual media.[140] Within the primary source blogs, there are a variety of different levels of anonymity, based on the presence of identifying information. Although not all of the primary source bloggers that are perceived by this thesis to be anonymous choose to acknowledge their anonymity as part of their self-representation. Anonymous bloggers *Evening Light* and *Quarter For Her Thoughts* do not refer at any point in their narrative to the fact that their offline identities are concealed. This could be read as an indication that the authors are not consciously striving for anonymity, or to completely hide their identity, but are merely sharing what they believe is appropriate. It could also be a way for the authors to avoid drawing attention to their anonymous status, and therefore construct their texts as not worthy of being unveiled, as many anonymous bloggers have been.[141] Given the confessional nature of personal journal blogs and the high levels of self-disclosure within the texts, the sort of identifying information which differentiates non-anonymous blogs from those that are considered anonymous, could be viewed as the sharing of superficial facts. The acquiring of this knowledge is therefore not considered an essential part of reading and engaging with the text, as it might be within other forms of life-writing. This emphasises the need to further examine the way in which anonymity functions within the blogosphere, and what implications this has on the individual user's self-representation.

In his analysis of how anonymity functions online, John Suler argues that despite the technology involved in the majority of online platforms, in general 'others only know what a person tells them'.[142] The textually-constructed performance of self contained within the primary source blog narratives is therefore read as the identity of the author. This constructed persona is removed from or aligned with the blogger's offline lived reality, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the individual author. The fluidity of this conceptualisation is reflected by anonymous blogger *29 to Life,* who despite not including any identifying information on her blog, does feature a heavily obscured photo (as shown below in *fig.1*).

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[140] The exploration of 'anonymity' and the existing research is outlined in the Introduction, pp. 12-17.
[141] For example, Afua Hirsch, 'Publish and Be Named: Police Blogger NightJack Loses Anonymity', *The Guardian*, 16th June 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2009/jun/16/nightjack-blogger-horton> [Accessed 13th November 2015]
[142] John Suler, 'The Online Disinhibition Effect', *Cyber-Psychology and Behaviour,* 7:3 (2004), 321-326. (p. 322).
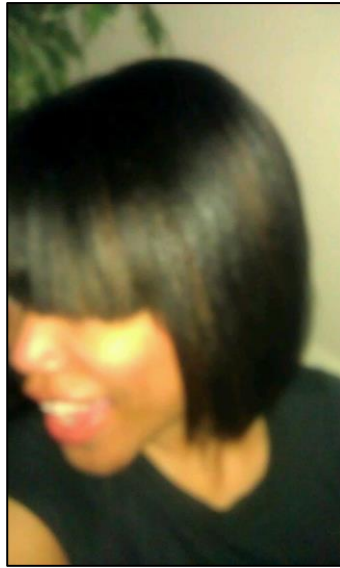
Fig.1

The use of images within anonymous blogs is inherently problematic as the photo could potentially make the author identifiable to those already familiar with her in the offline world, creating a crossover of her online and offline spheres. However, as with the other information included in the blogger's performance of self, it may not reflect the offline lived reality of the author, and the images must therefore be considered as pictures the blogger presents as depicting themselves. For some anonymous bloggers, the inclusion of an image that represents an obviously different physical impression than their bodily reality may provide another layer of ambiguity to their online performance. *29 to Life* does not construct herself as consciously striving for anonymity, and the image could therefore indicate a lack of desire to fully conceal her offline identity, or provide an indication towards the level of hiddenness she does wish to maintain. When analysing the blog narrative as a whole, the author regularly refers in the text to the importance of race and heritage in the construction of her identity. The choice to include a photograph, even heavily obscured, could therefore be read as a way of *29 to Life* representing her race to her readers, without having to explicitly define herself through those terms; something that she may prioritise above remaining anonymous. This demonstrates the variety of different factors that contribute to the performance of self being constructed by the primary source bloggers, as well as the added dimension of their anonymity.

Anonymous blogger *1 Year of Single* does not include an image of herself but instead uses a cartoon image that she suggests resembles her own appearance (as shown below in *fig. 2*).
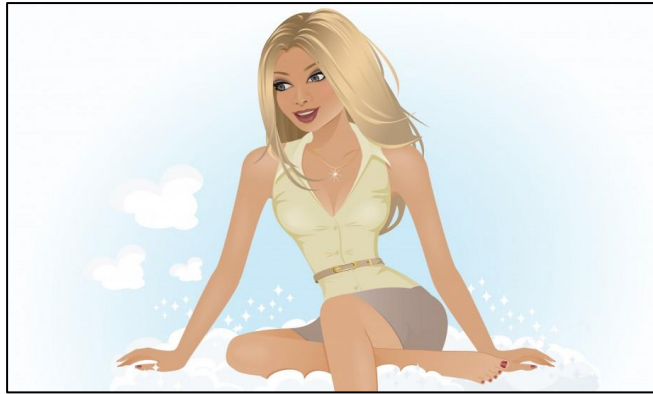
Fig. 2

When she discusses her decision to add this image to her page, she tells readers: 'I was thinking how bland my blog is without an image of me, yet didn't want to actually post a photo'.[143] Although she is not explicit in this desire, by referring to her reluctance to share a 'real' photo, she indicates through the text a desire for her identity to remain hidden. However, in a later comment discussion with one of her readers about the inclusion of this image, she states: 'My friends say this is not an anonymous blog because, "Oh yeah as soon as I saw the blonde icon I was like oh yeah that's her." Lovely'.[144] This statement is the only direct reference in the text to her anonymous status, which reaffirms her intention to separate her online performance of self from her offline lived reality. Although the image itself does not undermine her anonymity within the scope of this thesis, her acknowledgement that her offline acquaintances have managed to reveal her identity through the image suggests the anonymous status she maintains to some of the online world does not entirely protect her from recognition. The inclusion of the word 'Lovely' at the end of this statement is laced with sarcasm, and serves to subtly express her frustration and displeasure at her 'friends' undermining the hiddenness of her online persona. Although this apparent revelation does not encourage the blogger to add the 'real' photo she has previously discussed, or change her 'About Me' to include any more personal information; both of which suggest the blogger's own attitude towards her anonymity has remained the same. Therefore, the contextual definition used within this thesis of a disassociation between online and offline life is accurate in its flexibility, in that the presence of offline friends or acquaintances does not signify to the author that they are no longer anonymous. The choice to discuss the image within her narrative could also be read as another dimension of the blogger's textual construction of self. By telling readers about the fact that she has been 'recognised' as resembling the cartoon image by her offline friends, the author is able to

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[143] 1 Year of Single, *The New Me!* (9th January 2014) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2014/01/09/the-new-me/>
[144] 1 Year of Single, Comments on untitled post (25th April 2014) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2014/04/25/1752/>

provide validity to previous descriptions she has given of her offline physical appearance. For her readers, this may be read as an indication of the blog's authenticity as it appears to corroborate her story.

A similar overlap between online and offline spheres is demonstrated by anonymous blogger *Fertility Doll,* who states in her 'About Me': 'If you do think you might know me in real life.. ssshh.. this is my space to face these demons and I'd appreciate a bit of understanding'.[145] Here she acknowledges the possibility that despite her appearance of anonymity, she expects her online narrative to be found and read by someone from her offline life. Instead of rejecting this notion, or constructing it as something that changes her blogging behaviour, she simply asks them to respect her private space. For readers, this could be read as providing an increased level of authenticity to her narrative, because she implies that her self-representation would be recognisable to people from her offline world, indicating its alignment with her offline lived reality. As with *1 Year of Single*, this demonstrates that the risk and conflict often associated with the threat of losing online anonymity, is not always the reality for the individuals utilising the medium. For these bloggers, their choice to be anonymous does not come from a desire to make their narratives completely unconnected to their offline world, but to allow themselves a space in which they are not held completely responsible by the accountability of their offline lived reality.

In contrast, fellow anonymous blogger *Free Chick* is very clear in her desire for her narrative to remain entirely separate from her offline life. One of the first comments on her 'About Me' page requests pictures of 'who she really is', to which she merely replies: 'Hahaha [sic], you shall never know my friend!'.[146] Although she does not explicitly describe her blog as being anonymous, this reaction to a request for information demonstrates her attitude towards revealing herself to her readers. Her desire for her narrative to remain disassociated from her offline lived reality is also highlighted when she shares something, in a comment discussion on one of her posts, that her lover 'The Greek' has said. She states: 'He said he likes me because I'm not "crazy". HA! Thank God he doesn't read my blog!'.[147] This exposes the contrast between the persona she is performing in her offline life and offline relationships, and the persona she is performing through her blog. It also highlights her usage of the blogosphere as a platform where she presents as able to transgress the boundaries of her offline persona, and discuss things that she suggests would be deemed

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[145] Fertility Doll, *About Me* <http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[146] Free Chick, Comments on *About Me* (6th September 2012)
<http://freechick.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[147] Free Chick, *When Things Happen That Aren't Supposed to Happen* (1st August 2013)
<http://freechick.wordpress.com/2013/08/01/when-things-happen-that-arent-supposed-to-happen/>

inappropriate in her offline life. As with *1 Year of Single*'s revelation of her 'friends' recognising her, both *Fertility Doll*'s assumption of discovery, and *Free Chick*'s maintaining of secrecy could be viewed as deliberate additions to the narrative, in order to construct their self-representations as authentic. Stéphanie Genz argues that this can be interpreted as authors constructing an 'authentic *mediated* identity', which she describes as 'a credible public persona that commercially exploits the ideology of "being yourself" while fostering emotive bonds with consumers'.[148] The extent to which an audience perceives the narrative to be authentic is dependent on their own approach to the text, as each reader will interpret the blogger's textual construction differently. However, the analysis of this thesis demonstrates that there is a tendency to assume some narratives are authentic, and others not, regardless of their anonymity. Authors may therefore construct their self-representations to appear to be an authentic description of their everyday life, whether it reflects their offline lived experience or not. This highlights the ability of the blogging platform to challenge pre-existing ideas of anonymity and the process of narrative self-representation.

The conceptualisation of anonymity is different for each individual author; even those that are perceived by this thesis to be completely anonymous may be known by those in their offline life, and others may present a casual attitude towards their anonymity as a way of adding to their constructed online identity. Some bloggers that this thesis considers as non-anonymous, due to the presence of identifying information such as location and photos on their blog, may still feel they are maintaining a low level of anonymity, as it is not 'public' knowledge that they blog. This is demonstrated by non-anonymous blogger *Psychobabble* who chooses not to use her full name either as her blog name or in her 'About Me', and refers to herself simply as 'Lyssa'. At a later point of the data capture period, she states in a comment discussion with another user: 'I prefer my real name, Melissa, but I totally understand people in the blogging world calling me Lyssa….it's a nickname, and I used it initially to give myself an extra layer of anonymity if I so wanted it'.[149] The concept of a nickname being able to maintain a layer of anonymity, given the blogger's choice to include a photograph, may appear redundant; but as highlighted by the definition of anonymity used within this thesis, there are several degrees of hiddenness for an individual choosing to self-represent online. By using a nickname instead of her own name, the author prevents immediate traceability, so her blog will not automatically appear if her name is entered into a search engine, which she perceives as creating a small boundary of distance between her offline and online spaces. This example, and those of the anonymous bloggers discussed

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148 Stéphanie Genz, 'My Job is Me: Postfeminist Celebrity Culture and the Gendering of Authenticity', *Feminist Media Studies*, 14:4 (2015), 545-561 (553). [Emphasis Original]
149 Psychobabble, Comments on *Reminders* (27th February 2014) <http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2014/02/27/reminders/>

above, show that several of the primary source bloggers choose not to acknowledge their chosen level of anonymity within the body of their narratives. The issues of hiddenness or exposure are only discussed when communicating directly with their readers; either in the 'About Me' section which is aimed at a perceived audience, or in direct exchanges within the comment sections of other posts. This suggests that it is primarily the attention of readers which prompts the authors to specifically address their own anonymity, and therefore that the presence of an audience is what influences the anonymity of the author in the first place. Research such as Qian and Scott's 2007 study collude with this idea, and suggests that 'anonymity is only achieved with the presence of an audience'.[150] However, the relationship between anonymity and audience is shown by the primary source blogs to be more complicated than this. Although it is not reliant upon an audience, the texts demonstrate how anonymity is prioritised by the presence of audience, and emphasised by the public nature of the blogosphere as a whole. This is naturally encouraged by the computer-mediated nature of online communication, which creates a separation between author and reader. The blogger's own sense of anonymity still exists separately from these external interpretations of their narrative, and therefore anonymity is not *solely* focused on audience. The importance of a blogger's own perception of anonymity above external interpretations is demonstrated by the level of information sharing perceived in both anonymous and non-anonymous narratives.

One of the main difficulties in defining anonymity is the conceptualisation of it as something that is either present or absent, a binary that is repeatedly undermined by the primary source blogs, and the merging of their online and offline lives.[151] This is epitomised by the post-anonymous primary source blogs, who despite initially appearing to be anonymous, either lost or undermined their anonymity during the period of data capture.[152] For *Mum and More* and *What Kate Did Next*, the transition from anonymous to post-anonymous is not consciously acknowledged, but seen through the addition of photos of the author, and the use of the author and their family's names. For *Mum and More* this also results in a change of blog name, to *Rose and Mum and More*, in order to emphasise the inclusion of her daughter within the narrative construction.[153] The fact that the blogger does not acknowledge this development in the text suggests that her intention may always have been to develop the narrative into the story of them both, once her daughter had reached a certain age, rather than for it to remain a private account of her own life. Within *What Kate*

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[150] Qian and Scott, p. 1433.
[151] The problem of defining anonymity is explored in the Introduction, pp.12-13.
[152] The definition of post-anonymous, and the rationale for creating this subcategory is outlined in detail in the Methodology, pp. 27-32.
[153] For the sake of consistency, the thesis refers the blogger as 'Mum and More' throughout.

Did Next's narrative, the overriding theme is the death of her daughter, and the addition of images depicting them together does not disrupt, but adds to, the textual construction of self the author is mediating through her blog. In both these examples, the removal of their apparent anonymity does not affect the way the bloggers construct their narratives, indicating that their intention was never to uphold a high level of hiddenness. In contrast to this, the transition of *Seattle Poly Chick*'s blog from anonymous to post-anonymous is drawn out over a much longer period of time, and is presented as being fraught with difficulties for the author. The first piece of information that the blogger reveals is her 'real' name, which she includes in a quotation of something her lover 'Traveller' has said to her, stating at the end of the post: 'And yes. I know that I just used my real name'.[154] Although the tone of her narrative when she makes this acknowledgement appears casual, the inclusion of this closing statement demonstrates that even the addition of a small piece of information, like her first name, is deliberate and meaningful for the author and her textual construction of self. She subsequently tells her audience, 'I know the blog isn't really that anonymous', which she puts down to the presence of characters from her offline life being present on her blog.[155] Although she feels this has undermined her anonymity, she still maintains a hidden persona for the majority of other users, representing a reluctance to fully reveal herself to the blogosphere. It is only after a significant period of time has passed that she chooses to add an image of herself to her blog, and therefore her outward anonymity is challenged. After she has added the image she immediately publishes a post entitled 'Face Time', in which she declares to her readers: 'Yeah... that's my face. Big step'.[156] By deliberately drawing attention to the addition of a new photo, she emphasises to her audience the significance of her choosing to share this information with them. She also demonstrates her desire to receive an immediate response to her 'big step'.

The decision to combine her online and offline worlds is depicted in *Seattle Poly Chick*'s subsequent narratives as having direct repercussions upon her offline relationships, which can in turn be seen to influence her blogging behaviour. In the weeks following her revelation, the number of posts is much lower than the frequency with which she normally produces narrative updates. In a post titled 'I can't write that', she then expresses her exasperation at the limitations she now feels upon what she can share, given that she no longer perceives herself to be anonymous. She tells her readers:

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[154] Seattle Poly Chick, *Work to Do* (2nd August 2013) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/08/02/good-communicators/>
[155] Seattle Poly Chick, *Blogging 101* (8th September 2013) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/09/08/blogging-101/>
[156] Seattle Poly Chick, *Face Time* (15th March 2014) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2014/03/15/face-time/>

> I haven't written a blog in something like 5 days. It's not that I'm not thinking things or that I don't have anything to say. It's that I don't have anything right now that I *can* say. My little anonymous blog isn't so anonymous.[157]

Here, the author suggests that not being protected by a veil of anonymity means that she feels limited in what she can share through her blog. The platform that she has previously used to express herself is therefore constructed as having lost some of the freedom with which she has previously felt she could write. The use of asterisks either side of the word 'can', which are used in online communication to signify activity, also serve to emphasise this frustration, as in this case the action is being suppressed. In the comment section of this post, she discusses the transition with one of her readers, stating:

> It was suppose [sic] to be totally anonymous, but over time it just isn't. I didn't have it attached to anything of me. I never had my name and had only a picture of my feet and then later, my ass. From the beginning though it's become less and less anonymous.[158]

Here, the author's description of the process distances her from the responsibility of losing anonymity, framing it as a natural occurrence, and the inevitable fate of any anonymous blog. However, despite her assertion that she didn't 'have it attached' to anything from her offline life, it is clear in the examples from the text that some of the information that contributed to her revelation she willingly shared with readers. Her description of this process also highlights the performative nature of the blog narrative. She tells the reader that in her anonymous period: 'I didn't have it attached to anything of me'; the 'me' to which she refers being her offline lived reality. Therefore, by suggesting that the blog narrative had nothing that was attached to this offline self, she exposes the textually constructed nature of the online self she was previously performing.

Why blog?

The primary source blogs represent a variety of different representations of self, performances of gender and autobiographical writings. Although none of the primary source bloggers describe their narratives as a work of autobiography, some of them do frame their blogs as an online diary. For example, non-anonymous blogger *Tracey Louise* who explicitly describes her blog in the headline as: 'A Diary by Sarah Louise'.[159] Many of the bloggers also refer to the concept of sharing, updating and recording their experiences; reflecting the notion that they are choosing to document their own life. The choice to self-represent using

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[157] Seattle Poly Chick, *I can't write that* (4th April 2014) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2014/04/04/i-cant-write-that/>
[158] Seattle Poly Chick, Comments on *I can't write that* (4th April 2014) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2014/04/04/i-cant-write-that/>
[159] Tracey Louise, *About Me* <http://traceylouise.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]

the blogosphere, as opposed to other forms of life writing, is consciously addressed by some of the bloggers. For instance, non-anonymous blogger *I've Never Robbed A Bank* states:

> Mostly I wanted a blog because, Hey I have opinions. I have things I want to talk about. […] I've tried to write a journal, I've even tried an audio journal. But these never seem to work out for me, I hate the thought of just talking/writing to no one.[160]

She highlights the aspects of blogging that elevate it from traditional, or audio, journals; framing the opportunities for audience and conversation as key to her choice to engage in the platform. This emphasises the concept of readership, and the process of writing *for* someone. Despite the huge possibilities of audience within the online world, Gina Masullo Chen argues in her work on female bloggers, that 'blogs can become cathartic for bloggers even if few people have read them because they can be a place for people to feel they have shouted their opinions'.[161] The bloggers who construct themselves as 'having opinions' therefore demonstrate their desire to have their voices 'heard', and their perception of the blogosphere as a platform where this is possible. This suggests that the authors may wish to exhibit behaviour that could be considered transgressive in their offline lives. However, only some of the primary source bloggers actually express opinions that would be considered as socially unusual or taboo. Non-anonymous blogger *I've Never Robbed A Bank,* quoted above, is not one of the authors who does this, suggesting that her desire to share opinions is more about being 'heard' by her presumed audience, rather than saying anything different than she would offline. This emphasis on a sense of sharing with others is repeatedly highlighted by the female authored primary source blogs, and indicates the extent to which the audience can be seen to influence the primary source blogger's textual constructions of self.[162]

In contrast to *I've Never Robbed A Bank*, anonymous blogger *Evening Light* frames her choice to blog as part of a wider engagement in different modes of self-representation, all of which she uses in a bid to have her voice 'heard'. In her 'About Me' she explains:

> Why a blog? I've kept a private journal for many years (about 36 years, about 130 volumes). I write poetry. I correspond with friends and family. I post on social media. I write letters to editors, elected officials, and businesses. I talk.[163]

By explicitly describing her accumulation of self-representative narratives in numerical form she emphasises to the readers her commitment to documenting her own story. She also collates the writing of her blog and her offline journal with creative writing, written

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[160] I've Never Robbed A Bank, *Yeah* (14th February 2011) <http://corzgalore.org/2011/02/14/yeah/>
[161] Gina Masullo Chen, 'Why Do Women Write Personal Blogs? Satisfying Needs for Self-Disclosure and Affiliation Tel Part of the Story', *Computers in Human Behaviour,* 28:1 (2012), 171-180 (p. 173).
[162] This is explored in Chapter Two: The Readers, pp. 90-121.
[163] Evening Light, *About Me* <http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]

communication and face to face conversation; demonstrating how the collaboration of different performances of self contributes to the building of her identity. The implication is that the author performs these different selves depending on the context, and therefore uses her anonymous blog narrative to textually construct an online persona removed from the other performed selves. For others, the whole concept of having a blog is intrinsically part of the identity they are trying to create. For example, *Not Just A Mum Blog* is, as her blog name suggests, consistently searching for ways to define her sense of self as separate from her role as a mother. In this quest she repeatedly tells her audience: 'I want to be a blogger, I want it to be my thing'.[164] Here she utilises the blog as a way of appropriating a new identity for herself. As she constructs the blog narrative, she is simultaneously able to construct a mediation of self that depicts her as 'blogger'. Although their approaches to blogging are different, all of these examples demonstrate the importance each author places on the act of writing a blog. The narratives they produce are perceived as giving them a voice through which to tell their story, and allow them to express themselves in a way that they suggest they have struggled to do in the offline world.

The process of blog self-representation is marked as different from other forms of life-writing by the fact that the story is constantly being created and updated by the author. Therefore, the self that is represented on a blog is not a finished product, but an ever changing, developing character that is being represented through the text. This sense of constantly being in flux is reflected in the attitude the primary source blog authors present towards their writing. Previous research, such as Baumer *et al.*'s 2008 study note that: 'for many bloggers, a blog is not something you *have*, blogging is something you *do*'.[165] The activity that this implies is evident in how many of the primary source bloggers describe their relationship to their blog as something they are actively doing, and will continue to do. Anonymous blogger *29 to Life* tells her readers: 'This blog has allowed me to examine myself and my situations that come up in such a raw way […] I've never been this self-aware in my entire life'.[166] This self-awareness is aided by the accessibility of the medium to its authors, which in turn increases the temporal proximity of the blog narrative to the offline experience it describes, meaning the blogger is consistently reflecting on their most recent life events. For some, this process of converting experiences into writing inspires them to explore other creative outlets. Non-anonymous blogger *Sheryl's Pearls* describes how writing a blog narrative was a key turning point in her journey towards writing and publishing

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[164] Not Just A Mum Blog, *Meh* (2nd July 2013)
<http://notjustamumblog.wordpress.com/2013/07/02/meh/>
[165] Baumer *et al.*, p. 5.
[166] 29 to Life, *32 to life??? Coming Soon… Real Soon* (14th January 2014)
<http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2014/01/14/32-to-life-coming-soon-real-soon/>

her book, telling readers: 'Then I started blogging. A cross between journaling and the journalism I studied in undergrad, it was an outlet for my thoughts and opinions'.[167] She describes how this experience allowed her to gain confidence in her ability to mediate a strong sense of self, and also practice the textual construction of her world view; both of which contributed to her published work. These examples demonstrate that the writing of a blog narrative is interpreted differently by different authors, and therefore the way in which primary source bloggers self-represent through their narratives does not signify a unified narrative form, but is largely dependent upon the individual differences between authors. The fact that the primary source bloggers demonstrate such a variety of approaches to the act of writing a blog emphasises the flexibility of the format. Chris Fullwood, Wendy Nicholls and Rumbidzai Makichi's 2014 study suggests that the success of the blogosphere is rooted in this 'something for everyone' concept. They argue that the fluid interpretation of a blog means that 'different types of individuals can gratify very personal and individual needs through the same online applications'.[168] This accessibility is of particular importance for female users, who have historically been marginalised from computer science through a lack of education and training.[169] Therefore blog narratives could be seen to offer women writers a space in which to construct and share their stories with greater ease. In the context of this thesis, the ability to have greater ownership and control over their self-representative narratives is perceived to offer the female blog authors greater freedom over their textually constructed self.

First Impressions

Within the blogosphere, the first impression of the primary source bloggers is given through their choice of blog name. The name of the blog is repeatedly highlighted on each site; displayed at the top of every page of the blog (functioning as a 'home' button), as well as making up the body of the blog's website address.[170] This choice of name is often influenced by the level of anonymity the blogger has chosen, and can reflect the blogger's own name, a nickname or a pseudonym. Some bloggers use their 'real' names within their

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[167] Sheryl's Pearls, *Leap of Faith: I Published a Book!* (14th May 2014) <http://www.sheryleigh.com/2014/05/14/a-leap-of-faith/>
[168] Chris Fullwood, Wendy Nicholls and Rumbidzai Makichi, 'We've Got Something for Everyone: How Individual Differences Predict Different Blogging Motivations' in *New Media and Society,* 17:9 (London: Sage, 2014), 1-18 (p. 15).
[169] As argued in Bruce Bimber, 'Measuring the Gender Gap on the Internet', *Social Science Quarterly,* 81:3 (University of Texas Press, 2000), 868-876.
[170] Although the blog name can be changed, the URL web address remains constant, which is why some of the blog names used within this analysis differ from the name contained within the URL. All primary source blogs are referred to by the name they were originally captured under.

blog narratives, even if they do not include it in their blog name.[171] Armardeep Singh, in his 2008 research, highlights the importance of a blog name in the construction of an online identity, regardless of whether it aligns with the offline identity of the blogger or not. He argues that: 'Blogging pseudonyms are generally not fleeting aliases but fixed public identities, which are strongly associated with a particular author's style and ethos'.[172] Therefore, although the personae being represented through the narrative may alter over time, they are all attributed to the authorship of the blog's name, and seen as representative of that author.

There is only one primary source blogger in the sample who uses their offline name as their blog name, the non-anonymous *Sheryl's Pearls*. Fellow non-anonymous blogger *Tracey Louise* gives her blog the name she models under, which she describes as her 'working name'.[173] Although this is not described as her 'real' name, it is one that is associated with her offline lived reality, and is therefore more of a nickname than a pseudonym. The author's choice to give her blog this name is connected to the performance of self she is constructing both on and offline, focused on her job as a glamour model. During the period of capture, the blogger gives up her modelling career earlier than planned due to the lack of work she is receiving. This creates a division between the character of *Tracey Louise* on and offline, and the blogger's 'real' offline identity. She tells her readers: 'I don't want to be TraceyLouise for ever', describing how 'I always planned to kill her off on my 30th Birthday, because that was the day I intended to retire from modelling. No modelling… no need for TraceyLouise any more [sic]!'.[174] Here the author highlights the performative nature of 'TraceyLouise' as a character; emphasising her desire to now 'kill her off', and remove this persona from her offline and online performances of self. Apart from these two exceptions, the majority of primary source blogs use phrases, lyrics or jokes for their blog names. For example, 'Where The Light Is' is taken from the title of a John Mayer album, and 'I've Never Robbed A Bank' is linked to a joke the author makes in her 'About Me'. For non-anonymous blogger *Where The Light Is*, the use of an album title is part of her online self-representation, as she simultaneously sites their specific cultural context, which may be received by a niche section of her audience, whilst also claiming the phrase as personally relevant to her. The name used by fellow non-anonymous blogger *I've Never*

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[171] The examples of *Psychobabble* and *Seattle Poly Chick* are discussed in the 'Anonymity' section above, pp. 49-57.

[172] Armardeep Singh, 'Anonymity, Authorship, and Blogger Ethics', *Symplokē,* 16:1 (2008), 21-35 (p. 21).

[173] Tracey Louise, *About Me* <http://traceylouise.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]

[174] Tracey Louise, *What If* (10th October 2013) <http://traceylouise.wordpress.com/2013/10/10/what-if/>

Robbed A Bank, appears deliberately intriguing, and therefore encourages users to go the blog page and investigate. By linking it directly to her 'About Me' the blogger appears to exhort this curiosity, indicating that she may have chosen the name in order to be intentionally provocative.

Despite their use of pseudonymous blog names, many of the non-anonymous bloggers do include their full name within their 'About Me'. The name or signature attributed to a work of autobiography has traditionally been considered as a key feature of successful autobiographical writing, with Lejeune suggesting that 'an intention to honour the signature' is the basis of the 'autobiographical pact' on which we 'assume authenticity'.[175] However, feminist analysis of autobiography has criticised the prioritisation of a name as a signifier of truth. For example, Leigh Gilmore notes: 'For women, the fiction that our names signify our true identities obscures the extent to which our names are thought of not as our own but as the legal signifier of a man's property'.[176] She suggests that the signing of a name is less significant for women, as it represents either the name of their father or of their husband, rather than them as an individual. The emphasis on a signature is also undermined by the concept of anonymity, or of anonymous authorship. In terms of historical writing, the use of anonymity is also gendered; as Virginia Woolf pointedly remarks in *A Room of One's Own*, 'I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman'.[177] For female authors the signature is therefore less significant, and their name viewed as another way of framing their self-representation, rather than an authorisation of truth. This is evidenced by fact that the majority of the primary source bloggers, whether anonymous or not, chose a blog name that is removed from the 'signature' they would use in their offline life. They are therefore able to create an online identity that is disassociated to some extent from their offline lived reality, even if they choose not to write anonymously.

Alongside the name of the author, the first impression of an author's online persona is presented through the visual clues available on the blog home page. Although the analysis of this thesis is primarily focused on the textual constructions of self within blogs, the nature of the medium means that the authors can go beyond the text, and use graphic and pictorial elements of their blog to contribute to their self-representation. For some primary source bloggers, these non-textual elements offer a way to represent their female gender, by choosing stereotypically feminine colours or imagery for their blog design.

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[175] As quoted in Anderson (2001), p. 3.
[176] Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 81.
[177] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 1945), pp. 50-51. [Originally published in 1928]

Examples of this are seen on the pages of post-anonymous blogger *Mum and More* who uses a rose print 'blog theme', and anonymous blogger *Free Chick* who has a pink patterned background; both of which are perceived to symbolise femininity within Western culture. Alongside the name at the top of each page, many of the primary source bloggers also include an introductory headline sentence, which serves as the first textual representation of the author. This can be used as an opportunity to promote the author's favourite quote or saying, or as an opportunity to give readers a taste of the blog's content. Anonymous blogger *Free Chick*'s headline states: 'I'm a 20 something year old chick from London rambling about anything and everything that comes into my, frankly, confusing head'.[178] The author's choice of the colloquialism 'chick' to describe her gender appropriates the popular culture image of a cool, young girl. This is particularly associated with the Postfeminist era, which encourages women to reclaim the kind of overt femininity associated with phrases such as 'chick'. Genz argues that unlike second-wave feminism, which she considers as characterising feminist/feminine identities as mutually exclusive, 'postfeminism makes room in its ranks for *'femmenists'* who stage a sexualisation of the feminist body in order to construct a new femininity (or, new femininities) around the notions of autonomy and agency'.[179] Therefore, women may choose to utilise language or exhibit behaviour that has previously been used as patriarchally serving, in order to demonstrate their increased sense of empowerment. The headline then goes on to refer to her blog posts as 'rambling' and state that it all comes from her 'confusing head', both of which devalue the writing. This is framed as self-deprecation, and therefore suggests that the author is trying to represent herself as modest; something that is viewed by society as a desirable trait for women. It could also be read as the author trying to pre-empt any perceived criticism of her text, by immediately undermining its literary quality. Although this information only provides a very brief overview of the author and her blog, the description frames the blog narrative in a specific way, which subsequently informs the way a reader approaches the text.

The modesty with which *Free Chick* represents her own authorship is contrasted by the image she chooses to include alongside the headline at the top of her blog page. The image she uses (shown below in *fig.3*) depicts a woman with her hands being bound behind her back, by what appears to be a male lover.

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[178] Free Chick, *About Me* <http://freechick.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[179] Stéphanie Genz, 'Third Way/ve: The Politics of Postfeminism', *Feminist Theory*, 7:3 (London: Sage, 2006), 333-353 (345). [Emphasis Original]

Fig. 3

Although the image represents a passive woman, the scene is clearly intended to be sexual, underlined by the small glimpse of lace garter that is visible on the woman's leg. It appears to be a professional photograph, and it is not suggested anywhere in the text that the image is intended to depict the author, but it has been deliberately chosen by *Free Chick* as part of her self-representation. The unashamedly sexualised nature of the image represents an alternative impression of her persona than the headline of the blog, and the majority of blog content. The choice of image could therefore be read as aspirational, and representative of a performance of self she is striving for, rather than one she is currently performing online or offline.[180] Despite her anonymity, the image used in her headline is not the only visual representation of the author, as she also includes a specific tab with a series of 'Pin Up Girl' cartoon images, framed as symbols of herself.[181] This reflects a fetishized version of the female body, and brings with it connotations of sexualised femininity which echo the headline image.

While she was writing anonymously, post-anonymous blogger *Seattle Poly Chick* also used a similarly sexualised image of a female body to represent her blog. The image (shown below in *fig.4*) depicts the backside of a woman kneeling in front of the camera, wearing nothing but heart patterned knickers, with her bottom raised as the main focus of the image.

Fig. 4

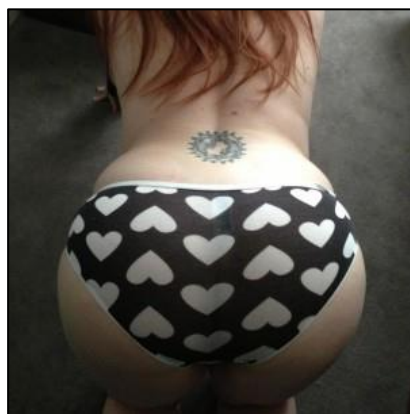[180] The idea of the blog as a space to explore alternative performances of self, and particularly the 'future self' is explored in Chapter Four: Past, Present and Future, p. 144-165.
[181] Free Chick, *Pin Up these Pin Ups* <http://freechick.wordpress.com/pin-up-these-pin-ups/>

As with *Free Chick*'s blog image, whether it is a 'real' image of the blogger or not, it has been chosen by the author to represent her, and is therefore read as part of her construction of self. Unlike the image chosen by *Free Chick*, the photograph used by *Seattle Poly Chick* does not appear to be professional, matches her physical descriptions of herself, and is repeatedly implied to be a 'real' image of her within the text. The image of a semi-naked woman in this position frames her as sexual and submissive to the gaze of the camera, and therefore of the audience. However, by choosing this image, the author is able to protect her anonymity, while still appearing to represent a 'true' image of her; something that frames her as an active agent in the process of constructing an online persona for herself. Without having to show them a recognisable face, the exposure of what the reader assumes is the author in a submissive pose, also allows her to present a sense of vulnerability to the reader, to emphasise she is a flesh and blood individual that they can interact with.[182]

The 'About Me'

After the initial impression given by the name and image of the author featured in their blog headline, and the visual elements of the blog page itself, the first point of orientation for a reader is the 'About Me' section of the blog. On the host site used for the data capture of this thesis, *Wordpress*, and almost unanimously across other blog hosting sites, the inclusion of an 'About Me' section as a specific page of the blog is a compulsory feature. Madeline Sorapure describes how these short biographies are 'used by writers to provide autobiographical background in a more linear, narrative format than the diary entries allow'.[183] The importance of an 'About Me' is also prompted by the way in which readers navigate blog narratives. As the posts are presented in reverse chronological order, it is the most recent narrative update that a reader encounters when first approaching the homepage of a blog. The 'About Me' therefore provides a point of reference to introduce the author, and explain the perspective of their blog, making the story more accessible to readers who may not have engaged with the narrative previously.[184] In her 2006 study, Karlsson observes that 'The "about me" is crucial for establishing a functional contract between the author and her readers'.[185] In other words, it allows readers to gain an insight into the blog before reading the main narrative, and therefore understand what to expect from the author. Although the 'About Me' is seen as an introductory piece, the format does not necessarily work against

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[182] The use of the body as part of the blogger's textual construction is explored in the 'The Body in the Text' section below, pp. 72-79.
[183] Madeline Sorapure, 'Screening Moments, Scrolling Lives: Diary Writing on the Web', *Biography,* 26:1 (2003), 1-23 (p. 6).
[184] The way in which blog authors specifically construct their blog for new readers is explored further in Chapter Two: The Readers, pp. 90-121.
[185] Lena Karlsson, 'Acts of Reading Diary Weblogs', *HUMAN IT*, 8:2 (Published by the University College of Borås, 2006), 1-59 (p. 25).

the concept of anonymity, as there are no set criteria for the details that bloggers should provide. Therefore, the information that bloggers use to describe and promote themselves does not need to include the kind of definitive material that would undermine their anonymity.

Despite the high levels of self-disclosure within their narratives, some of the primary source bloggers frame their 'About Me' as a reluctant sharing of information. In post-anonymous blogger *Seattle Poly Chick*'s 'About Me' she begins the introduction to herself by stating 'I hate writing abouts [sic]'.[186] This apparent reluctance to describe herself appears contradictory to the self-representative nature of a blog, and suggests that she would rather not acknowledge the process of presenting herself publically, despite choosing to do so through her blog posts. The rejection of operational constraints such as this represents the way in which bloggers view the blogosphere as a platform of creative freedom. The distinction between the introductory description in the 'About Me' and the self-disclosure of the blog posts also relates to the concept of audience that functions within the blogosphere. Many of the bloggers use the medium as a form of diary, where formal introductions or explanations about themselves would be unnecessary, as they are only writing for themselves or a familiar audience. The construction of an 'About Me' undermines this position by reminding the author that they are writing into an online world of potential strangers. It also complicates the fluid sense of self they are constructing through the blog as it requires a specific and definitive interpretation of their persona, rather than the multiplicity of self being developed within blog posts. The second line of *Seattle Poly Chick*'s 'About Me' further draws attention to this dilemma, as she attempts to deflect her readers by stating: 'You learn a lot by reading my blog'.[187] Despite this initial protestation, the description that she goes on to write is clear in establishing a tone for her blog, telling readers: 'here's the quick and dirty'.[188] This immediately sexualises her self-representation by using erotically charged language and innuendo, signalling to the reader early on the sexual content and explicit style to expect from the blog, much like *Free Chick* attempts to do through her chosen image.

Laurie McNeill suggests that this is common practice within the genre of personal journal blogging, as 'Having confessed in these introductory biographies to their foibles, beliefs, and attitudes, diarists have told readers what to expect, and do not have to apologize in their narratives for attitudes that may be unpopular or offensive'.[189] This deliberate narrative choice is demonstrated by the explicit way in which *Seattle Poly Chick* immediately

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[186] Seattle Poly Chick, *About Me* < http://seattlepolychick.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[187] *Ibid.*
[188] *Ibid.*
[189] Laurie McNeill, 'Teaching an Old Genre New Tricks: The Diary on the Internet', *Biography,* 26:1 (2003), 24-47 (p. 31).

addresses the issue of her sexuality, both using her blog image and the description of her 'About Me'. However, although the majority of *Seattle Poly Chick*'s posts do include some reference to sexuality, the content is predominantly focused on her emotional state, and descriptions of how she feels about the relationships and individuals in her offline life. More specifically, this dichotomy can be seen in the contrast between the contented and defiant description of her polyamorous lifestyle she projects within her 'About Me', and the more negative and analytical assessments of ethical non-monogamy she offers in her general narrative posts. Within her 'About Me' she states: 'I believe in ethical non-monogamy and I explore possibilities with the full knowledge and consent of everyone involved', emphatically proclaiming 'this is my life and the way I want to live it'.[190] These statements are clear and direct in outlining the author's approach to her polyamorous life, and act as an immediate defence against any criticism she may anticipate from readers. Where as in some of her posts she textually constructs a less confident view of her life choices, and tells her readers: 'I have wondered from time to time if it's really possible to have an investment (or have someone invest in me) when we are still open'.[191] Here she represents her doubts over whether the life she is promoting is actually viable in practice; meaning her 'About Me' section is therefore misrepresentative of the wider blog content. The construction of an 'About Me' is therefore represented as an erroneous task for many of the primary source bloggers, as it must be consciously constructed in opposition to the fluid performances of self depicted through their narratives.

The notion of asking bloggers to create one textual construction to represent their blog as a whole is problematic; partly because there is an increased level of pressure to perform an idealised version of the narrative self, primarily in order to attract and maintain readers. This could be viewed as a type of branding, as the users are marketing themselves, and in turn their blogs narratives, to the rest of the online world. As Alice E. Marwick highlights in her work on branding in the digital age: 'the technical affordances of social media reward with higher social status the use of behaviours and self-presentation strategies that make people look'.[192] She argues that these presentations are influenced by a host of factors, 'including their physical environment; social context; race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and economic background; the availability of technical infrastructure; the technical affordances of different applications; and the norms of those with whom they interact online'.[193] The concept of branding elevates the self-representative blogs beyond their

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[190] Seattle Poly Chick, *About Me* < http://seattlepolychick.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[191] Seattle Poly Chick, *Is Open Investment a Possibility?* (8th July 2013)
<http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/07/08/is-an-open-investment-a-possibility/ >
[192] Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 14.
[193] Marwick (2013), p. 7.

textual predecessors. As Sarah Banet-Weiser observes: 'Self-branding does not merely involve self-presentation but is a layered process of judging, assessment, and valuation taking place in a media economy of visibility'.[194] She argues that the ability for other users to provide feedback on an individual's textual construction of self means that the blogosphere 'can easily replicate a culture's (offline) strategies of surveillance, judgement, and evaluation – practices signalling consumer agency, but simultaneously disciplining and constituting subjects'.[195] This is a process which is emphasised by the 'About Me', as it draws attention to the narrative as 'public', and therefore open to external appraisal.

Despite this, the 'About Me' is not viewed as a problem for all of the primary source bloggers, and is interpreted by some as simply a general request for information, rather than something prescriptive. Within the scope of the primary source blog narratives, there is therefore a variety of different approaches to writing the 'About Me'. Three of the primary source blogs specifically interpret it as an opportunity to describe their reasons for blogging, and the nature of their blog; *29 to Life* describes how her blog is focused on what 'turning thirty' means to her, *Fertility Doll* explains her 'battle with infertility' and *1 Year of Single* discusses her reasons for deciding to have a 'year of singledom'.[196] Their 'About Me' narratives therefore function like the blurb of a book which introduces the themes of the text, rather than introducing the individual on whom the narrative is based. Given the anonymity that all three authors are writing with, this interpretation of an 'About Me' allows them to use the space as another blog post, in which to present themselves as they choose, rather than a statement of facts that might associate their blog with their offline lived reality. In contrast, both *Dorky Mum* and *Psychobabble* have both an 'About Me' and an 'About the Blog' section on their blogs, allowing them to create some separation between the two descriptions, and share more information about themselves.[197] They are both non-anonymous bloggers, and therefore this divide is constructed along the lines of the individual's public and private spheres; their everyday self and their blogging self. Other bloggers use the way they are characterised in the offline world as a basis upon which to construct a firm identity for their 'About Me'. This is particularly apparent with non-anonymous blogger *A Life Unexamined*, who tells readers: 'I identify as a white, working class, able-bodied, cisgendered, aromantic

[194] Banet-Weiser, p. 87.
[195] Banet-Weiser, p. 68.
[196] 29 to Life, *About Me* <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]; 1 Year of Single, *About Me* <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/about /> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]; Fertility Doll, *About Me* <http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[197] Dorky Mum, *About Me* <http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]; Psychobabble, *About Me* <http://dorkymum.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]

asexual female. That's the easiest way of trying to describe myself and my orientation'.[198] This description has clearly been built up over time and reflects her experiences in meeting different people and explaining her individual perspective. As a non-anonymous blogger, the alignment of her online performance of self with her offline lived reality allows her to more easily formulate a way of concisely representing herself to an audience. However, the formality of this introduction frames the blog as being a factual account rather than a personal one, and may therefore attract a different kind of audience to the more typical confessional narratives.

In contrast to the textual constructions discussed above, some of the primary source bloggers choose to be very brief in their 'About Me' descriptions. Despite her later reclassification as post-anonymous, *Mum and More* maintains the same 'About Me' as she originally had, in which she simply tells readers: 'I am a single mother to my daughter Rose, born November 2012. My passions in life are my daughter and writing'.[199] Within this short statement, the author shares more factual information about her daughter than she does about herself; but by framing her life and her blog in this way, she deliberately constructs her own identity as focused on her role as mother. In her 2013 study on 'Mommy Bloggers', Chen describes how appropriating the label of wife or mother as the basis of an online persona can trap female bloggers in a 'digital domesticity'.[200] She argues that 'the identities of individual bloggers can be lost, along with their agency, as they are subjected to subjugation through a term that has potential to minimize who they are to just one element'.[201] *Mum and More*'s choice to limit her 'About Me' to that single statement therefore diminishes the extent to which she can be seen to express herself through her narrative, and categorises her specifically to one role, and one type of blogging. Although this could be read as the blogger surrendering some of the agency she has over her narrative, it is her choice as an author to write and frame her text in this way. This is largely indicative of her narrative as a whole, which is primarily focused on her experiences of motherhood, and raising her daughter. The story she is choosing to tell therefore goes beyond an autobiographical account of her own life and documents the experiences of her daughter as well; demonstrating the variety of ways in which individual authors utilise the blogosphere as a platform to write and share.

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[198] A Life Unexamined, *About Me* <http://alifeunexamined.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]

[199] Mum and More, *About Me* <http://roseandmumandmore.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]

[200] Gina Masullo Chen, 'Don't Call Me That: A Techno-Feminist Critique of the Term Mommy Blogger', *Mass Communication and Society,* 16:4 (2013), 510-532 (p. 526).

[201] Chen (2013), p. 527.

The fact that post-anonymous blogger *Mum and More*'s 'About Me' was written when she was still anonymous could also play a role in the simplicity of its construction. Many of the anonymous primary source blogs highlight the problematic negotiation of deciding what information is valid, interesting and representative enough to summarise within one post, without revealing too much about their offline lived reality. One blogger, *What Kate Did Next*, who is also considered post-anonymous, addresses this at the beginning of her 'About Me' with the rhetorical question: 'Who Am I? The million dollar question!'.[202] The implication of this colloquial statement is that the author believes what readers really want to know is precisely *who* the author is, and she is therefore attempting to provide the right kind of information through her narrative. This reflects the marketing strategies of self-branding outlined above, as the author is consciously trying to represent herself in a way that is designed to satisfy her potential readership. Given the confessional nature of blog narratives, and the intention of personal journal blogs in particular to construct a textual representation of self, the desire for a reader to want to 'know' an author is a natural consequence of the medium. The concept of 'knowing' is a subjective term, and is therefore different depending on the different users. Therefore, it does not necessarily undermine the potential for anonymity, because the concept of 'knowing' is not always focused on facts or information, but on the engagement with blog narratives.[203] The role of audience in the construction of an 'About Me' is also highlighted by anonymous blogger *Evening Light*, as she asks her readers:

> What is it 'about' me? I started this blog just a few months shy of 50 and I'm still not really sure I *know* what I think is important about me. What might *you* want to know about me? Why am I writing this blog? What is there to say, realistically, that actually matters?[204]

In representing her struggle to decide what, if anything, people would want to know about her, the author reflects a similar self-depreciation to *Free Chick*'s headline statement, as discussed above. The modest way in which she constructs herself here could therefore be read as an attempt to perform socially acceptable female behaviour, in terms of society's narrow view of femininity. This could also be viewed as self-marketing, as the author appears to be branding herself in this particular way in order to encourage a specific reaction from her potential readers. It therefore highlights the distinction between writing narratives as a form of self-representation, and constructing a post specifically for an audience, in which

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[202] What Kate Did Next, *About Me* <http://whatkatedidnext.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]

[203] The relationship between blog authors and readers is explored further in Chapter Two: The Readers, pp. 90-121.

[204] Evening Light, *About Me* <http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]

she writes like she must also consider *their* needs and desires. She emphasises the '*you*' to directly address this question to the perceived audience who are reading the 'About Me'. In the context of self-branding, this appears as a form of 'market research', as she is asking the readers to guide her in constructing herself within this space. This line of thought also causes her to question her motivation for blogging, and whether her writing even 'matters'. However, despite this self-depreciation, the blogger expands her 'About Me' and subsequently continues her blog. This implies that her struggle to decide who she wants to 'be' within her 'About Me' is specific to that section, rather than to her blog in general; emphasising the falseness of the 'About Me' as a self-representative narrative. The self performed through a blog can be multiple and changeable, and these examples demonstrate that the construction of a fixed version of self is a difficult and potentially redundant task.[205]

This element of self-depreciation is also seen in the 'About Me' of anonymous blogger *Quarter For Her Thoughts* who introduces herself by telling readers: 'I'm just another average girl with a blog'.[206] By using this phrase she emphasises the commonality of being a 'girl with a blog' and therefore frames herself as unoriginal and 'just' one of many similar narratives that exist within the blogosphere. Her description of herself as an 'average girl' also diminishes her own sense of individuality, and implies that she considers her narrative to be insignificant. By directing this statement to potential and actual readers, the blogger appears to deliberately try and provoke a response or challenge to her self-criticism, and therefore receive some validation from the blogosphere. Non-anonymous blogger *I've Never Robbed A Bank* also frames her narrative and her 'About Me' in this way; even the title of her 'About Me' page is 'OH! ME?!', as if to emphasise her own surprise that anyone is interested in learning more about her.[207] After an image of herself and her full 'real' name, she then writes as a form of introduction: 'I'm very boring, very ugly and very annoying. OH! And I'm a serial killer. I only bring that up because honesty is the best policy, right?'.[208] This is clearly intended to be a humorous way of gaining the reader's attention, and reflects the jovial tone of the majority of her narrative posts. However, the choice to frame herself in this way also reflects a highly negative view of her own self-worth, and therefore appears disingenuous. As with *Quarter For Her Thoughts*' self-criticism, the author's choice to frame herself in such a negative light could be read as an attempt to incite sympathy from her readers, who may

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[205] The concept of multiple selves is explored in more detail in Chapter Four: The Past, Present and Future, pp. 144-165.
[206] Quarter For Her Thoughts, *About Me* <http://quarterforherthoughts.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[207] I've Never Robbed A Bank, *About Me* <http://corzgalore.org/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[208] *Ibid.*

feel compelled by social convention to challenge the author's statements and in turn provide her with complementary feedback.

The repeated pattern of self-depreciation shown in the primary source blogs emphasises the fact that women's voices have historically been marginalised from the public sphere more broadly, which is why many of the female bloggers react uncomfortably to the limelight that the 'About Me' casts on them. It is perceived as different to the self-representations contained within their general posts, as it draws attention to the potential readers, and subsequently to their position as author. The role of author is not one that has been easy for women to inhabit, with 'women's writing' still considered niche enough to require its own genre. Jelinek argues that the projection of a negative self-image is common within women's autobiographies, stating that: 'In contrast to the self-confident, one-dimensional self-image that men usually project, women often depict a multidimensional, fragmented self-image coloured by a sense of inadequacy and alienation'.[209] Although this study is focused on bloggers who depict an affirmed female gender, and therefore cannot make direct comparisons between male and female blogging behaviour, the tropes of women's life-writing that Jelinek highlights appear to be replicated in the primary source blogs. The analysis therefore demonstrates how women's autobiographical writing is inherently influenced by the social context of the female author, emphasising that the feeling of being inadequate, or uninteresting, is rooted in the unequal nature of society.

<u>The Body in the Text</u>

The majority of the 'About Me' texts are focused on the personality, circumstance or opinions of the individual and do not feature any physical description, regardless of the level of anonymity the blog maintains. Although some of the non-anonymous, and later the post-anonymous bloggers include a photo of themselves, these often act as a way of avoiding actual descriptions of their bodies. However, when analysing the primary source bloggers over the course of a year it becomes clear that their narratives are intrinsically centred round the body; which acts as a locus for all questions and mediations of self.[210] Despite this, it is only anonymous blogger *1 Year of Single* who includes a specific sketch of her appearance within her narrative, informing readers: 'I'm 5′ 2″, blonde and blue-eyed'.[211] As discussed above, this depiction of her offline appearance is reinforced by the cartoon image she adds to the headline of her blog; which she tells readers she chose after 'strumming through

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[209] Jelinek, p. xiii.
[210] As outlined in the Methodology (p. 28), the primary source blogs were captured between 13th June 2013 and 13th June 2014.
[211] 1 Year of Single, *To do: Lose that Last 15* (22nd June 2013)
<http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/06/22/to-do-in-my-year-off-2-2/>

countless adorable and perky blonde girl illustrations' because 'the likeness is uncanny'.[212] By informing readers that her search was limited to only 'adorable and perky' cartoon images, she represents a positive characterisation of her main physical features. This is reinforced by the image itself (shown above in *fig.2*), which epitomises an idealised version of female beauty. However, she later undermines this representation of her offline appearance through a further description of herself, in which she tells her readers: 'Someone once said I look like I have "Victoria's Secret" hair – *which is awesome* – but I'd like the body to match'.[213] Much like the self-deprecation seen in the 'About Me' sections of the primary source blogs discussed above, this is an example of the way in which the positive or confident descriptions of the blogger's bodies are consistently undermined by self-criticism.

This is also demonstrated by anonymous blogger *29 to Life,* who constructs a self-assured persona through her blog narrative, repeatedly framing her satisfaction with her offline appearance. For example, she tells readers: 'He showered me with compliments and that's no surprise. Because I slayed'.[214] However, she later qualifies this presentation of confidence by admitting to her readers: 'I think I'm a good-looking person, but in recent years I've struggled with my weight'.[215] As with previous examples of self-depreciation, the inclusion of positive and negative depictions of her body appears to be a deliberate way for the author to maintain a socially acceptable level of feminine modesty; examples of which can be seen throughout all of the primary source blogs. The female authors repeatedly undermine positives comment about their physical appearance with negative ones. Non-anonymous blogger *Sheryl's Pearls* draws attention to this issue as a gendered social convention. She describes how women 'list our flaws like badges of honor. […] Perhaps to point them out before someone else does? We give disclaimers for our brilliance'.[216] She suggests that this desire to remain modest, even to the point of self-deprecation, may be a way of women pre-empting external criticism by pointing out their own perceived flaws. This emphasises the way in which, in the offline world, women are primarily judged on the way they look, and their adherence to a stereotypical view of female behaviour. Susan Brownmiller therefore argues that femininity has, at its core, a 'tradition of imposed

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[212] 1 Year of Single, *The New Me!* (9th January 2014) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2014/01/09/the-new-me/>
[213] 1 Year of Single, *To do: Lose that Last 15* (22nd June 2013) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/06/22/to-do-in-my-year-off-2-2/>
[214] 29 to Life, *Introducing Dabnis Brickey* (16th June 2013) <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/06/16/introducing-dabnis-brickey/>
[215] 29 to Life, *Am I 20 pounds away from Mr. Right?* (23rd September 2013) <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/09/23/am-i-20-pounds-away-from-mr-right/>
[216] Sheryl's Pearls, *Excuse Me, Miss. Your Insecurities are Showing.* (19th June 2013) <http://www.sheryleigh.com/2013/06/19/excuse-miss-insecurities-showing/>

limitations'.[217] In the primary source blogger's textual constructions, these limitations are seen to heavily influence their self-representation and their perception of their own bodies. Susan Bordo argues that women are complicit in this social construction, observing that: 'Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress […] we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough'.[218] This sense of dissatisfaction is evident in many of the primary source blogs, irrespective of their anonymous status.

In many previous studies, the internet has been conceptualised as a space that allows users to express themselves more freely, which can lead to an increase in agency, and could therefore be used for democratic purposes. What the examples above emphasise is that, regardless of this apparent freedom, the social judgement placed upon women offline is so embedded it affects and informs the online narratives of all the female bloggers. In other words, the performances of self that are hosted within the blogosphere may hold the potential to transgress the boundaries of the offline world, but are often influenced by such strong social pressure that users are constantly self-monitoring, and performing a self that is in keeping with the social expectations of the offline world. As Banet-Weiser argues, 'self-presentation does not imply simply *any* narrative of the self, created within an endlessly open cultural script, but one that makes sense within a cultural and economic context of recognisable and predetermined texts and values'.[219] This creates a dichotomy surrounding whether the online world really offers users increased freedom over their writing. This thesis explores the potential of the blogosphere, as exhorted by the techno-enthusiast perspectives of previous research, and therefore the extent to which authors present themselves as able to escape their social and cultural acculturation.[220] Despite the limitations outlined above, the choice of the authors to share concerns over their appearance is also an example of how the personal journal style blog acts as a platform for confessional narratives, and a space in which bloggers feel they can self-disclose. Marwick argues that sharing personal information such as this is an example of the 'emotional labour' involved in marketing the self; and, that through the process of branding experiences in this way, users have the ability to produce 'a self that is simultaneously authentic and carefully edited'.[221] The blogosphere epitomises this dilemma of freedom, and the primary source blogs can be seen to represent both sides of the argument. This thesis therefore embraces the conceptualisations of the online world as

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[217] Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (New York: Linden Press, 1984), p. 14.
[218] Susan Bordo, 'The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity' in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* ed. by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 90-110 (p. 91).
[219] Banet-Weiser, p. 66.
[220] For example, Sherry Turkle, *Life on Screen* (New York: Touchstone, 1995)
[221] Marwick (2013), p. 196.

free *and* limited simultaneously, acknowledging the possibilities of freedom offered by the platform, and the ways in which the constraints of offline social structures are ever present.

The primary source bloggers choose to share feelings of insecurity towards their bodies within their blog narratives, both as a 'disclaimer for brilliance', and to garner sympathy and support from the blogging world. During her pregnancy, non-anonymous blogger *Psychobabble* shares with her readers: 'I've always been fairly petite, and sometimes it's tough for me to see my waistline disappear'.[222] Here the author is having difficulty comprehending her changing body image, but by sharing her struggles with the blogosphere, she receives several supportive comments and encouragement about her changing appearance. The effects of motherhood on the body are also discussed by other bloggers, such as fellow non-anonymous author *Dorky Mum*, who describes being 'all mummy and no yummy'.[223] By appropriating the popular cultural idea of a 'yummy mummy', *Dorky Mum* highlights the pressure women are under to be sexually attractive, and specifically to regain their pre-baby body after they have given birth. However, she does not reject the notion, but shows how the social pressures of the phrase function to encourage women, including her, to be more fit and healthy. In contrast, post-anonymous blogger *Mum and More* uses the experiences of child bearing to present a more positive attitude towards her body. She states:

> My belly is a squashy doughy blob, but Miss Rose finds it comforting and soft. My boobs are droopy but they fed her and now they amuse her. How could I possibly resent my body for looking like this when looking like this is precisely what gives my daughter so much joy?[224]

By framing the self-representation of her body through the opinions of her daughter, she avoids having to portray her own views within the blog narrative. When discussing her body and her own satisfaction with its appearance, she also states: 'My husband is still attracted to me'.[225] The construction of her body as popular with the people she cares about functions as a way of deflecting critical reactions to the addition of a picture to her blog, as their offline opinions are prioritised. However, both comments can be read as defensive, which may imply a level of insecurity on the author's part. The anxiety behind the choice to share the opinions of her husband in particular also implies the social pressure on women to not only adhere to an idealised femininity, but to do so in order to be sexually attractive to men. This

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[222] Psychobabble, *Lost in Transition* (11th April 2014) <http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2014/04/11/lost-in-transition/>
[223] Dorky Mum, *Feeling Good* (10th March 2014) <http://dorkymum.wordpress.com/2014/03/10/feeling-good/>
[224] Mum and More, *For the Love of Wobble* (6th January 2014) <http://roseandmumandmore.com/2014/01/06/for-the-love-of-wobble/>
[225] Mum and More, *Dutchess Diet* (24th July 2013) <http://roseandmumandmore.com/2013/07/24/dutchess-diet/>

is emphasised by *I've Never Robbed A Bank*, who describes to her readers the experience of 'getting naked' in a gym 'locker room'. She muses to her readers: 'should I be worried about other women seeing my naked body? I'm not feeling insecure about it. I would if I got naked in the men's locker room'.[226] By acknowledging her differing attitudes towards being naked in front of women and men, the blogger highlights the way in which being seen by other women is different to being under a 'male gaze'. As with *Mum and More*'s justification that her husband is 'still attracted' to her, this differential appears to elevate the male view of a woman's body above their own, or that of other women. The significance of male judgement is also echoed by non-anonymous blogger *Tracey Louise.* As a former model, she includes several photos of herself on her blog, and therefore her narrative does not include much description of her physical body. However, her posts do describe how her appearance is interpreted by other people in her offline life, often male, and what effect this has on her. For example, she describes how in some recent photos she had asked the photographer to make her 'look intelligent', and tells her readers how his response was to laugh.[227] In reaction to this experience, she therefore concludes that 'Looking remotely intelligent isn't something I can pull off'.[228] By describing both her initial desire to be perceived in a certain way, and the subsequent reaction, the author demonstrates how the external judgement of others can affect the individual's performance of self. It also demonstrates how the body of the author can function to inhibit their aspirations, even if their appearance conforms to a socially constructed 'ideal' of female beauty.

The body is therefore a contentious subject for many of the primary source bloggers, and their narratives repeatedly present the struggle of not adhering to the 'ideal' female body in a culture preoccupied with appearance. Non-anonymous blogger *Not Just A Mum Blog* observes to her readers that: 'The human body is an amazing work of art, my body however is like a 4yr olds play dough sculpture, all squishy and knobbly and could fall apart at any moment'.[229] Although this comment is said with humour, the juxtaposition she describes demonstrates how far the blogger constructs her body as being from the admired ideal, and how it is therefore less valued by society. Unlike previous examples of bodily insecurity which focus on a feminine ideal, this blogger refers to the 'human' body; which suggests that in this description the gender of it is not significant, as she is focused on the physical rather than sexual success of her body. However, the insecurity she has over her appearance is inherently gendered, and Bardo argues that by colluding with the notion that

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[226] I've Never Robbed A Bank, *Welcome to the Locker Room, I'm naked.* (22nd May 2014) <http://corzgalore.org/2014/05/22/welcome-to-the-locker-room-im-naked/>
[227] Tracey Louise, *Bikes* (21st November 2013) <http://traceylouise.wordpress.com/2013/11/21/bikes/>
[228] *Ibid.*
[229] Not Just A Mum Blog, *My Body is Not a Wonderland* (2nd February 2014) <http://notjustamumblog.wordpress.com/2014/02/02/my-body-is-not-a-wonderland/>

women must adhere to a certain image of beauty, we are 'reasserting existing gender configurations' and undermining 'attempts to shift or transform gender power relations'.[230] Therefore by representing critical or self-deprecating attitudes towards their female bodies, the primary source bloggers can be read as perpetuating patriarchal notions of female beauty. This represents another way in which the blogosphere is seen to replicate offline social pressures, rather than offer a space removed from them. However, some of the primary source bloggers demonstrate an unwillingness to adhere to these 'limitations' of femininity, and instead use narrative descriptions of their bodies to reclaim a sense of agency. Despite her initial discomfort, non-anonymous blogger *Psychobabble* demonstrates how pregnancy has allowed her to realise the power of her body. She tells readers:

> I feel like I can more fully leave my cancer behind, stop worrying about what my body can't do, and look forward to what my body *can do*, what it *is doing*, and what that means for my future and the future of my family.[231]

Within this textual construction of her journey, the female body she inhabits is no longer viewed as an object, but has become a tool; shifting from something passive when she was ill, to something active as she grows new life. This sense of activity reflects the agency of her and her body, which is creating something autonomous from her own sense of self, both of which she is able to mediate through her blog narrative.

In their anthology on the 'Body in Literature', David Hillman and Ulrika Maude observe how alternative bodily experiences, such as pregnancy or disability can 'pose challenges to accepted orders' through their 'acknowledgement of varying forms of difference or subjectification'.[232] They argue that non-normative bodies are inherently transgressive as they challenge the existing structures or expectations, and provide new ways in which individuals can claim a sense of subjectivity. This can be seen in non-anonymous blogger *Psychobabble*'s representation of her maternal body discussed above, but can also be read into the self-representation of anonymous bloggers *Evening Light* and *Fertility Doll*, who both describe the struggles they have with their physical bodies, and their failure to carry out the expected functions of the individual. *Evening Light* presents as being slightly older than the majority of the other primary source bloggers, in her mid-fifties, and repeatedly expresses her frustration at the limitations of her ageing body. This is combined with the repercussions of a brain injury, which she suffers the side effects of on a regular

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[230] Bordo, pp. 91-92.
[231] Psychobabble, *Amazingly Wonderful Worries* (11th February 2014) <http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2014/02/11/amazingly-wonderful-worries/>
[232] *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* ed. by David Hillman and Ulrika Maude (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 6.

basis. In one of her blogs she depicts her experience of getting out of bed, explaining to the reader:

> Then I moved to put my feet on the floor…pain. Headache pain. Arthritis pain. The other aches and pains that go with living life. Enough pain to create a wave of nausea as I stood. Damn it. I hurt and I 'feel old'; stiff, inflexible, aching.[233]

The description of her struggle with this simple task is intended to give the reader an idea of what her offline life and her physical existence are like. This level of sharing is something that is common within the blogosphere, and is another dimension of the autobiographical nature of the narratives, in that they are showing the readers what it is like to 'walk in their shoes'.

Unlike the experience of *Evening Light*, the narratives on *Fertility Doll*'s blog focus on her struggle with one particular physical experience; infertility. Many of the posts contain descriptions of her body's failure to succeed at its purportedly 'natural' role of child-bearer and mother. She outlines the problematic relationship she has with her body in her 'About Me', telling readers: 'I'm still learning to slow down, to walk patiently and to love my body... whether it's ovulating or not'.[234] This emphasises the struggle that is taking place between her mind and body during her offline life, and therefore on her blog. This frustration is clear in many of the experiences she depicts through her posts. In one instance, she describes to readers:

> I started spotting on Friday and I knew it was game over. I just waited for the blood to arrive. […] After 16 decent temperatures, most women would test by now but I know my body too well. It's trying to trick me again. A late period for me is exactly what it says on the can – a late period. It will arrive […] It always does.[235]

This highlights the way in which her narrative continually 'others' her body, granting it autonomy and showing the power it has to overrule her. The experience of menstruation is also utilised here as a symbol of the inevitable disappointment that her body inflicts upon her, marking it as a uniquely and unavoidably female bodily plight. However, despite the negative personal implications for *Fertility Doll*, what this narrative depiction represents is a female body that resists the ideal of appearance or behaviour. Clare Hanson argues that 'The maternal body is a troubling, disruptive body', observing that 'Its most striking characteristic is its mutability, as it expands, dilates, contracts and expels'.[236] In the case of *Fertility Doll*, the quest for maternal experience renders her body a disruption to the norm of

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[233] Evening Light, *Now Again, Now Always* (15th June 2013)
<http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/2013/06/15/now-again-now-always/>
[234] Fertility Doll, *About Me* <http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[235] Fertility Doll, *The Day 33 Curse* (3rd June 2013) <http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/2013/06/03/the-day-33-curse/>
[236] Clare Hanson, 'The Maternal Body' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* ed. by David Hillman and Ulrika Maude (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 87-100 (p. 87).

femininity; emphasising the ability of the female body to transgress its purportedly 'natural' role. The representation of this through her blog narrative therefore allows the platform to challenge the narrow cultural representations of female experience seen in other media, and diversify the stories being told of women's lives.

<u>Disembodiment</u>

A disembodied narrative is text that can be read without the bodily connotations associated with the embodiment of the author's offline life, and gender, affecting its perception. The disembodied nature of the blog narratives is rooted in the computer mediated nature of the platform, and the possibilities of anonymity that the platform offers users who choose to self-represent within it. Despite this, the examples discussed above clearly demonstrate that even in the purportedly disembodied world of the blogosphere, the author's performed self is never entirely separate from the notion of their physical offline self. It could be argued that instead of being disembodied, the narratives demonstrate an 'absence of embodiment', as described by Susie Orbach in her work on the body as a cultural product.[237] She refers to the ability of the narrative to be removed from the bodily connotations of the author's offline lived reality, while still being embodied by a textually constructed female body. Orbach believes that the body is something that can never be fully escaped. She argues that:

> Even as we take on imagined identities in cyberspace to make virtual connections with cyberised people, we cannot live in the material world without bodies. Ironically, it becomes the task of our cyber-identities, where one chooses who one wishes to be, to reveal the deep instability and slipperiness of embodied experience today, and yet how impossible it is to escape age, gender and ethnicity.[238]

Here Orbach highlights the ways in which the social implications of age, gender and ethnicity are still present in online or virtual communities, and therefore even 'cyberised' people are defined through the same notions of identity as those in the offline, material world. However, the authors of the primary source blog narratives are able to construct their own online persona, which although to a certain extent is embodied, and marked with familiar social identifiers, is often framed as the active choice of the author. Moreover, their self-representation is a textual construction of self that need not bare any resemblance to their offline lived reality, should the author choose to perform a persona, gender or self that is different. This element of choice is alluded to in Orbach's text, as she states: 'in cyber-land, we are offered unlimited scope to create fantasy bodies on screen that have almost nothing to do with our bodies as they are'.[239] Her use of the phrase 'almost nothing' appears like a

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[237] Susie Orbach, *Bodies* (London: Profile Books, 2009), p. 79.
[238] Orbach, p. 141.
[239] Orbach, p. 25.

vague attempt to include a variety of relationships between an online and offline self. However, what the phrase represents in the context of this thesis is the agency of the individual, as they are able to control and construct these multiple selves online. The self being represented by the primary source bloggers, in what Orbach calls 'cyber-land', may not align in any way with the offline lived reality of the user, but the connection is maintained through the individual's ownership over the performed self; meaning that the two (or many more) are never entirely separate from each other.

Although computer-mediated communication naturally creates a divide between body and text, it is clear from the analysis of women's offline published autobiography that the presence or lack of body is a problematic part of female self-representation more broadly. Gilmore notes how 'the self has functioned as a metaphor for soul, consciousness, intellect, and imagination, but never for body' and that therefore 'the self appearing in autobiography studies is presumed to exclude the body'.[240] Her analysis suggests that the way in which autobiographical writing creates an impression of 'knowing' the author, does not include any knowledge of their body. However, she acknowledges that as a figure of identity, the body is 'the intimate ground of lived experience, the material body, a body with organs and skin'.[241] This concept reflects the problematic nature of representing a body that is not visible through textual mediations of self, but which is still conceptualised as the 'home' of the 'authentic' self. This is emphasised by the anonymous primary source blogs who choose to include references to their offline body, as they ground their performance of self in a physical setting, which appears to provide their readers with a greater sense of the online persona as authentic. This could also be a motivating factor in the choice of blog authors to share their lack of self-esteem within their blog narrative. As non-anonymous blogger *I've Never Robbed A Bank* points out to her audience: 'it's hard to doubt that I am a real person when you read about my insecurities'.[242] She believes that by being 'honest' about her own body image, she is more likely to appear authentic to her readers; something that echoes Markwick's concept of self-branding's 'emotional labour', as outlined above. However, this prioritisation of the body as a signifier of identity is contested by a feminist critique of autobiography studies. For example, Gilmore observes that: 'the body as the stable location of gender is vigorously resisted by the changing representations of gender, bodies, and identities in self-representational texts'.[243] Her argument reflects the theoretical framework of this thesis, as it highlights how fluid definitions of autobiography and life-writing can be used

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[240] Gilmore, p. 84.
[241] Gilmore, p. 132.
[242] I've Never Robbed A Bank, *Chaos/Complexity* (31st July 2013) <http://corzgalore.org/2013/07/31/chaoscomplexity/>
[243] Gilmore, p. 149.

in contemporary theoretical analysis to undermine the notion of the body as integral to mediations of the self, and therefore emphasises the importance of textually constructed selves.

<u>Beyond the Body</u>

The body is integral to the primary source blogger's self-representations, whether absent or present within the textual constructions. However, many of the texts go beyond the body in their descriptions, giving readers an insight into an even more private and personal experience. One specific thing that was highlighted by the close textual analysis was the representation of mental health issues, an unprecedented commonality within the relatively small sample of primary source blogs. The physical success of the bloggers is often represented through the adherence to idealised conceptualisations of female beauty, rather than actual well-being. However, for some bloggers the health of their body and mind are depicted as much more significant. Although their textual constructions of self vary, all of the primary source bloggers who chose to represent their mental health frame it as inherently connected to their emotional well-being. It is therefore constructed as something that impacts on their offline experience, as well as the mood and tone they project through their blog. The subject of health is especially important to the self-representation of anonymous blogger *Evening Light*, who struggles everyday with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, as well arthritis, menopause and the side effects of a childhood brain injury. Within her narrative she acknowledges these issues as part of her identity, and therefore part of her self-representation, as they constantly affect her mind, body and emotions. In one post she tells her readers: 'I crashed early last night, fatigued with hormones, hot flashes, emotional volatility and ~~promise threat promise likelihood inevitability of~~ largely unpredictable ~~change~~ future happenings. […] Again, I find myself quite human'.[244] This description highlights the varied and constant nature of her symptoms, and the ways in which they impact upon her everyday life. Her choice to describe herself as 'quite human' shows a sense of vulnerability at how strongly she is affected by her health, both physical and mental. It also makes the experience relatable; authors, bloggers and readers are all 'quite human', and can sympathise with her feeling of powerlessness. The self-editing demonstrated by the 'struck through' words also shows her inability to pinpoint a reason behind her feelings, and a desire to make this confusion visible to her readers. A literary technique which reinforces the impression of her being unable, like everyone, to control her own destiny. Fellow

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[244] Evening Light, *More of an Edge than a Line* (8th June 2014) <http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/2014/06/08/more-of-an-edge-than-a-line/> [Emphasis Original]

anonymous bloggers *1 Year of Single* and *Quarter For Her Thoughts* also struggle with depression, and represent a similar sense of vulnerability in their blog narratives.

However, it is not only anonymous bloggers who represent their mental health issues through their blog. Non-anonymous blogger *Not Just A Mum Blog* openly tells her readers how she has, and does, suffer with post-natal depression.[245] This provides a contrast to stereotypical parenting themed blogs that present an idealistic image of the experience.[246] Fellow non-anonymous blogger *Where The Light Is* also subverts the norm of her narratives in the same way by using her travel themed blog to address her mental health problems. She shares with her readers her most difficult times, describing how: 'I was the most depressed I have ever felt living in Sydney since my confusing and dark adolescent years at university'.[247] The choice to represent her experience as 'confusing and dark' is a powerful way of depicting the vulnerability of suffering mental health issues, and her description of this negative period, in the context of more positive experiences, allows her to present a possibility of recovery for readers who may relate to what she has been through. This positive attitude is also reflected by post-anonymous blogger *What Kate Did Next*, whose whole blog is focused on her life after her daughter's death, and how she has dealt with the depression and anxiety that followed it. Despite the difficulties she has faced, the blog posts consistently end on a positive note, encouraging readers to look for the silver linings in life, and cherish what they have. The issues that these bloggers describe stem from experiences in their past, but are still very much part of their current self-representation.[248] The choice to frame mental health issues as part of their textually constructed self is shown by anonymous, non-anonymous and post-anonymous primary source bloggers, despite the opportunity to exclude it from their performed online personae. This implies that the blog is perceived as a safe space for these female bloggers. Therefore, the findings of this thesis could be seen to reflect in a small way the concept of the blogosphere as a platform where, particularly female, users could write with more freedom, as outlined by previous research.

For other bloggers, the issue of their mental health is addressed in a less grave manner. Non-anonymous blogger *I've Never Robbed A Bank*, is consistently light-hearted and funny in the way she describes her experiences through her blog posts, and the subject of mental health is represented in the same way. She regularly refers to herself as

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[245] Not Just A Mum Blog, *I Want My Wife Back* (12th September 2013) <http://notjustamumblog.wordpress.com/2013/09/12/i-want-my-wife-back/>

[246] For example, the 'mummy/mommy blogging' phenomenon, as explored in Pedersen and Smithson (2013).

[247] Where The Light Is, *How to Make New Year's Resolutions and Keep Them* (14th January 2014) <http://wherethelightis.org/2014/01/14/how-to-make-new-years-resolutions-and-keep-them/>

[248] The overlap between blogger's past and present selves is explored in Chapter Four: Past, Present and Future, pp. 144-165.

unbalanced and concludes one post about her 'nutcase' behaviour with the sarcastic statement 'I'm mentally healthy'.[249] This language is not unusual, given that the flippant use of 'crazy' as a pejorative term is liberally directed at those with and without mental health issues, both on and offline. However, as with other 'serious' topics she addresses in her blog, the humour appears to be a way of simultaneously deflecting away from, and drawing attention to her personal problems. In one post, she tells her readers 'I have been a bit depressed. Trying to cope. Not that I was in a depression. In fact, all other things aside, I have been in a fairly good mood'.[250] This statement appears confused, as she discloses something to her readers and then immediately undermines herself; suggesting she is in denial about her own situation. Despite this inconsistency, her choice to include the initial statement about being depressed, which is contrary to the general tone of her blog narrative, implies that it is something she deliberately wishes to share with the blogosphere, and tell her readers about. The potential repercussions of this confession are increased due to her lack of anonymity, as the impact of admitting she has suffered with, or is suffering from depression may impact upon her offline life as well as her online persona. Therefore, the fact that she goes on to reject this idea, correct herself, and mask this moment of disclosure with humour does not necessarily undermine the original admission, but instead acts as a form of disassociation that allows her to deny the validity of her original declaration should she wish to protect herself from its implications.

In contrast, anonymous blogger *Fertility Doll*, whose narrative is generally serious in tone, is very clear in documenting her experience of depression, but presents it as insignificant in comparison to the other topics of her blog, and the experiences of her everyday life. She highlights in several posts the psychological impact that infertility can have, and particularly discusses the connection between infertility and depression in her own experience. However, she consistently presents her battle with depression as secondary to her battle with infertility, and she is more concerned how any medication will affect her fertility hormones than she is about her mental health. She also trivialises it by referring to it as 'the blues', and suggesting that if she was to 'make more time for light exercise', that would have the same effect as anti-depressants.[251] In these examples, *Fertility Doll* is very clear in her dismissal of mental health problems as secondary to her fertility issues, which may represent her genuine attitude and experience. However, it appears to represent a distinction between what she sees as the public focus of her blog, and her own private

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[249] I've Never Robbed A Bank, *What I Think When I Look At Old Couples* (16th April 2014) <http://corzgalore.org/2014/04/16/what-i-think-when-i-look-at-old-couples/>
[250] I've Never Robbed A Bank, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (18th July 2013) <http://corzgalore.org/2013/07/18/a-series-of-unfortunate-events/>
[251] Fertility Doll, *5HTP Infertility & Depression* (30th June 2013) <http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/2013/06/30/5-htp-infertility-depression/>

experience. Although this is a problematic boundary to maintain given the intimate and confessional nature of the information contained within her narrative, it is repeatedly demonstrated by her separation of physical and emotional experiences within her writing. For example, the news that she has achieved her ultimate goal of receiving a 'BFP' (big fat positive pregnancy test) is delivered simply as a factual statement, without any indication in the text that she is happy or excited by the news.[252] She tells her readers: 'I just about got out of the cold waters of infertility […] The odds say I'll be in the water again very soon, so I figured I'd write to let you all know what's going on'.[253] The use of the metaphor 'cold waters' implies a negative and dangerous element to her experience, which she does not represent herself as being freed from by the information she is sharing. In this statement, she also makes it clear to her readers that she only feels like she can share this news with them because she believes that it will soon be redundant; suggesting that it is not an emotional high point she is choosing to share, but yet another example of the ups and downs of her physical story. This emphasises *Fertility Doll'*s focus on the subject of her narrative, and clearly demonstrates that the appearance of anonymity is not always enough to encourage users to share things that they personally deem to be private.

The majority of references to mental health within the primary source blogs are about the authors and their own psychological issues, but for non-anonymous blogger *Psychobabble*, the issue of mental health is an integral part of her offline identity, as well as her online textually constructed self. As suggested by her choice of blog name, the author works as a psychologist, and being identifiable means that this fact is also made clear in her 'About Me'. However, she is quick to disassociate herself from the stereotype of therapist, and reassures readers with the instruction:

> Please don't be deterred by the title or because of that one horrible therapist who made you cry as a child. I'm a fun, hip, sassy therapist lady who says it like it is when you have daddy issues or when your fly is undone.[254]

The tone of this description and the use of colloquialisms show that she is constructing herself as different from the archetypal character of therapist, and trying to frame herself as accessible to her readers, and her patients. However, her role as a 'therapist lady' is only part of her self-representation. She also shares with readers her own struggle with mental health issues, describing her experience of depression and telling her readers how

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[252] Fertility Doll, *IVF 2# Beta Hell. Update.* (24th May 2014)
<http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/2014/05/24/ivf-2-beta-hell-update/>
[253] *Ibid.*
[254] Psychobabble, *About Psychobabble* <https://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/about-psychobabble/>

sometimes she has trouble facing her own 'demons'.[255] She talks directly to her audience, stating: 'we need those reminders of what hope feels like, and now I am needing them, because depression lies to us'.[256] By using the first person pronoun 'we' to include her readers, she frames her experience as inclusive and relatable to others, encouraging them to empathise. The choice to include this insight in her self-representation also allows her to humanise the character of 'therapist' that she performs offline, and blur the boundary between mental health professionals and sufferers; something that would be difficult in her offline life. By demonstrating this level of agency over how she depicts herself as both a professional and an individual online, *Psychobabble* demonstrates how the blogosphere can be a space that allows for alternative, and potentially transgressive, representations, including that of mental health.

<u>Textually Constructing a Female Self</u>

Although the primary source blog authors and their narratives may never be completely removed from their body, or the idea of a female body, within the blogging world they do not have to be limited to it. As Karlsson notes in her 2007 research, 'on the web there are many momentary opportunities to free oneself from the shackles of one's gendered, aged and raced body'. [257] However, her analysis reflects a similar conclusion to previous research such as Biz Stone's 2004 work, which states that despite these opportunities for freedom, 'linear and grounded states of being are also thriving within various manifestations of cyberspace'.[258] Both these studies therefore suggest that the models of gender and behaviour that exist within offline society are also being replicated online, and many users are representing selves that adhere to stereotypical notions of femininity, or female behaviour.

In a variety of ways, all of the primary source bloggers represent different 'types' of women, different notions of female behaviour, and replicate miscellaneous models of womanhood that are prevalent in offline society. Some choose to frame their actions as being 'typical' of a woman, for example non-anonymous blogger *Where The Light Is* describes a conversation with her female friend, stating: 'we got together, as women do, bitching and ranting and reassessing our lives at current'.[259] The same trope is also used by

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[255] Psychobabble, *Reminders* (27th February 2014)
<http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2014/02/27/reminders/>
[256] *Ibid.*
[257] Karlsson (2007), p. 150.
[258] Biz Stone, *Who Let the Blogs Out? A Hyperconnected Peak at the World of Weblogs* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004), p. 125.
[259] Where The Light Is, *Do Women Expect Too Much?* (7th May 2014)
<http://wherethelightis.org/2014/05/07/do-women-expect-too-much/>

fellow non-anonymous blogger *Dorky Mum* to justify certain behaviour, as she states: 'So I did what any self-respecting woman would do in that situation. I drank too much wine, cried a lot and had an early night'.[260] By using the phrase 'self-respecting woman' the author deliberately reinforces the idea that she is behaving in a way that is 'normal' for any woman in her current situation. In both of these examples, the bloggers are describing stereotypically female behaviour that ironically may be deemed 'un-ladylike', i.e. 'bitching' and 'crying'. Therefore, their use of this framework to rationalise their actions shifts the accountability from the individual, and instead places the bloggers within a pre-determined pattern of gendered behaviour. This recourse to nature as a motivating factor reduces the level of agency that the blogger appears to be exhibiting over their own behaviour, and therefore distances them from any negativity associated with their activity.[261] Anonymous blogger *1 Year of Single* also uses femininity as a way of defending her behaviour, appropriating the stereotypical notion of blonde women being less intelligent to explain and justify her actions. This is used as part of her textual construction of offline behaviour, and also presented as an excuse for her not keeping up with communication in the blogging world. In one instance, she tells readers: 'I was nominated for three awards but between my commute and blonde-ness, I haven't posted diddly-doo about them'.[262] This example, and to some extent those of *Where The Light Is* and *Dorky Mum*, are represented as humour; jokingly replicating the typecast of women's behaviour and depicting themselves and their actions as unwittingly motivated by their female gender. However, this collusion with reductive representations of women undermines the possibilities that the blog narratives are offering users to represent alternative ways of being female in contemporary society. The replication of stereotypical female 'types' could therefore be read as a deliberate part of the blogger's self-marketing. In other words, constructing a self that is familiar, and therefore 'popular' within the blogosphere.

These gender stereotypes are also utilised by some of the primary source bloggers in order to further inform their self-representation. For post-anonymous blogger *Mum and More*, she is able to give readers an insight into her home life through series of posts entitled 'Homemade Housewife Project', which all include domestic tips for her readers.[263] Although the domestic theme is common amongst parenting bloggers, the choice to frame her offline

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[260] Dorky Mum, *A wobble. And a thank you* (18th October 2013)
<http://dorkymum.wordpress.com/2013/10/18/a-wobble-and-a-thank-you/>
[261] The way in which gender determined behaviour is seen to influence the blogger's self-representations is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four: Emotional Experiences, pp. 123-143.
[262] 1 Year of Single, *Awards! Thank you!!* (25th September 2013)
<http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/09/25/awards-thank-you/>
[263] Mum and More, *Homemade Housewife Project* (31st August 2013)
<http://roseandmumandmore.com/2013/08/31/homemade-housewife-project/>

life through her role as a 'housewife' brings with it connotations of a passive woman who serves her man, and cares for her children; something which again echoes the 'limitations' of femininity. Genz suggests that negative labels such as 'Slaves, prisoners, schizophrenics or, even more dehumanizing, robots' have been branded on the housewife by 'second-wave feminist critics, writers and filmmakers to the extent that now, it seems, the home has become an almost 'guilty' pleasure for some women'.[264] She argues that in contrast the ideals of postfeminism allow women to embrace these domestic identities, creating the new 'postfeminist housewife', who 'renegotiates and resignifies her domestic/feminine position, deliberately choosing to 'go home''.[265] The persona that *Mum and More* constructs online reflects this sense of pride in inhabiting a traditional domestic role, telling readers:

> I'm what my friend Imelda's Mum refers to as a "Stepford Wife". I do the cooking, the cleaning, the laundry and the child care. […] That is my role and I'm good at it. His role is the traditional "male" role.[266]

Here she makes it very clear that both her and her husband adhere to traditional gender roles within their marriage, and therefore there is a gendered division of labour. The way in which she frames her 'role' reaffirms her belief that this part was pre-destined for her, and that her success at it is something to be proud of. The list of her responsibilities also contrasts with the short description she gives of her husband's 'role', reinforcing the notion that the majority of responsibility lies with her. This textual gap reflects the silence in society over this unequal division of domestic responsibility, and could be read as a veiled criticism of the social expectations which function to perpetuate this behaviour in the majority of heterosexual households. However, the majority of *Mum and More*'s narrative echoes Genz's conceptualisation of a 'postfeminist housewife' who rejects the notion of the housewife as a form of gendered domestic servitude, and instead embraces this as a position for female subjectivity. This reflects one of the reasons why postfeminism is often considered in opposition to other strands of feminism, as its ideas collude with some patriarchal notions of women's position in society. Although the concept of adhering to the traditional 'housewife' lifestyle may be controversial within some spheres, *Mum and More* consciously frames her blog as focused on her and her daughter's life, and therefore places herself within the blogosphere's parenting community, where she knows her experience will be common to several other bloggers. As with the examples of *Where The Light Is, Dorky Mum* and *Tracey Louise*, her choice to frame her blog in this way could therefore be

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[264] Stéphanie Genz, '"I am Not a Housewife, but…": Postfeminism and the Revival of Domesticity' in Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 49-62 (p. 51).
[265] Genz (2008), p. 50.
[266] Mum and More, *What Makes A Daddy?* (1st July 2013)
<http://roseandmumandmore.com/2013/07/01/what-makes-a-daddy/>

deliberately to emphasise hers position as 'housewife', and therefore brand her online persona as a recognisable character, which she perceives to be popular with her blog's intended audience. This exposes the constructed nature of the self that is being performed within each individual blogger's narrative, even if it superficially aligns with their offline persona.

The primary source blogger's utilisation of female 'types' is not confined to 'housewife', but can also be seen in the invocation of other tropes of femininity. For example, post-anonymous blogger *What Kate Did Next* tells her readers 'I'm a 'why not?' kind of a girl'; representing herself as impulsive and spontaneous.[267] This type of characterisation can also be used to demonstrate what kind of woman the bloggers *desire* to be, such as anonymous blogger *29 to Life*'s statement of 'I want to feel like a girly, girl'.[268] The concept of a 'girly girl' is a common trope applied to young children who show a preference for toys, colours and activities that are considered by social norms to be female; and who are often admired for being pretty and well mannered. By utilising this as an aspiration, *29 to Life* automatically infantilises herself and implies a desire to be objectified. Chen argues that this form of identification limits the agency of the female authors, by focusing on the 'passive aspects' of female identities.[269] In a similar expression of desire, fellow anonymous blogger *Free Chick* states: 'I wish I could just be one of those girls who make do with just sex'.[270] Although this represents a similar assertion to the previous statements, the phrase 'one of those girls' deliberately others the type of girl that she is describing, inferring a moral judgement on the part of the author. This sense of othering is also demonstrated by anonymous blogger *Evening Light* when she talks about her choice not to have children. She tells her readers: 'Motherhood hasn't been an aspiration for me, though. I'm not *that* woman'.[271] The deliberate emphasis on the 'that' again implies a distancing of the author from those who have chosen a different path to her own. Although they are depicted as certainties, both statements read as defensive, and therefore appear to be a way of pre-empting any criticism they may receive from their potential audience.

One reason that female bloggers are keen to imply they do or do not adhere to certain 'types' of womanhood may be in response to the generalisations often made about a homogenous female voice. As female writers, the blog authors appear to consciously justify

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[267] What Kate Did Next, *Are You Gonna Go My Way* (29th September 2013) <http://whatkatedidnext.wordpress.com/2013/09/29/are-you-gonna-go-my-way/>
[268] 29 to Life, *The Thaw* (22nd October 2013) <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/10/22/the-thaw/>
[269] Chen (2013), p. 525.
[270] Free Chick, *When things happen that aren't supposed to happen* (1st August 2013) <http://freechick.wordpress.com/2013/08/01/when-things-happen-that-arent-supposed-to-happen/>
[271] Evening Light, *Menopause 101* (14th October 2013) <http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/2013/10/14/menopause-101/> [Emphasis Original]

their opinions within their text, and emphasise that they are not necessarily representative of *all* women. As a way of representing a broader world view, some primary source bloggers choose to utilise their own blog to re-blog the narratives of others, instead of writing their own narrative.[272] The choice of these bloggers to include other self-representative narratives, in order to add to their own, echoes Butler's statement that: 'my account of myself is never fully mine, and is never fully of me'.[273] What Butler is referencing is her interrogation of the notion of an 'original' self, whether it is gender or any other personality trait; she instead argues that our 'self' is the product of a series of socially conditioned performative acts. In this context, the bloggers who choose to re-blog are all using the textual constructions of self that other authors have produced, in order to contribute to their own performance of self. This also demonstrates how their self-representative narratives could represent a broader experience of female authors, as well as their individual experience.[274]

This thesis argues that blog narratives are an autobiographical form, and the analysis of this chapter demonstrates the many ways in which these textual constructions of self echo the style and intention of traditional autobiography. It also shows how these self-representations go beyond their textual predecessors and draw on non-textual signals such as photos and drawings, as well as the inferred physicality of the offline world, in order to mediate their identity. The differing styles of self-representation are not confined within the assumed binary of anonymous and non-anonymous, but vary based on each individual author. The focus for blog authors is on the ability to construct a sense of self that is multiple and changing, which is shown to be of particular importance in providing a new sense of subjectivity for female users. This sense of variety also represents the potential that the blogosphere has to diversify the mainstream narratives. However, the analysis simultaneously highlights the extent to which the online world is infiltrated by offline social constructions and constraints, which limit the potential agency and transgression of the bloggers and their narratives.

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[272] For example: A Life Unexamined, *The Value of Telling Stories* (9th February 2014) <http://alifeunexamined.wordpress.com/2014/02/09/the-value-of-telling-stories/>
[273] Judith Butler, 'Giving an Account of Oneself', *Diacritics*, 31:19 (2001), 22-40 (p. 26).
[274] The concept of re-blogging is explored further in Chapter Two: The Readers, pp. 118-121.

Chapter Two: The Readers

One of the most unique features of the contemporary blogosphere is the direct communication that is now available between users and their readers. Since the revolution of Web 2.0 and its participatory technology, the passive user has taken on an active role in the production and consumption of online content. This interactive technology has attracted more female users than any previous online platforms, and the importance of active engagement is therefore gendered.[275] The promise of support and encouragement is shown to be a key reason why many users choose to enter into the blogosphere and other Web 2.0 technologies, to share their self-representation with the online world. This thesis is primarily focused on the self-representative narratives produced by the primary source bloggers. However, as Baumer *et al.*'s 2008 study concludes: 'in order to understand fully the activity of blogging, we must study not only bloggers and the blogs they produce, but also the readers of those blogs and their interactions with the blog and the blogger'.[276] This chapter therefore examines women's personal journal blogs as a space of self-representation, and as a platform which allows them to connect and collaborate with other users. The analysis will examine how the relationship between the blog author and their audience functions within the contemporary blogosphere, and particularly within the female authored primary source blogs. It will also explore what effect the concept of anonymity has on the relationship between a blog author and their readership, as well as the blogosphere's wider element of commentary and community.

<u>Interactivity, Participation and Engagement</u>

Within the blogosphere there are many ways in which a reader can engage with a text or the blog author, either through comments, direct email communication or within another connected online platform. These various forms of available communication can be both visible and invisible, on and off 'stage', and are examples of the interactivity that makes the contemporary blogosphere the flagship of user led Web 2.0 technology. This metaphor of stage performance is inspired by Brenda Laurel's text 'Computers as Theatre' in which she observes that the users of online platforms such as blogs are like 'audience members who can march up onto the stage and become various characters, altering the action by what they say and do in their roles'.[277] She elevates the element of participation within the interactivity by noting that when 'the audience joins the actors on the stage' they 'become

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[275] The gender bias of Web 2.0 is discussed in the Introduction, pp. 1-26.
[276] Baumer *et al.*, p. 1.
[277] Brenda Laurel, 'Computers as Theatre' in *Reading Digital Culture* ed. by David Trend (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 109-114 (p.110).

actors' rather than continuing to be an audience.[278] This understanding of the blog narrative as a performance is a key part of the theoretical approach of this thesis, and the analysis is specifically focused on the textually constructed performances of self represented in each of the blogger's narratives.[279] This chapter examines these performative personae, exploring the extent to which the blogosphere offers opportunities for the audience to become part of a collaborative reader-audience performance, rather than remain a static viewer.

The level of participation the audience can have within the narrative construction demonstrates a move away from the conceptualisation of self-representation as an isolated first person narrative. Building on Serfaty's 2004 work, Karlsson observes that:

> The possibilities for the reader to contribute to the autobiographical performance - render it explicitly dialogic – by leaving comments on the page or by communicating with its author behind the scenes via email or instant messaging are often recognised as the most radical innovations of diary weblogs.[280]

The 'dialogic' potential of blog narratives is a key element of the narrative form and, as Karlsson highlights, it represents the most unique feature of the blogging platform in comparison to traditional autobiographical texts; the element of reader participation. By creating an environment in which the readers are able to express themselves alongside the author, the blogosphere represents the possibility for different and emergent voices to contribute to the platform. Jessalynn Marie Keller argues that this is gendered, describing in her 2012 text how: 'Participatory culture complicates earlier conceptions of the media fan/audience as a passive receptor of culture (and often gendered female), instead reconceptualising the media consumer as active and able to negotiate and participate in the construction of cultural texts'.[281] This technology is therefore seen to provide women with an active role. In the context of this thesis, the ability for female bloggers to share their voice through a self-representative blog narrative, as well as contribute to other primarily female voiced blog narratives and communities, represents the potential agency of the platform.

The involvement of users within each other's blog narratives is described by Baumer *et al.* as 'connectedness'. Their study suggests that although 'there is an argument that the readers who do not comment are not really connected, or that those who comment are more connected', 'being part of a blog looks different for different readers, and connectedness, even when achieved by different means, is still connectedness'.[282] The connectedness of a

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[278] Laurel, p. 110.
[279] The theoretical framework of performance utilised by the analysis of this thesis is outlined in the Methodology, pp. 27-47.
[280] Karlsson (2007), p. 139.
[281] Jessalynn Marie Keller, 'Virtual Feminisms', Information, Communication and Society, 15:3 (2012), 429-447 (p. 434).
[282] Baumer *et al.*, p. 8.

blog therefore centres on the presence of readers, and the engagement of readers within the blog narrative. By rendering the concept of connectedness more complex, they acknowledge the variety of ways in which a user may affect the narrative construction, or be present in the narrative itself. The idea of a 'feeling of connectedness' is rooted in the concept of finding similarity, or affinity, within another user; much in the same way social interactions are initiated in offline society. Karlsson's 2007 research specifically examines the desire female users have of 'seeking sameness' in this way, and notes that 'the emotional framework most often employed [by bloggers] to describe their engagement with the text is recognition/ identification. Readers speak of the pleasures of finding themselves in another person'.[283] This desire for connections is why research, such as that of Nardi *et al.*, characterises the blog as 'a form of social communication in which blogger and audience are intimately related through the writing and reading of blogs'.[284] This is highlighted by non-anonymous primary source blogger *I've Never Robbed A Bank* who states: 'When I blog, it is not just someone sitting at a computer typing or just someone texting on a phone. No. This is a conversation'.[285] She is explicit in acknowledging her awareness of audience as she is writing her blog, which affects how she considers the sharing of her narrative as a form of interaction. In this example, she specifically constructs the process of writing a blog as writing into something. By dismissing the value of other modes of communication, she also frames blogging as a superior form of self-representation. Non-anonymous blogger *Where The Light Is* constructs her narrative in a similar way, and explicitly draws attention to the presence of audience within the platform. For example, at the end of her 'About Me', she signs off by saying: 'I hope you enjoy, ghost audience!'.[286] Although the term 'ghost' may have negative connotations to some, the context in which the blogger is using it frames the 'ghost audience' as a friendly presence, to whom the blogger is directly communicating. By choosing the word 'ghost' the blogger aptly encapsulates the ever present and possible, but often non-visible, position of blog readers within the wider blogosphere.

The understanding of the blog as a 'conversation' indicates the type of interaction that Nardi *et al.* outline as the social aspect of blogging. They argue that: 'The blog is not a closed world, but part of a larger communication space in which diverse media, and face to face communication, may be brought to bear. Blogs, then, are unlike private diaries being completely social in nature'.[287] They suggest that the sociability of blogs is evident in their content, for example: 'salutations, advice giving, and invitations' which they suggest are all

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[283] Karlsson (2007), p. 151.
[284] Nardi *et al.*, p. 224.
[285] I've Never Robbed A Bank*, This Is Real Life* (25th August 2013) <http://corzgalore.org/2013/08/25/this-is-real-life/>
[286] Where The Light Is, *About Me* <http://wherethelightis.org/about/> [Accessed 13th June 2014]
[287] Nardi *et al.*, p. 225.

'unambiguously social actions'.[288] Although their analysis usefully frames the communication and community building potential of the blogosphere, by reducing the blog to a 'completely' social platform, they ignore the multi-modal nature of the narratives, and specifically the literary element of blog narratives that this thesis draws attention to. The concept of actions being 'unambiguously' social is also problematic in its assumption that these behaviours are purely limited to social interaction, when the sociability they infer is present in a variety of mediums. By viewing these social actions in opposition to an 'online diary', they undermine the plethora of different forms of self-representation that the diary/memoir genre symbolises, much of which could be read as sociable in its presentation. This thesis argues that blog narratives follow on from a trajectory of life-writing that includes diaries, and therefore rejects the notion of them as entirely social in nature. The social aspect of the blogosphere is instead considered as one of several elements of the online platform that mark its development from previous autobiographical forms. For some, the concept of sociability within the platform trivialises the narratives that are produced. However, the primary source bloggers demonstrate how the sociability of the blogosphere allows unique opportunities for users to be able to engage with their readers and fellow bloggers; to communicate, or share information and opinions, in a way that has not been possible in previous self-representative forms.

Anonymous blogger *Evening Light* epitomises this sense of social sharing in her 'About Me', as she says to her readers: 'I'd offer you a coffee, but it'd be cold before it reached you – so words will have to do'.[289] This offer is indicative of the relationship she feels she has established with her readers, which echoes that of an offline friendship. By physically distancing her readers, she also emphasises the limited online space within which this communication will take place, without diminishing the intimacy of the shared time. The social aspect of blogs also echoes offline patterns of social interaction, in that different posts will be more relevant and of more interest to different readers. For example, non-anonymous blogger *Not Just A Mum Blog* states at the beginning of a post about contraception, 'male readers you may want to come back tomorrow when the topic is less sensitive shall we say'.[290] Here she implies that the post is directly aimed at a female readership, within what she perceives to be a mixed gender audience. The use of the figurative term 'sensitive' is also loaded with connotations of privacy. The redundancy of this statement is evident in the open nature of the platform, but the author's choice to still include this direct comment to her

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[288] Nardi *et al.*, p. 223.
[289] Evening Light, *About Me* <http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/about/> [Accessed 13th June 2014]
[290] Not Just A Mum Blog, *I Want My Wife Back* (9th December 2013) <http://notjustamumblog.com/2013/09/12/i-want-my-wife-back/>

readership suggests a deliberate consideration of her reader's preferences. The concept of readers 'coming back' also implies a sense of physicality to their interaction with the blog narrative, as a space they can come and go from. This highlights the active role of the reader as they move in, out, and in between blog narratives; deciding on their own level and type of engagement. In the context of autobiographical narratives, Anderson argues in her 2011 text that the social aspect of blogging could provide a new way for authors to imagine their sense of self, stating that: 'The internet provides a way for the private self to negotiate a relation with social space and with others'.[291] Her analysis utilises the same concept of the blogging platform as a 'space' which users can exist within that *Not Just A Mum Blog* highlights in her text, emphasising the cultural value of online communities.

The engagement of readers is reliant on their perception of the blog narrative's authenticity, as the 'believability' of an author's online persona is shown to be central to a blog's popularity.[292] Although most people assume anonymity to be a feature that would undermine the perceived authenticity of a blog, several studies have found that the anonymous status of the author has very little to do with the extent to which the readers perceive the self-representation as 'real', and therefore the way in which they engage with the narrative. In her 2007 research, Karlsson highlights how readers instead look for 'consistency' in the continued representation of self being mediated through the narrative, often judged on the regular reading of a blog narrative.[293] By fostering a long-term engagement with a blog, readers establish a level of investment in the narrative voice, as the increased familiarity means a higher level of identification and affinity with the author. Karlsson argues that:

> The rhythmical continuous consumption of the life represented online forms a significant part of the readers' reflections on the ways in which the diary blog hooks into their own daily experience. The continuous juxtaposition of the readers' own subjective experience and the experience depicted in the dairy blog invites a referential, relational reading mode.[294]

The relational or empathetic affiliation with a narrative that Karlsson outlines is not unique to the blogging platform, but the potential regularity and longevity of the engagement make it unlike the consumption of printed texts. Therefore, the communication between a blogger and their readers represents increased possibilities for an intimate and personal relationship. A key element of this engagement is the unique way in which blog narratives are accessed by the readers. This can be through a subscription, so a reader receives an immediate email

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[291] Linda Anderson, *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom,* 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 124.
[292] The concept of authenticity is explored in more detail in the Introduction, pp. 13-17.
[293] Karlsson (2007), p. 148.
[294] *Ibid.*

as soon as a post is published, a weekly email containing all that week's updates, or a deliberate visit to the home page of the blogger whenever, and however often, the reader chooses. The prevalence of Internet enabled smart phones and tablets also means that these points of access are not confined to the home or office, but can be mobile and constant. The possibilities of access that a blog represents are within the control of the reader, and this highlights how easily a reader can become deeply engaged and familiar with a narrative should they choose to.

The relationships established through blogs can even be seen to extend the boundaries of their virtual beginnings, as online relationships are developed offline. This is most commonly seen in non-anonymous primary source blog narratives, as the individuals are representing a persona that aligns with their offline lived reality, and can therefore be directly replicated face to face. As non-anonymous blogger *Dorky Mum* describes in her narrative; over time 'friends in the computer' can make the transition to 'real life friends'.[295] She even suggests that pre-existing online relationships can make offline relationships easier, stating: 'There's a level of intimacy with blogging friends – an existing knowledge you have from reading their posts – which means that when you meet in person there's a level of comfort and intimacy that makes small talk unnecessary'.[296] What she emphasises is the power of the confessional narrative in establishing a connection between a blog author and their readers. Which, when translated into offline life, allows for an unsaid connection between her and the people who have engaged with her online self-representation. This process is also described by anonymous blogger *Quarter For Her Thoughts* in her 'About Me', as she states: 'Many friendships have also been born here. I've sent more emails, more tweets, and planned more vacations to meet these incredible people, than I have with any other friends throughout my life'.[297] By representing these different online communication outlets as a list, she depicts them as something that has accumulated, echoing the building of intimacy between individuals. This serves to further emphasise the face to face meeting as the climax of these relationships. Unlike *Dorky Mum, Quarter For Her Thoughts*' anonymity means that extending her friendships beyond the blogosphere requires her to share her offline persona with her online friends. However, she is not the only blogger who chooses to break this barrier, as online to offline friendships are also represented by anonymous blogger *Fertility Doll,* who describes meeting other anonymous fertility bloggers face-to-face. Post-anonymous blogger *What Kate Did Next* describes how she consciously

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[295] Dorky Mum, *10 Things I Loved About BritMums Live* (3rd July 2013) <http://dorkymum.wordpress.com/2013/07/03/10-things-i-loved-about-britmums-live/>
[296] Dorky Mum, *My month without social media* (17th February 2014) <http://dorkymum.wordpress.com/2014/02/17/my-month-without-social-media/>
[297] Quarter For Her Thoughts, *About Me* <http://quarterforherthoughts.com/about/> [Accessed 13th June 2014]

sought to translate 'virtual friendships into real life ones' when she realised the amount of support she was receiving from the online world. She tells readers: 'It's not that I think online friendships are necessarily less 'real', in some ways they can be more intense, more intimate than our face to face contacts. It is conversely easier to expose yourself while hiding behind a screen'.[298] Here, she highlights the possibilities of sharing and confessional behaviour offered by anonymous, and non-anonymous online self-representations, based on the computer mediated nature of the platform. All of the primary source bloggers, regardless of their anonymous status, can utilise this ability to hide 'behind a screen'. In the context of this thesis, this is seen to provide users with more agency over their writing, as they perceive themselves to be free from observation and scrutiny, and therefore able to share more through their narrative. By representing this perspective through her text, *What Kate Did Next* also emphasises how she views the online world as a point of access for relationships and communication which she can incorporate into her offline world; an outlook which is also reflected in her fluid approach towards her own anonymity.

The level of engagement between a blogger and their readers is not only evident in positively framed interactions, but also through the ability to receive and accept commentary from their audience that could be considered critical. The opportunities that the Internet presents for communication and interaction have recently been tarnished by the proliferation of trolling and flaming behaviour online; and there are many examples of bullying, threats and abuse that are directed at innocent users, and especially aimed at female voices.[299] However, these attacks are often made by individuals in isolation and directed at women in the public eye. They therefore represent a different, and more problematic form online interaction than that contained within the primary source blogs.[300] As with friendships and relationships offline, criticism can be a key part of online interactions, especially if the feedback is presented as constructive. When they have engaged with a blog narrative over a long period, readers construct themselves as 'knowing' an author, and therefore as entitled to utilise the social aspect of the platform to give advice or pass comment on their narrative. This element of the author/reader relationship is highlighted by post-anonymous blogger *Seattle Poly Chick* who states directly to her audience: 'I love that you read and like and

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[298] What Kate Did Next, *THE REAL THING* (5th May 2014)
<http://whatkatedidnext.wordpress.com/2014/05/05/5696/>
[299] For example, the abuse of feminist campaigner Caroline Criado Perez – e.g. Simon Hattenstone, 'Caroline Criado-Perez: Twitter has enabled people to behave in a way they wouldn't face to face', *The Guardian,* 4th August 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/aug/04/caroline-criado-perez-twitter-rape-threats> [Accessed 6th August 2015]
[300] The issue of Internet abuse, and specifically the targeting of women online, is something that warrants further research in terms of female users, and women's engagement with computer technology. However, it is not something that is explicitly experienced or addressed by the primary source bloggers of this thesis, and is therefore not discussed in detail within this research.

comment and I love your emails and support and encouragement. I even love it when you call me on my stuff sometimes'.[301] Although this highlights various forms of interaction, her acknowledgement of the colloquial concept of her readers 'calling' her out on 'stuff' indicates that although her visible connections are generally supportive and enthusiastic, readers have also taken the time to express their dislike or disagreement with what she has written through other 'off-stage' forms of communication. Within this description, the author deliberately differentiates the negative commentary from her positive feedback, but still explicitly refers to it as part of the interaction she enjoys. The positive acceptance of reader criticism is also demonstrated by non-anonymous blogger *Tracey Louise,* who states in one post: 'Somebody picked up on my comment about betting in my last post, and asked if I was a gambler, asking if I had a problem'.[302] Within an offline context, this kind of judgemental comment from a stranger may be considered as interfering and insulting. However, within her narrative *Tracey Louise* frames this commentary as well-meaning, and chooses to answer their worries directly. This takes the 'off-stage' commentary she has received back onto the stage, as she makes it part of her next narrative. She then writes about the experience in a way that suggests the behaviour is more acceptable from those who exist within her online community, as they are invested in her narrative and therefore 'know' her. Both examples demonstrate that not all of the comments received by the primary source bloggers are positive and supportive. However, the negative commentary attracted by these authors comes from within their recognised readership, and is therefore received very differently than negative comments would be from unfamiliar users. Given this context, it is not considered as an example of the vitriolic commentary, often known as 'trolling', suffered by many women within the online world.

Connectedness and Community

The increased level of connection between online users is what creates the environment of an online community. The concept of 'virtual communities' was first coined by Howard Rheingold in 1994 to describe the 'social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace'.[303] This conceptualisation highlights the potential of computer mediated communication to be personal. However, by

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[301] Seattle Poly Chick, *2013 In Review* (31st December 2013)
<http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/12/31/2013-in-review/>
[302] Tracy Louise, *Goodbye Les* (3rd September 2013)
<http://traceylouise.wordpress.com/2013/09/03/goodbye-les/>
[303] Howard Rheingold, 'A Slice of Life in My Virtual Community' in *Global Networks: Computers and International Communication,* ed. by Linda M. Harasim (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1994), pp. 57-80 (pp. 57-58).

aligning it with a normative concept of offline behaviour, Rheingold's definition fails to acknowledge the full potential of computer mediated communication. Given the developments that have occurred in the online world since his text was written, the idea of online communities used within this thesis must go beyond this conceptualisation and acknowledge the alternative possibilities for interaction that the Internet now presents. The *real* potential of an online community lies in its ability to offer users the chance to connect with someone who they do not 'know' in in a physical offline sense; and to form bonds and relationships between users regardless of their geographic location, age or circumstance. These possibilities are why the social networking technology of Web 2.0 is often described by journalists and researchers alike, as 'making the world smaller', by connecting users who otherwise would have never met, and utilising the technology to bridge gaps in geography and time.[304] This is a phenomenon that is often referred to as 'the global village', a term coined by communication theorist Marshall McLuhan.[305] His 1962 text, which came before the rise in Internet technology, and specifically the Web 2.0 technology of the 1990s, is often said to have predicted the expansion of communication mediums as an extension of consciousness. What he was actually referring to was earlier visual culture, for example the printing press and televisions, whose rise in popularity meant that the majority of society consumed the same information, allowing a 'village-like' mind-set to apply to the entire world. The technological developments associated with the Internet have taken this concept several steps further, and simultaneously reflect the 'global village' that McLuhan described, whilst also representing a diversity of information from multiple sources and perspectives. Blogs are a huge component of the Web 2.0 phenomenon that facilitated the development of this. Contemporary ideas about blogging, such as Baumer *et al.*'s research, argue that the idea of being *part* of a blog relies on the communicative aspects of 'consistent readership, a sense of community, or a feeling of connectedness', all of which rely on the elements of interactivity highlighted above.[306] These conceptualisations of the blogosphere's audience potential highlight the context into which the primary source blog authors are choosing to share their narrative, and therefore contribute to the exploration of the content authors produce.

The connections facilitated by the online platform are often made between users who are of the same opinion, or have been through the same experience; but who would not have had the chance to connect in the offline world. Theorists such as Zizi Papacharissi

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[304] For example: Oliver Burkeman, 'Forty Years of the Internet: How the World Changed Forever', *The Guardian*, 23rd October 2009. <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2009/oct/23/internet-40-history-arpanet> [Accessed 12th March 2016]
[305] Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 31.
[306] Baumer *et al.*, p. 8.

argue that this represents a 'tribalisation' of the Internet, as those who represent certain ideologies are brought together as a collective, and the online world is therefore splintered into different subgroups, or 'tribes'.[307] However, this thesis argues that these multiple 'public sphericules' represent a unique opportunity for women to share their stories in what they perceive to be a safe public domain.[308] Martin and Valenti argue that this 'relationship building online' can allow women 'to feel less alone, to feel like they're part of a community'.[309] The fact that their narrative exists within a community or 'sphericule' is seen to increase the agency with which the female authors write, as they construct their online communities as supportive, which encourages them to share elements of themselves that they describe as having to moderate in the offline world. By engaging in these online communities, women therefore create powerful spaces for themselves online. These spaces can be seen in various platforms across the Internet, but are most prevalent in the female dominated blogosphere.[310] This desire for community is explicitly addressed by non-anonymous blogger *A Life Unexamined* as she frames her own blog as a protected environment. She specifically tells readers, in the side bar of her blog home page, 'This blog is a safe space for feminists of all identities and intersections'.[311] This highlights the focus of her narrative, which is the promotion of women's issues and ideas, and her blog is therefore represented as a safe space for women to write and comment within, without being exclusively made up of female voices. The supportive interaction between different users on her blog also represents how the sharing of self-representative narratives can build an online community. The community aspect of the blogging platform is shown to be particularly important for women, as it encourages those who may not have shared their story offline to do so through their blog, meaning that they gain a sense of agency over their narrative self-representation.

The power of online communities can also be seen in post-anonymous blogger *Mum and More*'s description of the support she received throughout her pregnancy, and then as a new mother. She admits to her readers:

> With those ladies I shared everything. I shared my fears and dreams, I shared far too much information about what was happening with my body, and I read theirs. At times I think I would have gone quite mad if it hadn't been for those ladies. Say what

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[307] Zizi Papacharissi 'The Internet as Public Sphere' in *The Information Society Reader* ed. by Frank Webster (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 379-382 (p. 384).

[308] The concept of the public sphere being split into public 'sphericules' is used by theorists such as Todd Gitlin to explore the communities within television audiences, e.g. Todd Gitlin, 'Public Sphere or Public Sphericules?' in *Media, Ritual and Identity* ed. by Tamar Liebes and James Curran (Routledge: London, 1998), pp. 175-202.

[309] Martin and Valenti, p. 11.

[310] For example: *The Everyday Sexism Project* <http://www.everydaysexism.com/> & *A Room of Our Own* <http://aroomofourown.org/> [Accessed 18th September 2014]

[311] A Life Unexamined <http://alifeunexamined.wordpress.com/>

you will about online communities, but having fifty comments following a question or fear all offering advice and reassurance is priceless.[312]

By choosing to share her experiences within the online platform, and communicate with other women who were going through the same things, the author describes how she was able to establish a network of caring and empathetic readers. Her description also alludes to the common conceptualisation of online communities as negative, and specifically the perception of parenting communities as hosting disruptive and anti-social exchanges between users. As with previous examples, the way in which *Mum and More* describes her own experiences of online communities shows that characterising all such platforms negatively presents a reductive view of their potential.

Many of the primary source bloggers describe the opportunity to engage with an online community as something that encouraged them to enter the blogosphere in the first place, and this generally supportive atmosphere is fostered by their readers. This is demonstrated by anonymous blogger *29 to Life* when she uses her narrative to reflect upon what she has recently been through with her ex-boyfriend. She writes: 'Things haven't been easy, but a lot of you readers have been with me the whole way along the salty trail of tears, triumphs and straight up dating and life blunders. I'm grateful'.[313] To her, the supportive nature of the blogosphere is about a feeling of having a constant listener whenever she may choose to share her thoughts and feelings within a blog post. The comments and feedback she receives act as sympathy or encouragement, and contribute to a sense of solidarity between the author and the wider blogging community; as if the readers are going through her experiences with her. This sense of connection is also highlighted by post-anonymous blogger *What Kate Did Next*, who speaks directly to her readers, stating: 'Thank you for letting me know that you are out there and that even if you cannot always agree with me or understand, you are hearing me'.[314] This concept of being 'heard' is regularly used by blog authors to describe their engagement with the medium, and reflect their relationship with their readers. For *What Kate Did Next* this engagement is focused on direct interactions, and she therefore constructs her readers as more than a 'ghost audience'. Anonymous blogger *Evening Light* also describes a similar connection with her readers, stating: 'Even if we've never met in the flesh, here you are now, reading my words and connecting with me through them'.[315] Despite the computer mediated nature of the communication, the process of other

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[312] Mum and More, *Operation Christmas Pudding* (21st October 2013)
<http://roseandmumandmore.com/2013/10/21/operation-christmas-pudding/>
[313] 29 to Life, *Absinthe and Exes: The Reunion Show* (5th August 2013)
<http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/08/05/absinthe-and-exes-the-reunion-show/>
[314] What Kate Did Next, *WHY? BECAUSE WE LIKE YOU!* (12th March 2014)
<http://whatkatedidnext.wordpress.com/2014/03/12/why-because-we-like-you/>
[315] Evening Light, *Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise* (26th October 2013)
<http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/2013/10/26/softly-as-in-a-morning-sunrise/>

users reading and commenting on her narrative allows her to feel connected to them, which in turn encourages a sense of community and support. The way the primary source bloggers construct themselves as being 'heard' through their blog also constructs the offline world as an environment in which they are *not* being heard. This could be seen as indicative of the patriarchal nature of contemporary society, in which some women are still marginalised. Through the creation of online communities, primarily made up of female users, the blogosphere could therefore be seen to offer a platform where the stories of more women's lives can be 'heard', and the mainstream representations of women broadened.

The online relationships fostered by the primary source bloggers are represented by some as a direct substitute for a connection the author is lacking in their offline life. For example, anonymous blogger *1 Year of Single* writes: 'Hey Kids! Normally I'd use the last 10% of cell's battery power to send a photo of the concert that I'm seeing with Jen to the guy I'm dating, but since I'm not dating anyone, here ya [sic] go'.[316] The blog is focused on the author's journey through a year of 'singledom', and therefore her description of a lack of romantic relationship highlights the role of the blog, and the readers of the blog, in her navigation of this experience. The way in which the post is framed also emphasises a level of intimacy she feels with her blogging community; the use of the phrase 'Hey kids!' appears affectionate, and the privilege inferred in the use of her 'last 10%' of mobile phone battery implies a prioritisation of this blogging communication, perhaps at the expense of other offline friends. The idea of utilising a supportive online community can also be seen in the post-anonymous blog of *Seattle Poly Chick*, particularly when she was writing her narrative anonymously. She repeatedly represents the supportive and understanding space of her blogging community as a contrast to the hostility she is receiving in her offline life. This is demonstrated by the reassurance and affirmation she receives when she describes the breakdown of her marriage, and the realisation that her husband replaced her 'for being a whore'.[317] This experience of rejection is also evident at a later point in the narrative when she describes the breakdown of her relationship with her housemates, who are unhappy that they can regularly hear her having sex. *Seattle Poly Chick* describes a conversation with her housemate, in which she states: 'She was trying to explain and kept saying "so many men" and "so much sex". She wasn't trying to be shaming but it felt like shaming'.[318] These examples highlight the ways in which the author constructs her offline lived reality as a place where she often faces criticism for her lifestyle choices, and therefore feels compelled to edit

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[316] 1 Year of Single, *Yes I'm Saving all my charge for you…* (24th July 2013) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/07/24/saving-all-my-charge-for-you/>

[317] Seattle Poly Chick, *He Admitted he Replaced Me for Being a Whore* (18th June 2013) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/06/18/he-admitted-he-replaced-me-for-being-a-whore/>

[318] Seattle Poly Chick, *A Great Divide* (23rd October 2013) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/10/23/a-great-divide/>

her behaviour to adhere to social norms and expectations; for example, responding to her housemates by changing her sexual behaviour, 'being quiet and playing music'.[319] The fact that she is discussing these problems online shows that, for her, the blogosphere is acting as a safe space in which she can be honest about her actions to an extent which is not possible in some of her offline circumstances, without fearing a negative response from the online users that she is aware read her blog. It is also constructed as a form of dissent against the attempts of others to control her behaviour offline. This highlights the potential that the blogging medium has to facilitate 'free speech', allowing users to write and publish their own experiences and opinions, unconstrained by the social expectations of their offline context and the pressure to adhere to the accepted norm. It also emphasises the blogger's ability to create an accepting audience for her narrative by writing within a public sphericule that accepts her polyamory. The use of the blogosphere for 'free speech' is highlighted by previous studies to be primarily a trait of anonymous blog narratives, as they allow a blogger to explore anything they want to in their narrative without the accountability of attaching their offline persona to the views.[320] However, within the analysis of this thesis, the non-anonymous primary source bloggers also demonstrate an element of freedom through their writing. Their narratives therefore demonstrate the ability of the blogosphere to provide *all* users with an opportunity to share their own ideas, and produce a narrative that is solely their own opinion, uninterrupted by other people's views and ideas. This thesis argues that the concept of 'free speech' within the blogging medium is therefore closely associated with the concept of agency, as it indicates a narrative that is controlled and executed by the author themselves.

Anonymous blogger *Fertility Doll* explicitly presents the desire for support and freedom of expression as motivators for her choosing to enter the blogosphere. She writes in her 'About Me': 'I decided to start blogging about it because I need a group of women and men who understood how distressing this process is'.[321] Although framed in a similar way to the experiences of other primary source blogs, the online community and public sphericule that *Fertility Doll* is part of is unique in its construction, as it is largely made up of other female bloggers struggling with infertility and trying to get pregnant. This makes it a very fragile network, undermined by the jealousy experienced when someone gets a 'BFP' [big fat positive].[322] Within her narrative, *Fertility Doll* repeatedly refers to the problems of this online community, specifically describing the conflict caused by other infertility bloggers falling

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[319] *Ibid.*
[320] As outlined in the Introduction, pp. 1-26.
[321] Fertility Doll, *About the Typist* (May 2013) <http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/about/>
[322] Fertility Doll, *Recent BFP? Don't Feel Guilty* (20th June 2013) <http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/2013/06/20/recent-bfp-dont-feel-guilty/>

pregnant. She tells readers: 'I know lots of women who get their BFPs wonder whether they should continue blogging and while yes it is hard for some of us to see the updates, we do have the option to look away or in some cases unfollow'. [323] This indicates that although the network of bloggers appears supportive, the community can be fickle and potentially reject people if they achieve the 'ultimate aim' and become pregnant. This is an example of the relational aspects of reading that are perceived as underpinning online communities. When all the bloggers have the common goal of infertility and are all connected by the shared interests of trying to get pregnant, then the community is strong. However, when a member of the community becomes pregnant, they no longer adhere to this criteria, and the affinity and connection between users is therefore lost. It is also indicative of the way in which the 'infertile' bloggers are using the blogging community to gain the support they desire during this difficult time, so their blogs therefore become redundant once they are pregnant. They may therefore choose to transfer their blog into a different online network, such as a parenting community, or remove themselves from the blogosphere completely. The community within which *Fertility Doll* writes is therefore represented as unstable, and less of a safe space than other online communities of female voices. The attitude *Fertility Doll* depicts towards these other bloggers highlights how her own engagement in the community functions, and specifically the ease with which she feels she can break the online bonds she has established. She recommends to readers the option of 'looking away' from pregnant bloggers, or in specific cases unfollowing the blog all together. In an offline context, the idea of looking away or removing eye contact suggests a reduction in intimacy or a removal of attention from the object of the gaze. By choosing to remove her online gaze from other bloggers who have successfully conceived and are therefore posting material she finds upsetting, *Fertility Doll* is able to disengage herself from their narratives. This prioritises the position of the viewer as the subject of the action, and reduces the blog content to an object which can be discarded. In the context of a performance, *Fertility Doll* is in this case occupying the position of an audience member, who instead of joining the actor on stage, turns her back on the performance, or leaves the theatre all together. The bloggers choosing to self-represent within this context may therefore consider the blogosphere as less of a safe space, and subsequently write with a decreased sense of agency, as they know their narrative is vulnerable to rejection from the wider community.

Despite their different circumstances, all these examples of community rely on a sense of familiarity that comes from continued readership and repeated engagement, which makes the 'global village' of the platform appear less intimidating. Anonymous blogger *Quarter For Her Thoughts* even goes to the extent of limiting some of her posts to what she

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[323] *Ibid.*

describes as 'legitimate' readers. She creates a specific 'Protected Posts' Tab on her blog homepage to address her decision, informing readers:

> You may have noticed that a few of my posts are labelled "protected". If you'd like the password, please request it by emailing me at intriguemeblogs@gmail.com and providing me with either your blog link or a little bit of information about yourself.[324]

The fact that the blog is anonymous indicates why the blogger may be protective over her narrative, given the possibilities of audience represented by the blogosphere. However, by making it exclusive in this way she risks alienating other users who have chosen to be anonymous, and may not want to provide her with the 'information' about themselves that she requests. The choice to only make *some* of her posts password protected also complicates the relationship between the author and her readers, as the self-representation is more difficult to access and appears disjointed to users who cannot view the hidden material. Some users may not feel they can fully engage with the blogger when some information is being hidden from them, or from others.

Non-anonymous blogger *Psychobabble* demonstrates a similarly problematic negotiation of the blogosphere's huge potential readership when one of her posts is featured on *Wordpress'* recommendation list for blog readers, 'Freshly Pressed'.[325] This exposure naturally increases the traffic on her blog, and the featured post in particular, which attracted over two hundred and fifty comments.[326] However, the author describes being uncomfortable with this level of attention, confessing to readers in her next post:

> Being Fped [sic: Freshly Pressed] is an honor [sic] and a part of me is excited – maybe it'll give me that push to start really writing again – but it's also a vulnerable place to be. I'll get a lot of exposure from all different kinds of people and that can be awesome but it brings about just that – the feeling of being exposed.[327]

This emphasises the dichotomy between the public nature of blogging, and the feeling of protection a blogger feels within their established online community. *Psychobabble* describes how she is worried about the 'different kinds of people' that might read her blog and respond, constructed as a contrast to her regular readers, whom she feels a sense of familiarity and safety with. She represents the online community as a layer of privacy around herself, despite her generally identifiable status, as she perceives it as a buffer between her narrative and the wider online world. The self-representation constructed in this post

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[324] Quarter For Her Thoughts, *Password Protected Posts* Tab
<http://quarterforherthoughts.com/password-protected-posts/>
[325] 'Freshly Pressed', *Wordpress* <http://wordpress.com/fresh/> [Accessed 12th September 2014]
[326] Psychobabble*, Post Wedding Blues* (5th August 2013)
<http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2013/08/05/post-wedding-blues/> [Information Correct June 2014]
[327] Psychobabble, *Transitional Periods Are Hard* (3rd September 2013)
<http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2013/09/03/transitional-periods-are-hard/>)

exposes how she both desires and fears the readers of the blogosphere. It also highlights the importance of having a sense of community for bloggers, who feel their narrative is vulnerable when exposed to the scrutiny of a wider audience.

The possibilities of audience online represent a huge number and variety of people, which may not represent the supportive atmosphere that *Psychobabble* feels she has around her. Many of the users who regularly comment on her posts are female, and therefore this 'different audience' that she fears, could represent a gendered division between commentary that she accepts and appreciates, and feedback that she is wary of. Contemporary feminist and cyberfeminist theorists, such as Anne Goulding and Rachel Spacey, consider women-only or majority websites, forums and blogs to be a way of making women feel more welcome online, which they argue acts 'as a counter culture to patriarchal sexist cultures' such as the problems of male trolling, or flaming.[328] This can be read into *Psychobabble*'s experience of vulnerability as her narrative is elevated from a small stage surrounded by an audience of female voices, to a much larger stage where she is visible to a much greater and more intimidating audience. However, in contrast to this understanding of female spaces as supportive, research by Pedersen and Smithson argues that 'a women dominated site seems to offer its users the freedom to adopt what have previously been identified as male styles of online communication, including aggressive language, swearing and flaming'.[329] Their research suggests that instead of avoiding confrontation and aggressive interactions, female only spaces online could actually encourage more women to become involved in such exchanges. This is often represented as negative, as it disrupts the sisterhood ideology often associated with second-wave feminist ideas of female togetherness, and represents a form of female behaviour outside of the gendered social norms. However, this thesis argues that the confrontational exchanges demonstrated by the women in Pedersen and Smithson's research could alternatively show that by inhabiting women-only spaces online, some female users may feel able to express themselves in ways that they have not previously felt able, or entitled to, in an offline context.

Comments and Communication

The comment section of a blog is seen as an opportunity for users to continue the discussion or topic raised in the original blog post, allowing for direct communication and feedback. However, facilitating outside commentary by providing a comment section does not necessarily ensure any interaction with the wider online world. For instance, Susan C.

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[328] Anne Goulding and Rachel Spacey, 'Women and the Information Society: Barriers and Participation', *International Federation of Library Associations Journal,* 29:1 (2003), 33-40 (p. 39).
[329] Pedersen and Smithson, p. 97.

Herring, Lois Ann Scheidt, Inna Kouper, and Elijah Wright's research, based on a longitudinal content analysis of four hundred and fifty seven blogs between March 2003 and April 2004, observed that: 'the number of comments per entry fluctuates, but also remains low overall (0.4, 0.6, 0.4)', which indicates that the modal number of comments on an individual blog post was zero.[330] Although this would seem to suggest that commenting is less common than the notions of online community imply, the primary source blogs captured for this thesis show that commenting is still common practice. For example, a post by anonymous blogger *Fertility Doll* about her first experience with IVF (In Vitro Fertilisation) gained forty-two comments, and a blog by non-anonymous blogger *Psychobabble* about dealing with sadness gained sixty-eight comments.[331] One thing that is reductive about the conclusion reached by Herring *et al.*'s study is that they use the number of comments received on the blogs over the course of the year to denote the level of community and reader interaction as a whole. The implication is that a lack of comments, followers, or readers means that a blog has not achieved its purpose of self-representation as there is nobody engaging with the narrative. This is an idea which is undermined by the wider possibilities for communication and interaction available on a blog. As highlighted above, the possibilities for self-expression within a blog narrative exist regardless of the level of visible social interaction.[332]

The importance of providing the ability to comment on posts is not solely focused on the author's desire for feedback, but also on expectations of the reader to be able to react and respond to what they have read. This is often encouraged by the blog author, and in some cases authors actively request comments on their blog posts by posing direct questions to their readers. Anonymous blogger *29 to Life*, ends each of her posts with a question or questions of the day, for example:

> Question (s) of the day: for people in relationships did you have a definitive starting point? Or did it just happen and you both basically knew you transitioned into relationshipdom [sic]? Do you have to speak it for it to be real and for everyone to be on the same page?[333]

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[330] Susan C. Herring, Lois Ann Scheidt, Inna Kouper, and Elijah Wright, 'A Longitudinal Content Analysis of Weblogs: 2003-2004' in *Blogging, Citizenship and the Future of Media*, ed. by M. Tremayne (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 3-20 (p. 7).

[331] Fertility Doll, *My Imperfect First IVF Cycle,* (16th November 2013) <http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/2013/11/16/my-imperfect-first-ivf/> & Psychobabble*, Tolerating Sadness* (11th November 2013) <http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2013/11/11/tolerating-sadness/>

[332] The opportunities for non-visible interaction between a blogger and their readers are also outlined in the Introduction of the thesis, pp. 1-26.

[333] 29 to Life, *When is the Start of a Relationship?* (21st October 2013) <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/10/21/when-is-the-start-of-a-relationship/>

This is a direct invitation for her readers to reply with their own thoughts and opinions about a specific area of the post, and therefore ultimately about the blog author themselves. The author is deliberately trying to open a line of communication between herself and her readers, by providing them with a sanctioned opportunity to express their own opinions. The author is also seeking reassurance from this communication, by requesting answers and information that she suggests she is not getting in her offline life. This advice seeking represents one of the social aspects of blogs that Nardi *et al.* suggest differentiates the medium from traditional forms of life-writing. It also shows how the construction of *29 to Life*'s narrative is reliant on the participation of her readers, from who she desires contribution and collaboration. A similar use of the comment function is also demonstrated by non-anonymous blogger *A Life Unexamined,* who uses it to continue the discussions she starts in the body of the narrative, encouraging feedback from her readers. In one post she asks: 'Is there anything I've missed that you think is important to note? Please feel free to leave a comment and share your thoughts on this post!'.[334] These methods of encouragement are often successful on both *29 to Life* and *A Life Unexamined*'s blogs, as they prompt discussion and both bloggers often receive a high number of comments on their posts.

However, for some of the primary source bloggers, even directly questioning their readers does not prompt any responses. Non-anonymous blogger *Not Just A Mum Blog* often includes questions or queries such as: 'Where do you go to get away from it all? Where is your simple place?', but does not receive any comments in response.[335] A blog can be consumed by an audience without any obvious evidence of connectedness, and from an external perspective this analysis cannot verify whether the primary source blogs receive feedback from their readers 'off-stage' or not. Despite the differing levels of comments, the analysis demonstrates similarities in the language used by bloggers to address their audience. The majority of the primary source bloggers refer to their readers and specifically use the second person personal pronoun of 'you' to identify them as individuals. By personifying the readership in this way, the blogs demonstrate the personal nature of the author/reader relationships that can develop through computer mediated communication; something that is constructed as present even without the visible connectedness of comments. The relationship *29 to Life* has with her readers is further emphasised by the author repeatedly referring to her 'blog family', which implies a level of intimacy and

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[334] A Life Unexamined*, Fixed and Fluid Sexual Identities – An Ace Perspective* (3rd October 2013) <http://alifeunexamined.wordpress.com/2013/10/03/fixed-and-fluid-sexual-identities-from-an-ace-perspective/>
[335] Not Just A Mum Blog*, The Farm* (27th June 2013) <http://notjustmumblog.com/2013/06/27/the-farm/>

community beyond the conventional dynamic of author and reader.[336] This conversational language is also seen in the narrative of non-anonymous blogger *I've Never Robbed A Bank*, who receives relatively few comments, and has several posts which have no comments at all. Despite this, she consistently refers to 'people' being excited, wanting her to do certain things on her blog, and 'people' enjoying the videos she posts; in much the same way as *29 to Life*.[337] Although there is a lack of visible connectedness such as comments on her blog, the textual construction of an ongoing author/reader relationship suggests there is off-stage interaction taking place, or at least that the author wants to present as though there is.

By providing a comment facility, the authors are presenting readers with the option of contributing their own ideas to the narrative, which can then be perpetuated by the author themselves, even if they do not directly request reader response. This can be seen on *Fertility Doll's* anonymous blog, *Seattle Poly Chick*'s post-anonymous blog, and *Psychobabble*'s non-anonymous blog. All of these authors receive several comments on their posts, almost all of which they reply to; making the point to thank the reader for their response, which in turn encourages more. To one commenter *Seattle Poly Chick* states: 'I'm glad you read and glad you commented. I always wonder what people are thinking, and it's nice to meet you'.[338] This provides encouragement to the reader who commented, and to all of her other readers to whom this comment will be visible, to comment again. The statement also indicates that *Seattle Poly Chick* considers the other members of her blogging community as people she can 'meet' and therefore count as acquaintances, much like *29 to Life*'s blogging 'family'. This interaction is what builds a blogging community, and the establishment of such a network is exemplified in the way *Seattle Poly Chick* textually constructs her reader's reactions to a blog post by 'Great Date' (her former offline partner) in which he writes negatively about her. She describes how 'something like 8 people emailed it to me', adding, 'I appreciate all of you looking out for me'.[339] This is an example of the invisible ways in which the interaction between a blogger and their readers can take place 'off-stage'. *Seattle Poly Chick* perceives this reader behaviour as helpful and reassuring, stating: 'Bloggers can be pretty amazing [sic] supportive'.[340]

[336] 29 to Life, *"Naturally" Supportive????* (13th November 2013) <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/11/13/naturally-supportive/>
[337] I've Never Robbed A Bank, *This Again* (12th April 2014) <http://corzgalore.org/2014/04/12/this-again/>)
[338] Seattle Poly Chick, *He Admitted he Replaced me for Being a Whore* (18th June 2013) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/06/18/he-admitted-he-replaced-me-for-being-a-whore/ >
[339] Seattle Poly Chick, *My Answer and Best Wishes* (1st July 2013) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/07/01/my-answer-and-best-wishes/>
[340] Seattle Poly Chick, *Letter to HER* (2nd July 2013) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/07/02/letter-to-her/>

This level of interaction is developed further in the network of *Psychobabble*'s non-anonymous blog. When she is moving to a new city she suggests to another blogger, who has commented on her post about living locally, about meeting face-to-face. She states directly to the other user: 'I would love to meet up once the dust settles in my life…. [sic] which will be like never. So we can meet when I am still a hot mess and that will be fine'. [341] She also accepts another blogger's invitation to attend an offline blog meet up, after he commented on a blog post and invited her. This goes beyond the loci of audience that is identified within online communities, and represents a new level of intimacy being fostered within the blogosphere. The key difference between the way in which *Seattle Poly Chick* and *Psychobabble* exist within their online communities is the level of anonymity originally chosen by each blogger. The non-anonymous nature of *Psychobabble*'s blog, which includes regular photos of herself and her husband alongside the narrative updates, allows readers of her blog readers to gain a physical familiarity with her alongside the textually constructed self-representation. This renders the author more accessible to readers as they 'know' the author in a way that goes above and beyond their textually constructed self; therefore, the online community can more easily be seen to transition into an offline setting.

<u>The Agency of Readers</u>

The interactivity of the platform and the potential for online communities demonstrates the elevated position of the reader in the contemporary blogosphere. The audience now have the potential to influence the author's blogging behaviour, affect their self-representation and even to generate narrative. This can particularly be seen in the primary source blogger's awareness of new readers approaching their blog for the first time. However, what is key to examining the active role of the reader within the construction of the blog narrative is the awareness that the blog will almost always pre-exist its readership, i.e. there will already be several posts published before the body of the audience arrives at the blog. The first reference point for a reader is often to read the blog's 'About Me' section in order to introduce the blog and its author.[342] These introductory narratives can vary dramatically in the level of information they share, and do not necessarily mean the reader will automatically be able to understand all the references or perspectives that are presented in the body of the narrative. Some bloggers are acutely aware of this problem, and therefore try and provide their readers with a more comprehensive introduction. Non-anonymous blogger *Dorky Mum* creates for her readers a 'Popular Posts' tab, in which she observes that: 'When you land on a new blog for the first time, it can be hard knowing where to start!

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[341] Psychobabble*, We Put Birds On Things!* (3rd December 2013)
<http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2013/12/03/we-put-birds-on-things/>)
[342] The 'About Me' is discussed in Chapter One: The Bloggers, pp. 65-72.

How do you get a feel for the blogger's style without trawling through their whole archive?'.[343] For her, the responsibility of familiarising new readers with her narrative is on her as the author, which indicates her desire for users to read and engage with her blog. However, for some of the primary source bloggers, the responsibility of becoming acquainted with the blog's style lies with the user themselves. When anonymous blogger *29 to Life* is discussing her latest dating experience, she tells readers: 'You all have read the blog, (and if you are new, I'm glad you are here. But you have a lot of catching up to do if you want some context)'.[344] Her initial statement suggests a level of pre-existing knowledge that comes from having previously engaged with her narrative, which allows for a greater understanding of her story. Despite asserting that she is 'glad' the new readers are there, by using parenthesis to address them separately, and highlighting the fact that they are at a disadvantage, the author others them and excludes them from this discussion. Although this may appear less inclusive than *Dorky Mum*'s approach, it could also be read as a challenge to readers who wish to be part of *29 to Life*'s exclusive community.

The pressure to attract and maintain readers can also be seen in the non-textual elements of the primary source blogs, such as the choice to change or update the 'theme' of a blog to make it visually more attractive. This is highlighted by anonymous blogger *Free Chick* when she updates the layout of her blog. She draws attention to the change by using the colloquial innuendo, 'I've slipped into something more comfortable…', to title a new post.[345] Within this post, she constructs the new layout as being for the benefit of her audience, telling them: 'I've changed my lovely blog page. I hope you all like it'.[346] The concept of deliberately marketing a blog to readers is then emphasised by the comment of another user on her post, who states: 'At times, it's good to make some changes to enrich the experience of visitors to your blog, just like what retailers usually do for their retail outlets'.[347] Although *Free Chick* does not reply to the commenter and endorse their perspective, she also chooses not to delete the comment, allowing it to remain part of the textual construction, which suggests that she does not necessarily disagree with their point. By framing the blog in this way, the reader is perceived as a customer of the blog, and therefore the emphasis is on the blogger to entertain and please the reader, rather than write simply for themselves. This could decrease the level of agency represented by the narrative, as the authors are seen to write with less freedom over how they choose to self-represent.

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[343] Dorky Mum, *Popular Posts* Tab <http://dorkymum.wordpress.com/popular-posts/>
[344] 29 to Life, *Permission to Demand* (9th October 2013)
<http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/10/09/permission-to-demand/>
[345] Free Chick, *I've slipped into something more comfortable…* (1st August 2013)
<http://freechick.wordpress.com/2013/08/01/ive-slipped-into-something-more-comfortable/>
[346] *Ibid.*
[347] *Ibid.*

This increased interactivity also disrupts the traditional power relationship between author and reader that is perceived in most literary texts. By increasing the agency of the reader who engages in a blog narrative, they go beyond the role of passive consumer, and become an active part of the textual construction.

Some of the primary source blog authors still represent contradictory ideas about the possibilities of audience, despite the active audience being a key feature of the contemporary blogosphere. Many of them are conflicted in terms of their desire to write, and desire for their narrative to be read. Anonymous blogger *Quarter For Her Thoughts* states: 'While I do enjoy (most of) the comments I receive, they are not necessary. I do not write this blog for my readers, I write it for me'.[348] Here she constructs the narrative as being primarily for her own benefit, and the comments as a bonus of the medium. Despite this, her narratives reference the friends she has made online, and repeatedly express her appreciation of off-stage communication, both of which imply a desire for audience and a connection with her existing readers. Towards the end of the period of capture *Quarter For Her Thoughts'* posts become less regular, and she often goes several weeks without publishing anything. However, on her return she comments: 'Even when I was barely blogging, I published my most popular post. Reassurance. People remembered and people were listening'.[349] This demonstrates that despite her assertion that she writes the blog for herself, she is aware and appreciative of having readers that are still 'listening'. Post-anonymous blogger *Seattle Poly Chick* also presents conflicting ideas about the influence of readers on why she chooses to blog. She states:

> I don't actually know which things you like the best or which posts bring you back, but I'm glad you come here. I'd write it even if you didn't, because the act of writing is so useful to me, but it gives me something that you do read it and sometimes comment on it or like it.[350]

Seattle Poly Chick makes it clear that she enjoys and appreciates the readership of her blog, but, like *Quarter For Her Thoughts,* she maintains that the act of writing a blog is something she does for herself, not for others. The two primary source bloggers present very different constructions of self, and write very different styles of narrative, yet their representation of their blogging approach is very similar. By including such statements within their narratives, the bloggers are able to show their appreciation of their readers, whilst also framing their online personas as humble and unassuming. This is an example of the self-marketing

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[348] Quarter For Her Thoughts, Comments on *Around a Year Ago* (12th August 2013) <http://quarterforherthoughts.com/2013/08/12/around-a-year-ago/>

[349] Quarter For Her Thoughts, *A Leap of Faith: I Published a Book!* (14th May 2014) <http://www.sheryleigh.com/2014/05/14/a-leap-of-faith/>

[350] Seattle Poly Chick, *Blogiversary – One Year* (4th September 2013) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/09/04/blogiversary-one-year/>

techniques that can be seen to play a role in the author's textual construction of self.[351] Previous studies have emphasised the narcissistic element of blog narratives, whose authors are focused on self-promotion. However, the analysis of this thesis demonstrates that by characterising the blogosphere in this way, it ignores the creative content being produced, and the potentially transgressive ways in which the platform is being used. Therefore, *Seattle Poly Chick* and *Quarter For Her Thoughts*' choice to represent themselves as both grateful and yet reliant on the blogosphere's potential audience highlights how they are constructing themselves as 'author'. They therefore engage with constructions of authorship as an independent and isolated occupation, reinforced by stereotypes of the 'creative genius' shut away in their study; whilst simultaneously being influenced by an awareness of readership that one cannot escape in the enormity of the online world.

Despite the possibilities of audience, some bloggers attempt to frame their blogs as purely personal; although this is consistently undermined by the audience, community and commentary inherent in the medium. As Sorapure argues, 'Even if no one other than the author reads the diary, it is available on the Web for others to read, and to some extent put on the Web precisely for others to read'.[352] A blogger's choice to write within this online platform therefore implies a desire for some level of social interaction outside of their own self-representative narrative. This is demonstrated by post-anonymous blogger *Seattle Poly Chick* as she states: 'I took a little break, but I'm here, and I'm thinking about you. Now, topics to talk to you about… that might need some thought'.[353] Here she is speaking directly to the reader, and drawing attention to their role in the construction of her blog narrative. Although her writing is focused on her own experience, she is consciously thinking about the reader and what to 'talk to' them about. The claim of ignorance of her reader's preferences is also undermined by her choice to begin including 'disclaimers' on her sexually explicit blog posts, for those who have previously responded negatively to her more graphic posts. She warns her audience: 'Please do not read if talk about me having sex would bother you'.[354] This demonstrates an awareness of her audience and their sensitivities, and a conscious decision on the author's part to be sympathetic to them, framing her self-representation within their boundaries. The use of the phrase 'glad that you come here' also represents a spatial dimension to her blog, which suggests a strong sense of community as she is framing the blog as a physical place which herself and her readers inhabit and share. This element

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[351] The concept of self-marketing is discussed in Chapter One: The Bloggers, pp. 49-89.
[352] Sorapure, p. 9.
[353] Seattle Poly Chick, *A Little Game of Catch-Up Maybe?* (23rd March 2014) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2014/03/23/a-little-game-of-catch-up-maybe/>
[354] Seattle Poly Chick, *Surprise Me* (12th April 2014) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2014/04/12/surprise-me/>

of consideration is also shown by anonymous blogger *29 to Life* when she shares a post that has sexual content in. She begins by stating: '*I looked at some of the blogs of my followers and I was a little nervous when I discovered one of my followers is 16. It kind of reminded me all kinds of people are out following blogs. So this post is for grown folks*'.[355] Again, this shows that although the blogger does not construct themselves as being inhibited by the presence of an audience, they do suggest an awareness of their readers and their potentially varying demographic, so may subsequently alter their narrative.

For other bloggers, the potential of audience is acknowledged as integral to the appeal of the platform. Non-anonymous blogger *I've Never Robbed A Bank* explicitly outlines how this influenced her decision to start writing within this space, highlighting that 'with a blog, the chances of someone reading my blog are small, but there still is a chance'.[356] Here, it is clear that the concept of having an audience, more than the visible presence of an audience, is what appeals to her about the medium of blogging. She acknowledges that the chances of someone reading her blog are just that, a chance, but the mere possibility of an audience acts as a way of the author justifying her self-representative narrative. This reflects the element of performance within her blog narrative as it requires the concept of a present audience in order to be validated in her own mind. By framing her writing in this way, *I've Never Robbed A Bank* also exposes her desire to have a more public platform, and be able to share her voice with a wider audience than other forms of self-representation would allow. This is in contrast to the explicit desire for audience interaction demonstrated by blogs such as *Seattle Poly Chick,* and *A Life Unexamined* who both encourage feedback from their readers. For non-anonymous blogger *A Life Unexamined* the characters she interacts with on her blog may also be present in her offline life, but she presents the two as aligned and therefore this does not appear to change her narrative. However, given her original choice to write anonymously, the presence of characters from the offline lived reality of *Seattle Poly Chick* is more complicated. Although the blog is now considered to be post-anonymous due to the addition of identifying features, the author's anonymity was challenged before this by the outside commentary from characters depicted within her blog narrative. Their presence also impacts upon the nature of the blog and the agency the author can be read as having over her self-representative narrative. *Seattle Poly Chick* specifically appears to edit her blog posts in order to align her own version of events with a depiction that is also acceptable to other characters in her offline life that are part of her blog's readership. This is most explicit in her choice to provide revisions, or clarifications to her original posts. After her break up

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[355] 29 to Life, *Calling My Inner Aggressor (WARNING: This post is for mature folk, I'm talking about sex)* (24th October 2013) <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/10/24/calling-my-inner-aggressor-warning-this-post-is-for-mature-folk-im-talking-about-sex/> [Emphasis Original]
[356] I've Never Robbed A Bank*, Yeah* (14th February 2011) <http://corzgalore.org/2011/02/14/yeah/>

with 'Great Date', she spends several posts discussing his problems and the reasons she can no longer be with him. However, when a reader comments on a post and expresses sympathy for her by criticising his behaviour, she is quick to jump to his defence. She responds: 'clarification – Great Date was not a cavalier in lying and was actually lying out of shame. If my description seems like that was fun for him, I apologize'.[357] This highlights the way in which the medium of blogging exposes the contradictions within her narrative, by allowing users to view each narrative post side by side, and compare the alternative textual constructions of a situation with the benefit of hindsight.[358] The fact that *Seattle Poly Chick* chooses to edit her posts in this way, and include a disclaimer, shows the influence of her readers upon her narrative construction. Many of the posts that she edits contain descriptions of her break up with 'Great Date', who was also present in her online world. Although she states that the changes are based on privacy reasons, the idea of adding a clarification to her personal description suggests that 'Great Date' may have read her post and asked her to change or modify it reflect him in a better light. The choice to alter her narratives based on external influences undermines her use of the blogging platform as a place for unrestricted self-representation, as she is editing her words to adhere to someone else's views, and therefore surrendering some of the agency she has over her own narrative.

The perceived freedom of the blogging platform, for both anonymous and non-anonymous bloggers is often rooted in the lack of accountability that comes from being able to share ideas and experiences with an audience who are not familiar with their offline lived reality. This sharing of private information is one of the reasons that many people consider blogs to be an online version of the traditional diary form. However, the presence of audience and the potential readership of the platform elevate the self-representation to a different level than this textual predecessor. As Nardi *et al.* conclude in their study, 'Bloggers aren't letting 900 million people read their diary, […] they are standing before 900 million, sometimes in an attitude of indifference, sometimes with the hope of reaching out to new people in the ever- expanding blogosphere'.[359] Given this potential audience, any blogger who positions themselves within the contemporary blogosphere will more than likely be affected by the desire for popularity, the urge to gain readers, and to build a visible and present audience. Marwick argues that the very nature of the platform encourages this desire for attention, stating that:

> The technical features of social media reward attention, making the potential
> audience clearly visible to the user by turning ephemeral status or reputation

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[357] Seattle Poly Chick, *Letting Go of Great Date* (1st June 2013)
<http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/06/01/letting-go-of-great-date >
[358] This concept is explored in more detail in Chapter Four: Past, Present and Future, pp. 144-165.
[359] Nardi *et al.*, p. 231.

information into quantifiable metrics, such as blog analytics, number of Facebook friends, or Twitter followers. Comments, references, Facebook "Likes," and Twitter @replies indicate the user's value, rewarding the ability to provoke the awareness of others.[360]

The achievement of this kind of attention will therefore have an impact on the author's writing. The higher the number of readers on a blog, the more pressure there is on an author to provide new posts for them to read, and content that maintains their attention. This demonstrates the influence of readers on the production of blog content, as the author is concerned with meeting the demands of their audience. As Baumer *et al.* observe in their analysis:

> While a reader can "get away" with not reading every post without much notice, it is more obvious when there are lapses on the part of the blogger. Though expectations and obligations may not be symmetrical, the activity of blogging nevertheless exerts social pressures on both bloggers and readers.[361]

The social pressure they highlight is rooted in the elevated position that readers now hold in the blogosphere, as active consumers of content. This can be seen in some of the primary source blogger's narrative traits, such as the common practice of apologising if there has been a longer than usual gap between posts. This is particularly significant for female users as it suggests a replication of offline pressures upon women to adhere to social expectations, and a self-pressure of maintaining a certain level and type of self-representation.

Non-anonymous blogger *Where The Light Is,* represents an extreme example of this issue as she frequently leaves big gaps between blog posts. After not having posted for almost three months, she posts an update with the opening line: 'I am a terrible blogger. I am a terrible blogger for which I vehemently apologize for my neglect and lack of communication'.[362] Due to her lack of updates, *Where The Light Is* characterises herself as a 'terrible' blogger. Although extreme, this self-criticism serves to enforce her apology to the blog's audience, and frame her as sincerely sorry. Her choice to describe the lack of posts as 'neglect' demonstrates how the blog narratives are considered to be something readers are entitled to, rather than merely the recipients of. This sense of expectation is also seen in the narrative of anonymous blogger *Fertility Doll*, when, after a period without blogging, she writes: 'I haven't been chatty on here or Twitter […] Forgive me. Right now I just can't do it. Eventually I'll emerge from the protective bubble and you'll all have me back again'.[363]

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[360] Marwick (2013), pp. 187-188.
[361] Baumer *et al.*, p. 7.
[362] Where The Light Is, *how to make new years' resolutions and keep them* (14th January 2014) <http://wherethelightis.org/2014/01/14/how-to-make-new-years-resolutions-and-keep-them/>
[363] Fertility Doll, *Forgive Me* (23rd December 2013) <http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/2013/12/23/forgive-me/>

Although she explains that her lack of posts is due to the emotional stress she is under in her offline life, she still feels the need to clarify and justify this to her readers; apologising for not being present in the blogosphere. The phrase 'have me back again' implies that the readers have a degree of ownership over her, and she is therefore obligated to share her narrative with them. The vulnerability of her situation also betrays a different form of self-representation than is generally depicted on her blog, as the 'protective bubble' she refers to is her offline life, which she usually seeks solace from on her blog. As with the example from *Seattle Poly Chick,* this highlights how blog narratives can expose contradictions in a constructed self, and demonstrates the way in which the blog author is consciously performing a persona online, motivated by her own desire for self-representation and the expectations of her audience.

In some cases, the expectations of an audience become part of the blogger's self-representative narrative. Non-anonymous blogger *Tracey Louise* goes as far as to tell her readers that 'The complaints have started to arrive, about the lack of writing, lack of posts, lack of updates, and my general overall crapness [sic] at keeping this blog of mine up to date'.[364] These 'complaints' are never visible on her blog, and therefore by implication take place via 'off-stage' methods of communication. Unlike with *Where The Light Is*, the regularity of *Tracey Louise*'s blog posts never falls below once every two weeks, and therefore the attraction of 'complaints' implies an eagerness on the part of her readers to read more about her life. However, even if the 'complaints' she refers to are fictional, she may still attract new and different readers to the blog by framing her narrative as in demand. *Tracey Louise* also uses the apparent pressure from readers to consciously document her writing process, stating: 'I just can't find the time to write a 1000 word opus every day, and I think that's the problem, I have it in my head that I should'.[365] The expectation of writing such a long narrative is not common practice within the blogosphere, as on average blog posts are usually five hundred words or less. The term 'opus' also denotes the idea of a musical composition, reinforcing the conceptualisation of her blog as something that is crafted and perfected over time. The author therefore imposes her own interpretation of reader expectations upon her writing process, rather than creating and sharing what she wants to. In the comment thread of one of her posts she tells another user: 'I get all edgey [sic] when I miss a day, then it gets worse as days go by. I know I shouldn't really, but I do worry about not writing'.[366] Again this represents the pressure she is placing on herself to produce blog

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[364] Tracy Louise, *The Long And The Short* (17th July 2013)
<http://traceylouise.wordpress.com/2013/07/17/the-long-and-the-short/>
[365] *Ibid.*
[366] Tracy Louise, Comments on *The Long And The Short* (17th July 2013)
<http://traceylouise.wordpress.com/2013/07/17/the-long-and-the-short/>

content in order to keep up with the anticipation of her readers, which may in turn undermine the freedom with which she is able to self-represent. By using her blog narrative to describe the external and internal pressures that affect the production of her blog, she is highlighting to her readers the lengths to which she is going to produce a narrative for them, as well as framing herself as popular and therefore worthy of attention. This technique can also be seen in anonymous blogger *Free Chick*'s narrative, when after a gap in posts she reassures readers: 'I haven't abandoned my blog! In truth, I've been beyond busy […] so it wasn't until yesterday that I saw the, frankly, phenomenal amount of emails in my inbox. Sigh'.[367] As with *Tracey Louise*, *Free Chick* explicitly refers to the amount of direct 'off-stage' communication she has received from her readers while she has been away from the blog. The one-word sentence 'Sigh' suggests that she finds the volume of feedback, or the request for more frequent updates, tiresome. The textual construction of pressure and expectation on these authors demonstrates how their blogs are being consumed as narrative objects or commodities, removed from the personal point of production.

This expectation upon the author to provide their audience with new content is not always as explicit, but can have a tangible effect on the author's writing. For example non-anonymous blogger *A Life Unexamined* uses a book review piece that she had previously written for another website as a 'filler post' on her blog, while she is too busy to write any new content.[368] An acknowledgement of her regular readership can also be seen in the same author's choice to include a 'Feminists in Fiction' feature on her blog, which demonstrates her awareness of her reader's expectations, and of the continual presence of an audience.[369] This idea of having a series of themed posts is also utilised by post-anonymous blogger *Mum and More* who includes several 'Homemade Housewife Project' updates on her blog, where she shares domestic advice with her readers.[370] This behaviour is indicative of the complicated power relationship that now exists between the blog author and their readers, who co-exist within a wider online community full of social expectation. Although they represent differing attitudes towards the production of their blog narratives, these examples show the way in which direct communication between authors and readers allows for the wider blogosphere to exert their impact upon the self-representative narratives of the individual blogger.

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[367] Free Chick, *How did that happen?* (23rd December 2013) <http://freechick.wordpress.com/2013/12/23/how-did-that-happen/>
[368] A Life Unexamined*, Review – The Fabulous Feminist, Sunti Namjoshi* (25th July 2013) <http://alifeunexamined.wordpress.com/2013/07/25/review-the-fabulous-feminist-suniti-namjoshi/>)
[369] A Life Unexamined, *Feminist Fictions: Mulan* (18th October 2013) <http://alifeunexamined.wordpress.com/2013/10/18/feminists-in-fiction-mulan/>
[370] Mum and More, *Homemade Housewife Project* (31st August 2013) <http://roseandmumandmore.com/2013/08/31/homemade-housewife-project/>

<u>Re-Blogging and the Communal Blogosphere</u>

The blog reader has become embedded in the creation of blog narratives through their commentary, and simply their presence within the platform. However, some blog narratives take this further by choosing to utilise their own blog posts to highlight their analogous position as author and reader, by re-blogging the narratives of other users. The most problematic example of this demonstrated by anonymous blogger *1 Year of Single*'s choice to re-blog the narrative of an affirmed male blog author. As a form of introduction, she simply states: 'Love a man's perspective, especially one thats [sic] spot-on!'.[371] The post itself, '5 Ways Women Destroy Relationships', represents a narrow and misogynistic view of women's behaviour, which she consciously chooses to replicate in the space of her own narrative. She is therefore aware of the content she is sharing, and how this may affect her own self-representation as a female blogger. The choice to replace her own narrative with someone else's words, and specifically that of a male author, undermines the potential agency that she can be seen to exhibit over her own narrative. She is surrendering some of the control over how she is represented, and perceived, to somebody else. It also reverts the medium back to traditional online platforms of passive content consumption, which were predominantly authored by men.

The act of re-blogging is also seen repeatedly in other primary source blogs, including anonymous *Fertility Doll,* post-anonymous *Seattle Poly Chick* and non-anonymous *A Life Unexamined*; all of whom choose to recreate the narratives of others in the space of their own words. Despite the varying levels of anonymity, this narrative choice is most commonly seen in these blogs as they all address specific themes. Their chosen topics provide the foundations of their online communities, or particular 'public sphericules', and are therefore discussed by other bloggers with whom they are connected. For example, *A Life Unexamined*'s blog is focused on her asexuality, and if a fellow asexual blogger has explored an issue which she relates to, she shares their narrative with her own readers, or uses quotations from their post. In one particular post she frames her narrative as a review of the various perspectives offered by other asexual bloggers, using referenced quotations from their various blogs, and concluding by offering her own opinion on the issue.[372] Within the period of data capture she also creates a separate blog to host other individual narratives called 'The Asexual Story Project', where she directly re-blogs posts from on her

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[371] 1 Year of Single, *5 Ways Women Destroy Relationships* (2nd September 2013) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/09/02/5-ways-women-destroy-relationships/>
[372] A Life Unexamined*, Some Thoughts On Commitment* (11th August 2013) <http://alifeunexamined.wordpress.com/2013/08/11/some-thoughts-on-commitment/>

own blog, and vice-versa.[373] The idea of utilising the other people's narratives is highlighted by anonymous blogger *Evening Light* in her post 'In Other Words…', in which she does not fully re-blog another post, but provides her readers with the links to several different blogs, stating: 'Somehow, this morning I find myself struck by how completely these two articles 'say everything' I could have wanted to say about… anything'.[374] Unlike the previous examples, she does not entirely substitute her own narrative with the words of someone else, but shares with her readers an alternative articulation of how she constructs herself as feeling. This element of overlapping creates a blogging matrix as the individual narratives become part of another blogger's narrative self-representation. The act of re-blogging can also be a way of increasing user interaction; by acknowledging their appreciation of another blogger's narrative, that blogger may in turn read, comment on, and re-blog a post of the author's, meaning their narrative reaches a wider audience. The possibilities this represents for creating a blogging community are demonstrated by *Dorky Mum* through her blog's weekly 'Tuesday Treats' feature, which she describes as 'a roundup of top blog posts which is curated on a rotating basis by me, Chris at Thinly Spread, Lizzie at Me and My Shadow, and Becky at A Beautiful Space'.[375] This goes beyond the concept of re-blogging, and instead represents a communal blog space into which a series of different voices contribute to producing a narrative.

This element of shared narratives is developed further by post-anonymous blogger *Seattle Poly Chick.* She includes podcast format posts on her blog, which feature audio recordings of her in discussion with characters from her offline life. The narrative that is presented in these posts is therefore collaborative, rather than an isolated form of self-representation. This changes the style of the blog as it removes the personal element and makes it appear more informative; something which also affects the blogger's relationship with their readers by creating a distance between the text and the author. Therefore, *Seattle Poly Chick*'s choice to include this type of post as part of her self-representative narrative partially undermines the agency she exhibits over her narrative by surrendering some of the control she has over what is being shared. Although the inclusion of podcasts is unusual within the primary source blogs examined by this thesis, the use of alternative forms of media as part of blog posts is fairly common within the wider blogosphere. By producing blog content in conjunction with a member of her audience, *Seattle Poly Chick* enacts what Jill

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[373] A Life Unexamined*, The Asexual Story Project is Live!* (28th March 2014) <http://alifeunexamined.wordpress.com/2014/03/28/the-asexual-story-project-is-live/>)
[374] Evening Light, *In Other Words…* (19th June 2013) <http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/2013/06/19/in-other-words/>
[375] Dorky Mum, *Tuesday Treats* (13th May 2014) <http://dorkymum.wordpress.com/2014/05/13/tuesday-treats-8/>

Walker [Rettberg] refers to as the 'hypertextual dimension' of blogs.[376] The concept of a blog's 'hypertextual' potential is problematic in terms of the implications it has on the female voices that are being represented through the primary source blog narratives. Within the tradition of female life-writing Wendy Brown notes:

> [O]ne of the consequences of confessional discourse is that, instead of providing a way of articulating experience which is also "true" for others, breaking a silence or exposing social taboos or injuries, it tends to monopolize the space, pre-empting the possibility of other different, or emergent voices.[377]

In Brown's analysis, confessional female narratives are seen to overshadow other female voices, and further marginalise their experiences. However, the analysis of this thesis shows that the very nature of the blogging platform disrupts this conceptualisation of women's autobiographical narratives. The blogosphere represents a platform for many different female voices to share their stories, and disclose experiences that they construct themselves as unable, or unencouraged, to do through other narrative forms, and/or elsewhere in their offline lives. As is demonstrated in the examples from *Fertility Doll, A Life Unexamined* and *Evening Light,* the authors consciously acknowledge the experiences of other women, and they therefore demonstrate their position within the wider female domain, as well as representing their individual experience.

What this chapter demonstrates is that the participation of readers within a blog narrative is evident in many different ways, and the level of comments, the sense of community and the relationship with readers are elements that fluctuate from one blog to another. They are not distinctly separated by the assumed binary of anonymous and non-anonymous, but unique to the individual and their specific online community. The threads of communication between a blogger and their audience are not always visible or 'on-stage', and therefore present unknown possibilities to those examining the blogs from an external perspective. The primary source bloggers specifically emphasise how the presence of audience plays a key role in attracting them to the medium, and subsequently influences the construction of their self-representations. The ability for readers to comment on and contribute to the narrative, becoming an active part of the blog's construction, is seen to disrupt the traditional power relation of author/reader, and demonstrate the ways in which blogging is unlike its textual predecessors. The analysis of this chapter highlights that the blog narratives produced by the primary source bloggers are inherently influenced by their readers; the possibility of readers, the feedback of readers, or even the quest to gain

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[376] Walker [Rettberg] (2005), p. 45.
[377] Wendy Brown, 'Freedom's Silences', in *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Recognition* ed. by Robert C. Post (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Arts and the Humanities, 1998), pp. 320-322 (p. 321).

readers. It therefore emphasises the performative nature of blogging and the perceived 'public' nature of the platform through which the primary source bloggers are choosing to share their autobiographical narratives. Their textual constructions of self must therefore be examined in the context of this consistent awareness of audience, from which the bloggers appear unable to escape.

Section Two:

Blogging Life

Chapter Three: Emotional Experiences

Although the narratives can vary dramatically in content, the notion of confessional discourse and the revelation of private information has become commonplace in personal journal blogs. For many bloggers, this self-disclosure is focused on emotionally charged events in their offline lives. The textual construction of emotion is categorised as the social expression, or projection, of a particular feeling; which is perceived as indicative of an individual's mood. The definition of emotion used in this thesis does not include the idea of 'affect', but is also not constructed in opposition to it.[378] The representation of emotional tension is read as the expression of feelings, most commonly conceptualised as either positive or negative, which are different in the context of each author. The blogosphere is obviously not the first or only medium through which an individual can share and unload emotional tension. However, unlike traditional autobiographical forms, the immediacy and ease with which blog narratives can be written, revised, and shared, means that the authors can use the platform as a space to vent their emotions as soon as they experience them. Therefore, the writing represents an insight into the experiences of the author, and their developing story, as it is happening to them. The blogging platform also presents the potential of an audience, meaning the author's emotions may attract different levels of sympathy and empathy than they could do offline. This chapter is focused on how the primary source blog authors specifically mediate the experience of emotionally-charged events, contextually perceived as positive or negative, and how they portray their ever-changing emotional states through their narratives. It will also discuss the extent to which the individual primary source blogger's textual constructions of emotion can be seen to represent the gendered nature of exhibiting feelings, the performative aspects of a blogger's mood, and how the online behaviour of bloggers emphasises the offline social constructs that influence our perception of others' emotional experiences.

The Emotional Blogger

Within the patriarchal offline world, the private lives of women are habitually considered secondary to the public lives of men. Therefore, personal journal blogs are often dismissed because they focus on the thoughts and feelings of authors, who are shown by previous studies to be overwhelmingly female.[379] The nature of these self-representations means that they focus on the domestic sphere of the authors, who share private and personal details about their life. The primary source blogs show that this confessional

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[378] For a more comprehensive discussion of the differences between emotion and affect, see Eric Shouse, 'Feeling, Emotion, Affect', *MC: A Journal of Media and Culture,* 8:6 (2005) <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php> [Accessed 11th January 2016]

[379] The gender bias of personal journal blogging is discussed in the Introduction, pp. 1-26.

sharing is primarily focused on the emotional tensions of the individual. The display of emotion has historically been feminised in opposition to that of the rational male, and this stereotype is still pervasive in contemporary society. Morwenna Griffiths argues that 'a stereotype is not believed by everyone – but since it is recognised by everyone, it is powerful even for disbelievers'.[380] Therefore, the understanding of women as emotional becomes ubiquitous even for women themselves. The infiltration of this reductive view is represented by *Wordpress'* topic tag feature, which can be used by the bloggers to identify the content of their posts. This makes it easy to identify the regularity with which the bloggers discuss emotionally loaded subjects, and one specific topic tag 'emotional women' is widely used, particularly by anonymous blogger *29 to Life.*[381] Although not incorrect in its detail, the fact that this topic tag exists when there is no 'emotional men' or 'emotional people' tag suggests that *Wordpress*, and its authors, are perpetuating the stereotypical conceptualisation of women as emotional. This is not solely based on the idea of women being *inherently* emotional due to their gender, but about them being perceived as *overly* emotional. The gendered nature of this also demonstrates the lack of value that emotions are given in our society, as with many other things that are traditionally coded as feminine.

This conceptualisation is also implied by the authors themselves, who repeatedly blame their emotions on their biological sex. Several of the authors use the idea of female 'hormones' in order to deflect the responsibility of behaviour away from themselves, justifying to themself, and their audience, behaviour that they construct as abnormal or undesirable. For example, in a post titled 'Me… An emotional disaster, well today anyway', non-anonymous blogger *Not Just A Mum Blog* includes a 'list of the things I cried at today' and states: 'My only excuse is hormones and I'm sticking to it'.[382] By referencing her hormones in this way, the author frames her behaviour as part of her female gendered performativity. The same concept is represented by fellow non-anonymous blogger *Dorky Mum*, who admits to her readers 'I had my first wobble this week', but further qualifies this by saying:

> It wasn't so much an oh-my-goodness-I've-moved-to-the-other-side-of-the-world wobble as it was a damn-these-hormones-and-the-long-list-of-things-to-do-and-why-isn't-there-any-chocolate-in-the-house wobble.[383]

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[380] Morwenna Griffiths, *Feminisms and the Self: The Web of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 96.
[381] For example, 29 to Life, *Absinthe and Exes: The Reunion Show* (5th August 2013) <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/08/05/absinthe-and-exes-the-reunion-show/>
[382] Not Just A Mum Blog, *Me, An Emotional Disaster… Well Today Anyway* (1st August 2013) <http://notjustamumblog.wordpress.com/2013/08/01/me-an-emotional-disaster-well-today-anyway/>
[383] Dorky Mum, *A Wobble. And a Thank You.* (18th October 2013) <http://dorkymum.wordpress.com/2013/10/18/a-wobble-and-a-thank-you/>

Although her narrative describes various events that may have prompted her emotional state, the author still chooses to add the detail of her hormones to further rationalise her behaviour. Both *Not Just A Mum Blog*, and *Dorky Mum* construct their emotional states as inherently connected to their hormones, and therefore to their biological female sex. This reflects the social construction of gender as innate, often referred to academically as an essentialist view of gender. Emotion is represented by the authors as a *natural* female behaviour, and therefore something that all women are predetermined to display. These examples show that while the female authors are representing their own individual experience, they are simultaneously reflecting a problematic discourse that surrounds all women.

By characterising their behaviour as a 'female' problem, the authors subject it to preconceived ideas of women as irrational, and potentially even 'hysterical'. This characterisation is just one example of the way in which socially constructed ideas of gender subconsciously function to remind the female authors that certain behaviours are considered undesirable in women. In her work *Feminism and the Self*, Griffiths discusses how in different cultures and subcultures, 'some feelings and emotions are thought appropriate while others are recognised but incur disapproval'.[384] Although this statement could be applied to a variety of circumstances, the theory she outlines demonstrates the ways in which the social context that the individual exhibits their emotion within, may influence the way in which they choose to mediate their feelings. Although the primary source bloggers do not consciously engage with postfeminist discourse, the replication of reductive views of female behaviour could be seen as a reflection of the postfeminist dimension of current culture, in which all the female authors are living and writing. Postfeminist theorist Stéphanie Genz argues that postfeminism 'facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of feminism that rejects the ideas of a homogenous feminist monolith and an essential female self'.[385] However, several feminist theorists suggest that by encouraging women to inhabit subject positions facilitated by patriarchal society, postfeminism colludes with the social structures that inhibit women.[386] By appropriating the stereotype of women as hormonal, emotional and irrational the primary source bloggers discussed above replicate the kind of sexist tropes of female behaviour that traditional feminist ideals contest. Diane Negra argues that this attitude is typical of postfeminism, as it is seen as a deliberate revolt against the assumed, or imagined, constrains of feminism. She suggests that: 'In gestures that often tout the "freedom" from political correctness, postfeminist culture revives the "truths" about

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[384] Griffiths, p. 106.
[385] Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 28.
[386] For example, Ariel Levy (2005).

femininity'.[387] These supposed 'truths', such as the idea that women are subject to the will of their hormones, collude with a patriarchal view of female behaviour, and therefore undermine the agency of the individual woman. This underlines the ways in which the primary source blogger's textual constructions of self are influenced by the social expectations and conceptualisations of women in the offline world.

The language used by the primary source bloggers also reflects the external pressures influencing how they choose to describe their emotions, with many of them utilising metaphors such as 'the blues'; or words which disguise or diminish the strength of their feeling. For example, authors are seen to replace angry with 'sad', 'distressed' or 'neglected'.[388] By making their language less defined or dramatic, the bloggers present a calmer performance of self, constructed as reasonable, rather than highly emotional or irrational. As well as the gendered connotations of being angry, there is also a moral framework within modern Western society which characterises anger as a mindless display of emotion, often enacted without thought. Therefore, the women who choose to mediate their anger in a public domain such as the blogosphere may be doubly wary of how their emotion may be interpreted, despite the emotive event depicted within their narrative potentially justifying a strong reaction. The way in which the authors describe the process of dealing with their anger is also constructed through gendered language, with anonymous blogger *1 Year of Single* telling herself and her readers, 'If you want to be happy you have to man-up'.[389] Although she is simply repeating a common colloquialism, it emphasises the extent to which attitudes towards emotion as a feminine trait are culturally embedded. The idea that happiness is rooted in the rejection of certain feelings, and the adoption of a 'masculine' stance, also reflects the fact that the visible display of female emotion is socially constructed as negative. However, despite this conceptualisation, women who are characterised as 'unemotional' are also subject to criticism. Non-anonymous blogger *Tracey Louise* tells readers: 'I am not good with sympathy, or even empathy. I am not good with advice. I am, I guess… a little bit cold in these situations'.[390] In her narrative, it is represented

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[387] Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 10.
[388] Fertility Doll, *5HTP Infertility & Depression* (30th June 2013)
<http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/2013/06/30/5-htp-infertility-depression/>;
Where The Light Is, *Do women expect too much?* (7th May 2014)
<http://wherethelightis.org/2014/05/07/do-women-expect-too-much/>; Psychobabble, *Post Wedding Blues* (5th August 2013) <http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2013/08/05/post-wedding-blues/>
Mum and More, *Separation* (10th February 2014)
<http://roseandmumandmore.com/2014/02/10/separation/>
[389] 1 Year of Single, *5 Reasons Why I Stopped Writing Purely Negative Posts* (12th May 2014)
<http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2014/05/12/5-reasons-why-i-stopped-writing-purely-negative-posts/>
[390] Tracey Louise, *Codes* (10th February 2014)
<http://traceylouise.wordpress.com/2014/02/10/codes/>

as transgressive behaviour for her to reveal this, as it contradicts traditional conceptualisations of women as being naturally sympathetic, and nurturing. Catherine Lutz argues in her discussion of 'Emotion and Feminist Theory' that emotional behaviour is such a requisite of femininity that there is an argument for viewing 'emotion as a form of labor required of women, at least in the modern industrial world'.[391] Therefore, when a woman is presented as unemotional, it is potentially perceivable as a lack of femininity. The way in which *Tracey Louise* uses '…' (the textual equivalent of a linguistic pause), demonstrates her reluctance to characterise herself as 'cold'. This adjective is a common description used for individuals who show a lack of empathy with others, and although she may have had the term directed at her before, she constructs herself as hesitant to make it part of her self-representation. This dilemma represents the paradox in which women are placed when it comes to emotional behaviour; neither the outward display of emotions, nor the lack of them is perceived as desirable female behaviour. *Tracey Louise*'s narratives often describe warm relationships with her boyfriend, her family and her colleagues; therefore, her self-representation does not depict her as emotionless. The lack of desire to comfort and empathise with strangers that she describes should therefore be considered as part of her individual personality, and not be seen as negative in a wider cultural context just because it places her outside of the traditional ideal of what it means to be a woman. The same applies to the other primary source blogger's gregarious expressions of emotion, whether online or offline. This thesis shows that each of the blog narratives represents an individual female voice and therefore the diversity within their self-representations emphasises the reductive nature of homogenising female bloggers, or women more broadly. The fact that all of the primary source bloggers discuss and describe their emotional experiences within their self-representational narratives, despite them clearly being conscious of how their depictions of emotional tension may be judged, highlights the extent to which the blogosphere provides authors with a perceived safe space to write. In the context of this thesis, the choice to include their emotional experiences as part of their mediated self, despite the social judgement surrounding public displays of emotion, also represents the author's increased level of agency.

Sharing and Self-Disclosure

The blogosphere is often characterised as a place where primarily female users share personal narratives, and therefore discuss their emotional experiences. Previous studies, such as that of Qian and Scott, show an increase in personal information sharing

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[391] Catherine Lutz, 'Emotions and Feminist Theories' in *Power and the Self* ed. by Jeanette Marie Mageo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 194-215 (p. 203).

when the user is anonymous, as the blogosphere acts as an 'emotional outlet'.[392] However, the findings of this thesis show that all of the primary source blogs contain the description of emotional tensions through their narrative, to varying degrees, regardless of their anonymous status. The post-anonymous bloggers also demonstrate a consistent level of emotional sharing despite their transitioning anonymity. For example, post-anonymous blogger *Mum and More* regularly uses her narrative to share emotional moments with her readers, perceived as an attempt to gain sympathy and advice from other users. At a particularly fraught time, she tells her readers:

> My breast feeding journey is over. My bedtime baby cuddles are no more, she is in her own room. It feels like part of my body has been ripped off. I am truly in mourning. I am also numb. It doesn't feel real.[393]

The tone of this post represents her struggle to come to terms with what is happening to her, and implies a desperation to share her story and offload her emotional baggage to someone. Her sense of grief is emphasised by the short first person statements, and the dramatic sensory descriptions of ripping and numbness. Her focus on the emotional tension of the experience is also emphasised by her disassociation of her feelings from her bodily reaction, as she concedes: 'I am not ready emotionally, but physically I have no choice'.[394] The decision to share the pain she is feeling through her blog narrative is indicative of how she uses the platform as a way of giving her thoughts and feelings a voice, rather than keeping them confined within her head. Her blog also sits within an established online community of other parental bloggers, and so she is writing with an awareness that there may be other people within the blogosphere who could provide support and advice to her in her time of need. In their work on online parenting forum *Mumsnet*, Pedersen and Smithson highlight how important this sense of audience is for users, who feel able to confide within this platform because they feel there may be 'empathetic 'listeners' who share their problem'.[395] This is represented as a contrast to the offline parenting world, which is characterised as being fuelled by judgment and competitiveness. Their findings suggest that the online platform is therefore a 'safer' place to share emotional parenting experiences; something which is endorsed by the behaviour of the authors, within the sample of primary source bloggers, who are parents.

This conceptualisation of the blogosphere as more sympathetic than the offline world is not only confined to parenting communities, but is often considered one of the main

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[392] Qian and Scott, p. 1441.
[393] Mum and More, *Journey's End* (17th September 2013) <http://roseandmumandmore.com/2013/09/17/journeys-end/>
[394] *Ibid.*
[395] Pedersen and Smithson, p. 100.

attractions of the online platform more broadly. Although sympathy and empathy are seen as desirable traits in society, there are certain social expectations about the visibility of sadness that function to contain offline emotional expression to private and intimate settings. This is echoed by several of the primary source bloggers, who during times of trauma and grief suggest that their offline interactions become strained.[396] Given her experience as a therapist, non-anonymous blogger *Psychobabble* has firm ideas about this issue, and in her post about 'tolerating sadness' she outlines how the agenda of offline social interactions means that many people struggle to know how to react when someone openly expresses negative emotions or distress. She tells her readers:

> In my experience, sadness is not tolerated well or at all. It is not given much room, and it is not given nearly enough time. It is shamed. It is seen as weak. It is hidden and dealt with privately, or not at all. Often times, it's covered up and comes out disguised as another feeling altogether.[397]

Her description represents the ways in which those who are perceived as expressing negative emotions are often rejected, as the action is considered undesirable. The choice to reference her 'experience' subtly reminds readers that her opinion is a professional one. Her statements are also direct and concise, reinforcing the factual nature of her opinion. Although she does not explicitly refer to it, the analysis of this chapter demonstrates how this adversity is specifically shown towards women who display emotion. The perception of sadness as being 'weak' reflects this gendered division by characterising emotion as a feeble feminine trait, demonstrating how the expression of feelings can be used as a criticism of women both on and offline. Her reference to the 'disguised' nature of sadness, also frames it as something that needs to be hidden from view, rather than something an individual can share freely. She speaks of this frustration to her readers, and therefore the wider online world, through her blog narrative, directly stating: 'when I share my sadness with you, I am not asking you to fix it. I am not asking you to cheer me up. I am asking you to bear witness. I am asking you to join me in empathy'.[398] Her use of the personal pronoun 'you' immediately involves the reader, and the repetition of the term 'asking' represents her desperation to receive what she perceives as a 'correct' reaction from them. The concept of another individual 'bearing witness' is something that is also elevated by the possibilities of audience presented by the blogging platform. By using her blog narrative to express this frustration, *Psychobabble* emphasises the importance of the blogosphere as a platform

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[396] This is repeatedly highlighted by post-anonymous blogger *What Kate Did Next*, who is grieving the death of her teenage daughter.
[397] Psychobabble, *Tolerating Sadness* (11th November 2013) <http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2013/11/11/tolerating-sadness/>
[398] Psychobabble, *Tolerating Sadness* (11th November 2013) <http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2013/11/11/tolerating-sadness/>

through which women feel they can express their emotions and their experiences. She also highlights how the blogosphere could present possibilities for sympathy and empathy to be enacted and performed in an alternative way to offline society.

One of the things that renders blogging unique to previous autobiographical forms is the opportunity, as represented by the primary source bloggers, for authors to receive sympathy and support directly from their readers. This established sense of community could be viewed as evidence that those who inhabit the blogosphere are somehow better at 'tolerating' or responding to sadness than those in the offline world. However, as non-anonymous blogger *Sheryl's Pearls* highlights, bloggers 'often have a hard time sympathizing with someone else's plight without feeling the need to inform the affected party that we hurt, too'.[399] Her description suggests an element of narcissism in that instead of responding to someone's account of trauma or distress with sympathy, bloggers are more likely to respond with a counter narrative that details what they perceive as a similar or equivalent traumatic experience. Although this type of response may not be considered sympathetic in an offline interaction, it is evidence of *Psychobabble*'s conceptualisation of other users 'bearing witness', and is demonstrated by the comment threads of several of the primary source blogs. It is particularly evident with anonymous blogger *Fertility Doll*, and post-anonymous blogger *Seattle Poly Chick's* pages, both of whom regularly receive a high number of comments on their posts. One of the reasons that these two blogs receive more comments than others is that they are both written within existing online communities, and are focused on a particular theme (fertility and polyamory respectively). Therefore, the readers' choice to offer an account of their own emotional experience may function as a display of empathy, as many of them might have been in a similar position to the one the author is describing. This represents the assumption that, whether with a statement of sympathy or a story of empathy, readers will respond to a blogger's emotional narrative. However, this is not always demonstrated by the primary source blogs, as for some authors, even posts which describe emotional tensions do not receive any comments.[400] The primary source bloggers who share emotional experiences continue to do so whether they receive visible feedback or not, and therefore the idea that the blogosphere can provide users with sympathy and support is perpetuated even by narratives that do not demonstrate it.

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[399] Sheryl's Pearls, *The Part of the 'Dark Girls' Commentary We Didn't Need to Hear – Yet* (25th June 2013) <http://www.sheryleigh.com/2013/06/25/part-dark-girls-commentary-didnt-need-hear-yet/>
[400] For example, I've Never Robbed A Bank, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (18th July 2013) <http://corzgalore.org/2013/07/18/a-series-of-unfortunate-events/>

<u>Happiness and Despair</u>

Within the varied representations of emotion described by the primary source blogs, one pattern that emerges is the extremity of emotions; with bloggers repeatedly representing themselves as either very high or very low emotionally. The binary definition of different emotions as either positive or negative implies a value judgement, and has been widely challenged by sociologists, psychologists and neurobiologists.[401] However, this thesis is specifically focused on the how the bloggers share their stories, and how they represent their experiences as either positive or negative for them as an individual. Therefore, the analysis of this chapter is focused on the blogger's experience of emotional events, and their narrative construction of each one as having a positive or negative impact upon their personal wellbeing and happiness. Some of the primary source bloggers acknowledge that the extreme display of emotion is part of their online and offline personality. For example, anonymous blogger *29 to Life*, who admits to her readers:

> I'm moody. When I'm high, I'm high. I want to be around people, I want to give them my love an [sic] affection, I want to go on 100. But when I'm down, I'm down. I want to be alone, even when people offer themselves to me.[402]

Despite stating her desire for solitude when she is feeling low, her blog posts depict both positive and negative experiences, demonstrating her choice to represent both the ups and downs of her story. The way in which she constructs this sharing also suggests that it is the conceptualisation of her blog as 'hidden' which allows her to present these negative emotional experiences. Another author who is very aware of her variable mood is anonymous blogger *Evening Light*, who reflects on her emotional state at the beginning of each post. On one occasion, she highlights the changeability of her own mind, stating: 'My mood is volatile this morning, and once the peace and serenity that I woke with faced its first challenge of the day, it dissipated like a mist as the morning sun rises on a summer morning'.[403] Her use of poetic language veils the negativity of this description, and by describing her 'mood' as separate from her own being, she distances the problem and allows her mediation of self to remain separate from it. Although she is using it to describe her fading sense of peace, the metaphor of a summer's morning has positive and calming connotations for her readers, and could therefore prevent them from reading her narrative as too dark. By recounting her feelings and experiences on her blog, *Evening Light* suggests

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[401] A comprehensive discussion of this debate can be found in Robert C. Solomon and Lori D. Stone, 'On "Positive" and "Negative" Emotions', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 32:4 (2002), 417-435.

[402] 29 to Life, *Why Am I Really Alone?* (1st July 2013) <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/07/01/why-am-i-really-alone/>

[403] Evening Light, *Fragile, Volatile, Lovely* (26th June 2013) <http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/2013/06/26/fragile-volatile-lovely/>

she is able to process them, which is why she constructs the blog writing process as a kind of therapy. She often reflects on this emotional journey, and confesses to her readers: 'When I started this blog, I was struggling. A lot. I struggle less now, and enjoy the moment more'.[404] This demonstrates how the blogger perceives the writing of her blog as having a positive influence on her emotional state, something that could have implications for female bloggers more widely.

Unlike the examples discussed above, some bloggers do not suggest any awareness of the shifting nature of their narrative's emotional state. Despite the transition in her anonymous status, *Seattle Poly Chick* consistently uses her narrative to describe her thoughts, feelings and emotional experiences. The changeability of her mood is exposed by the regularity with which she posts (on average around two or three times a week). This means that to a regular reader there is an obvious contrast between the representations of her as being very high and very low emotionally. In one of her content moments, she writes a post entitled 'Taking Stock' in which she counts her 'many many blessings'.[405] She tells her readers, 'I am left after this weekend of celebration and reflection feeling loved and safe and secure'.[406] Within this post the author presents a settled and consistent happiness with her offline life and loves, taking a philosophical tone advising and encouraging others to appreciate what they have got. However, only four days later, she posts again, and this time appears extremely frustrated and dissatisfied with events and people in her offline life. She describes to her readers how 'this situation happened and it was frustrating as hell because I felt like I had no choice but to suck it up […] It really hurt my feelings'.[407] Also telling them how she was left 'feeling neglected […] unimportant and disposable'.[408] *Seattle Poly Chick* herself does not acknowledge this shift in mood, or reflect back on her earlier self-representations; she simply focuses on the present and assumes her readers are also in the same moment. This is something that is unique to the way blog narratives are produced and consumed. Unlike with traditional autobiographical writing, the narrative posts are not a serialised version of a pre-determined story, but represent live updates of the author's life story as it is happening. As well as representing the emphatic way in which *Seattle Poly Chick* shares her emotional states, these two opposing perspectives demonstrate the author's reliance on others to feed her emotions; with both her highs and lows being

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[404] Evening Light, *Timeless Moments* (30th December 2013)
<http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/2013/12/30/timeless-moments/>
[405] Seattle Poly Chick, *Taking Stock* (15th February 2013)
<http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/09/15/taking-stock/>
[406] *Ibid.*
[407] Seattle Poly Chick, *She is a Secondary Person* (19th February 2014)
<http://seattlepolychick.com/2014/02/19/she-is-a-secondary-person/>
[408] *Ibid.*

prompted by the behaviour of characters in her offline life. Griffiths suggests that this is not unusual, arguing that: 'Emotions are spontaneous and can surprise the person who feels them. However they are not reflexes and can change as a result of new understandings'.[409] Within the confines of her blog narrative, *Seattle Poly Chick*'s shift in perspective seems a dramatic contrast, but when consuming the blog, the majority of readers understand that 'Seattle Poly Chick' as a character exists on and offline, and what is not depicted by the two narratives is what 'new understandings' may have occurred in the gap.

Although these examples demonstrate a pattern of emotional fluctuation within the primary source blogs, this is not necessarily indicative of similarities in the author's textual constructions, as the experiences of each individual blogger are shown to be unique. Alternatively, the depiction of extremes in a blogger's textually constructed emotional state can be read as part of the way authors engage with the platform. In Karlsson's 2007 research, one participant suggests that blogs may show more emotional fluctuation than printed forms of autobiographical text, 'because printed material is limited in its duration, whereas online journals have potentially unlimited time to tell their stories'.[410] Although the longevity of their story may not directly concern the bloggers as they begin to write each narrative update, the consistent ability to add to and update their self-representation allows for their performance of self, and specifically their emotional status, to be fluid and flexible. Therefore, the authors may be less constrained by the social etiquette that influences their offline behaviour, and encouraged to perform their emotions with more agency. Further to this, the nature of blogging means that the posts are often written with a greater temporal proximity to the event they are describing. Therefore, the author's emotional reaction, whether negative or positive, is naturally increased by the immediacy to whatever they are describing. This can be seen with several of the primary source blogs, and most obviously in the narratives of post-anonymous blogger *Seattle Poly Chick*, as discussed above. In her analysis, Karlsson argues:

> At a time when invocations to the real are abundant in reality TV and other "reality" venues, suggesting the ultimate collapse between the real and the fictional, the temporal proximity in the production/ consumption of blogs reinforces the autobiographical contract online.[411]

The 'autobiographical contract' that she refers to highlights the importance of authenticity for audiences and readers of self-representative narratives. She suggests that the temporal proximity of the narrative description, to the experience they describe, increases the perception of the depiction as 'real'. In his work on diaries and memoirs, James Young

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[409] Griffiths, p. 107.
[410] Karlsson (2007), p. 148.
[411] Karlsson (2007), p. 147.

highlights this concept, and argues that immediate self-representations can, based on the same 'phenomenological basis' as print journalism, be 'far more convincing of their factual veracity than more retrospective accounts'.[412] This is primarily based on the idea that the level of detail with which an author remembers something immediately after the experience would be difficult for them to achieve in hindsight, and so the instant retelling is considered more accurate. Therefore, the stories of sadness and trauma that the primary source bloggers share could be perceived as a more authentic version of the individual's struggles, than they would if presented as part of a text based autobiography. The immediacy and flexibility with which an author can update their narrative is what allows the primary source bloggers to produce extreme and contrasting representations of mood; emphasising the potential freedom of the platform.

The Performance of Emotion

The description of personal emotional experiences contributes to the author's mediated self, and are therefore part of their performed persona. The analysis of this thesis highlights the influence of audience on how bloggers construct their narrative, and specifically the choice of some blog authors to 'market' their self-representations deliberately in order to gain more recognition or a certain reaction from their readers.[413] Something which is also evident in the way the primary source bloggers depict emotional trauma, or tension. In his work on defining emotion, Eric Shouse suggests that unlike with 'affect' or 'feeling', 'We broadcast emotion to the world; sometimes that broadcast is an expression of our internal state and other times it is contrived in order to fulfil social expectations'.[414] The presence of audience within the blogosphere highlights this social element, as the narratives and their authors are subject to observation and commentary from their readers. The sense that some of these representations may be contrived also emphasises the performativity of the blog narratives. This is demonstrated by the reluctance of authors to textually construct emotional experiences in a way that would align them with the stereotype of 'overly' emotional woman. For anonymous blogger *1 Year of Single*, the acknowledgement of her 'self-indulgent blathering', prompts her to completely change how she approaches her writing.[415] She tells her audience: 'A continual string of negative, self-indulgent pity posts makes me look bad […] makes me look like "that girl who's always complaining," which is

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[412] James E. Young, 'Interpreting Literary Testimony: A Preface to Rereading Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs', *New Literary History*, 18:2 (1897), 403-423 (414).
[413] The influence of audience is discussed in Chapter Two: The Readers, pp. 49-89.
[414] Shouse (2005), p. 1.
[415] 1 Year of Single, *5 Reasons Why I Stopped Writing Purely Negative Posts* (12th May 2014) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2014/05/12/5-reasons-why-i-stopped-writing-purely-negative-posts/>

not a good representation of who I really am, nor who I want to be'.[416] This highlights the performed nature of her online self-representation, as she distances her 'real' self from the one she has previously textually constructed. By framing her previous performances as that of a critical and negative female, she echoes the stereotypes of women's undesirable emotional behaviour, from which she deliberately distances her 'new' self. The choice to alter her performance of self, and particularly to edit her emotions, could be seen to undermine the authenticity of her narrative as it is not presenting her 'real' feelings. However, she is vehement in her criticism of other blogs where 'the entire site is a swirling, self-indulgent, pity sucking vortex'.[417] For *1 Year of Single* it is therefore important to distance herself from this 'type' of narrative, which consciously influences her writing process. She tells her readers: 'I've started rethinking, repurposing and rewriting my blog posts'.[418] By acknowledging her desire to be perceived differently, she demonstrates the potential of blog narratives to allow authors to engage with aspirational versions of themselves, and use their narratives to textually construct a 'better' version of themselves, rather than a 'different' version.[419]

These examples highlight the extent to which negative emotions are conceptualised as self-indulgent, and therefore the pressure that authors are under to represent their experiences in a way that is acceptable to their audience. Anonymous blogger *29 to Life* describes in her blog how she considers this to be a gendered problem, that can be seen across both online and offline interactions. She suggests that the choice of women to adapt their self-representation to appear more positive and less emotional is motivated by the judgement of men. Arguing that: 'Men love women who are like happy all of the time, and who can continuously eat shit over and over and still smile. And women, we try. We try so hard to fake it until we make it'.[420] This concept may be rejected by many of the primary source bloggers, and contemporary women more widely, who present their choices as made through their own free will, and *not* dictated by men. However, *29 to Life*'s perspective highlights the fact that happiness is socially constructed as part of being an 'ideal' woman. This is evidenced in offline circumstances through the regularity with which women are told to 'cheer up' or to 'give us a smile' by, predominantly male, strangers.[421] This also reflects the distaste for public displays of negative emotion within offline society, as discussed earlier

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[416] *Ibid.*

[417] *Ibid.*

[418] *Ibid.*

[419] The idea of blogs as a space for aspirational performances of self is explored more in Chapter Four: Past, Present and Future, pp. 144-165.

[420] 29 to Life, *Why Am I Really Alone?* (1st July 2013) <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/07/01/why-am-i-really-alone/>

[421] This is one of the most commonly reported 'cat calls' on Laura Bates' *Everyday Sexism Project*.

in the chapter. Something which is seen specifically to apply to women, who are considered as undermining their decorative role in society by appearing to be anything other than happy. Despite this conceptualisation, the primary source blogs represent very few emotional experiences that are framed as positive, in comparison to negatively framed ones. Griffiths argues that this is because the stereotype of women as negatively emotional is so pervasive that it actually influences women's behaviour directly. She contends that 'it is neither surprising that the stereotype is held by many women, nor that women are emotional. They have learnt to be so'.[422] Although her discussion highlights the dominance of the stereotype, her argument undermines the agency of women in deciding how to construct their own behaviour, which could be seen as reductive to women in contemporary society. However, her analysis demonstrates the extent to which emotional behaviour can be conceptualised as part of the performance of a female gender, which is seen in the textual constructions of the primary source bloggers. For many of the bloggers, their narrative is an emotional outlet and they use the blogosphere to seek support and advice. The choice to textually construct themselves this way is therefore just as consciously considered as *1 Year of Single*'s resolution to avoid appearing negative. The possibilities of interaction may therefore encourage bloggers to mediate their experiences in a way that is deliberately structured to provoke sympathy, and attention, from their readers. This is an option primarily available to anonymous bloggers who are able to present false or exaggerated versions of offline situations without fear of correction. However, the issues presented are often very personal and individual, and therefore even non-anonymous authors may be tempted to construct their emotional difficulties in such a way as to increase their supposed suffering and in turn their perceived entitlement to sympathy. For example, non-anonymous blogger *I've Never Robbed A Bank* tells her audience: 'So right now is one of those times where the universe is testing my character. And I am not sure if I am winning. But that's okay'.[423] This statement is deliberately ambiguous in its lack of detail, and her choice to posit the 'Universe' as the source of her problems also avoids placing blame on anyone or anything specific; meaning her problem is generic and relatable to her readers, as well as vague enough to potentially intrigue readers.

By writing posts that are specifically constructed to try and produce a reaction from the audience, the authors emphasise why blogging is widely considered as narcissistic, or self-indulgent. The experiences the authors describe may represent 'real' offline events, but the way in which they are textually constructed allows the authors to mediate a greater or

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[422] Griffiths, pp. 107-108.
[423] I've Never Robbed A Bank, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (18th July 2013)
<http://corzgalore.org/2013/07/18/a-series-of-unfortunate-events/>

more significant emotional reaction than they could through offline, face-to-face, communication. This is demonstrated by anonymous blogger *1 Year of Single*'s post 'Help', in which she simply says to her readers 'I just realized I'm a little devastated about the newest breakup and it's making me want to shut down this blog completely and retreat. Not really sure what to do. Thoughts?'.[424] In this statement her emotional struggle is presented as a threat to her readers that she may withdraw from the blogosphere. The post itself does not provide a description of her thoughts or feelings, aside from labelling herself as a 'little devastated'. This oxymoronic phrase, the assertion of her sudden realisation, and the provocative title, makes her emotional distress appear consciously constructed. Although she appeals for help from the blogosphere, the request is ambiguous in that she appears to desire help both with her devastation, and the construction of her narrative. The fact that the author represents such an explicit desire for her readers to respond undermines her emotional distress and suggests instead that she is primarily striving for the attention of her blog audience. In spite of this, the blogger's performance produces the validation she appears to desire, as the post receives nineteen comments within a short time of being posted, all of which despair over and discourage her suggestion of leaving. This is several more comments than her general posts receive, and the performance of emotion she constructs in 'Help' could therefore be viewed as contrived. However, the choice to textually construct her experiences in this way could also be read as indicative of the lack of empathy the author is receiving within her offline life. This is also true of non-anonymous blogger *I've Never Robbed A Bank*, who is seeking sympathy in a similar way to *1 Year of Single*, but is limited by her lack of anonymity. These textual constructions must also be read in the context of the condemnation many women in the offline world experience if they publically display emotional distress. In contrast to this negative conceptualisation, the blogosphere is framed as a more accepting space, in which authors suggest they are able to express themselves and their emotions with more freedom.

The analysis above shows how the blogger's representations of emotion are influenced by the presence or possibility of audience within the blogosphere. The depiction of emotional experiences is also seen to have a significant impact on the readers themselves. The way in which readers engage with blog narratives has been compared to the consumption of television soap operas, given the regular depiction of specific characters and their everyday dramas. In her work on 'Effeminate Feelings and Popular Forms', Robyn Warhol suggests that 'Part of the appeal of following a soap opera over a long period of time is the accumulation of knowledge of those emotive details that add layers of affect to each

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[424] 1 Year of Single, *Help* (26th March 2014) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2014/03/26/help/>

new episode'.[425] In the case of blog narratives, the 'emotive details' are not as subtle or crafted as that of the characters in a fictional programme. However, the familiarity of an author and the implied intimacy that comes with 'knowing' about their feelings and emotions, demonstrates the foundations of the relationships that are built within the blogosphere. The long term engagement with an individual blogger therefore allows a reader to sympathise with a range of different emotional experiences, and in turn create an intimate connection with the author. It is therefore clear that the interactivity of the contemporary blogosphere allows for a sharing of experience that is not possible in offline communication, and which inherently changes the way in which individual authors choose to share their story.

Transgressive Emotions

The online world was originally considered to be a place that had the potential to be free of social prejudice; a platform of equality, where everyone could be who or whatever they wanted, including their 'true' selves. Sadly, as shown by the primary source blogs examined by this thesis, the Internet is seen in many ways to replicate the hegemony of the offline world. One way in which the blogosphere is seen to be more progressive than society is the commonality of mental health as a topic, even amongst the relatively small sample of primary source bloggers.[426] According to data gathered in 2013 by the World Health Organisation, approximately 450 million people worldwide suffer with mental health problems; therefore a proportion of individuals within the blogosphere being effected by them is not surprising.[427] However, despite the increase in knowledge and treatment within the last fifty years, the subject of mental health is still marginalised, with a 2009 study of British attitudes showing that mental health was considered to be the biggest social taboo.[428] Although the approach to mental health differs between different countries and cultures, the stigma associated with mental illness is universal. Given this stigmatisation, and the personal nature of the subject, mental health should therefore be considered as one of the most private issues an author could include within their self-representation.

For many of the bloggers, their mental health is inherently connected to their emotional well-being, and their mood or feelings are used as a way of expressing these experiences. For example, non-anonymous blogger *Psychobabble* shares with her readers:

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[425] Robyn Warhol, *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Popular Forms* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2003), p. 113.

[426] The inclusion of mental health issues as part of an author's construction of self is discussed in Chapter One: The Bloggers, pp. 81-85.

[427] 'Mental Health', *The World Health Organisation* <http://www.who.int/mental_health/en/> [Accessed 18th January 2016]

[428] Mary O'Hara, 'Mental Health is Strongest Taboo', *The Guardian,* 20th February 2009. <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2009/feb/20/mental-health-taboo> [Accessed 18th January 2016]

> I'm really sad about the way my wedding went. It wasn't what I wanted. […] I'm having to grieve the loss of the biggest, most important party of my life, and that I'm having to grieve the violation of my expectations, which has always been a tough one for me.[429]

Although this is not explicitly referred to as an example of her depression, the post goes on to describe her utilising a therapy method she has previously described as using to deal with low points in her mental health, and therefore this description of sadness and grief can be read as an example of her suffering. She concludes the post by highlighting the significance of sharing this experience through her narrative, stating: 'This has been really hard to write, so thanks for reading this far'.[430] The struggle *Psychobabble* describes emphasises the difficulty bloggers face when trying to textually construct experiences that they are not used to sharing in the offline world. Her choice to thank readers also demonstrates her appreciation of the platform's community, and the online space in which she feels she can express herself and her emotional difficulties. Anonymous blogger *Quarter For Her Thoughts* frames her own mental health issues in a similar way, describing to readers:

> It was around this time last year when I had my meltdown. I hit the depression stage of grief, after losing my father. My relationship with Y came to a heartbreaking [sic] and unexpected end, and my work atmosphere had me so stressed out that I could barely face walking into the office each day.[431]

Here, *Quarter For Her Thoughts* characterises her low emotional state as a form of depression, which she openly acknowledges and frames in the light of several negatively framed experiences. Unlike with *Psychobabble*'s period of depression over her wedding, this experience is being described in hindsight, which allows the author to reflect on the events from a different perspective. The author's choice to address this period in her life, despite its lack of temporal proximity to the time of writing, emphasises how the blogosphere is perceived as a platform of confession. Although the discussion of mental health within the primary source blogs does not directly seek to disrupt the existing taboo, it offers a space in which those who suffer from mental health issues can transgress the existing social conceptualisation of their suffering, and share the 'reality' of their experiences. The choice of both anonymous and non-anonymous bloggers to include these less socially desirable aspects of their personality within their online self-representation suggests an authenticity to the narratives which challenges preconceived notions of how bloggers use the anonymity available within the blogosphere. In addition, it presents a clear demonstration of the blogosphere being used as a supportive space in which individuals choose to self-disclose

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[429] Psychobabble, *Post Wedding Blues* (5th August 2013)
<http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2013/08/05/post-wedding-blues/>
[430] *Ibid.*
[431] Quarter For Her Thoughts, *Around a Year Ago* (12th August 2013)
<http://quarterforherthoughts.com/2013/08/12/around-a-year-ago/>

even the most private of struggles. More specifically, in which they feel they can discuss a topic which offline society, and the mainstream media, still struggles to address. By normalising and publicising the issue of mental health within their self-representations, the bloggers have the chance to offer advice and inspiration to others, and to challenge the stereotype of mental health sufferers. Although these findings do not inherently change the way mental health, or the blogosphere, are perceived in offline society, the analysis demonstrates that the stereotypical assumptions made about both are unrepresentative of those who have direct experience.

Although the reaction to mental health sufferers represents an extreme example, the social conventions of the Western world do not encourage any kind of visible sadness, and the discussion of emotions online and off is therefore characterised as the 'oversharing' of personal information.[432] Despite this, the primary source bloggers collectively and consistently use their narratives to divulge and vent their emotional tensions. By sharing their emotions through their self-representations, the authors therefore demonstrate an increased level of agency over their own narratives, as they refuse to allow their stories to be changed or dictated by social convention. In the context of this thesis, the textual construction of sadness, depression, grief, stress and anger are therefore considered to be transgressive acts. The choice to express emotion is explicitly framed in this way by some of the primary source bloggers, who see it as a powerful act. Anonymous blogger *29 to Life* tells her audience: 'As a person who often chooses to suck it up, when I do express my feelings of discomfort, I am being brave, I am standing up for myself, I am standing in my truth'.[433] Here, the choice to share with others the 'truth' about how she feels is represented as empowering, and she can therefore be read as demonstrating agency over her actions offline, as well as through her construction of this experience within her blog narrative. Her emphasis on 'truth' also implies that the bloggers who do alter the representation of their feelings to be more socially acceptable, surrender some of this potential agency. These authors are instead seen to place more value upon the opinion of others than upon that of themselves. *29 to Life*'s choice to prioritise her own perspective challenges the stereotypical conceptualisation of 'femininity' and the ideal woman as selfless and sympathetic, and could therefore be viewed as transgressive. She also takes the opportunity to encourage her readers to do the same, concluding: 'My feelings have value. So do yours'.[434] By expressing the importance of her own feelings, and equally championing others to do the same, she constructs herself as empowered by her emotional expression. Her choice to listen to and

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[432] The concept of oversharing is outlined in the Introduction, pp. 21-22.
[433] 29 to Life, *Personal Bill of Rights: My Feelings Deserve Respect* (19th August 2013) <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/08/19/personal-bill-of-rights-my-feelings-deserve-respect/>
[434] *Ibid.*

represent her own emotions also demonstrates her confidence and self-belief. Griffiths argues that 'feminist activists and theorists have [always] trusted feeling, as a source of knowledge, refusing standard accounts of the dichotomy between emotion and reason as a masculine distortion'.[435] Although *29 to Life* does not explicitly acknowledge it, by proudly representing her emotions and consequently rejecting the idea that they are irrational, her approach echoes Griffiths' theoretical standpoint, and her self-representation could therefore be considered a feminist act.

This approach is also echoed by non-anonymous blogger *Psychobabble*, who regularly discusses her own emotional difficulties, as well as appreciating the struggles of her patients. She reassures her readers: 'Sadness isn't easy. It's extremely vulnerable and humbling. But it also takes courage'.[436] Here, *Psychobabble*'s description highlights the bravery of both experiencing and sharing negative and distressing emotional experiences with others. These examples also reflect why theorists such as Lutz believe that emotion could have cultural value for feminist politics, as a symbol of its 'revalorized femininity'.[437] In her discussion of 'Emotion and Feminist Theory', Lutz argues that there has historically been an ideological distortion of emotion, such as the categorisation of it as 'weak'. However, she suggests that 'emotions can be remade through renaming', and they could therefore 'constitute empowering forms of knowledge for feminist purposes'.[438] In the context of this analysis, a 'rebranding' of emotion could involve a reconceptualization of it as evidence of an individual being passionate, or demonstrating assertiveness; adjectives which are more commonly used to describe male behaviour. The choice to mediate a self-representation online that discloses and describes emotional experiences as a valid and integral part of an author's performance of self is therefore part of this 'remaking' of emotion within society. By constructing narratives that challenge social norms in this way, the blog authors also represent alternative ways of conceptualising female behaviour more broadly.

Given the argument outlined by this thesis for the interpretation of blogs as literary texts, the potential power of emotion as a tool for individuals is underlined by the very production of blog narratives. The textual depiction of emotional tension is inherently connected to the creative process of writing the narrative, and therefore could be seen to fuel the author's creative outputs. In the field of psychology, emotions have often been connected to creativity, and in his analysis Scott Kaufman describes the widely held view that 'positive emotions are conducive to creativity because they broaden the mind, whereas

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[435] Griffiths, p. 95.
[436] Psychobabble, *Tolerating Sadness* (11th November 2013)
<http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2013/11/11/tolerating-sadness/>
[437] Lutz, p. 198.
[438] Lutz, p. 200.

negative emotions are detrimental to creativity because they narrow one's focus'.[439] However, the opposite is demonstrated by the blog authors, in that the representation of negative emotional experiences far outweighs that of positive ones. This suggests that the blogger's creativity is *not* inhibited by emotional negativity, or even mental health issues, as suggested by previous studies. Authors are instead shown to be *more* motivated to write by the emotional tensions in their lives than they are by pleasure, which subverts the conceptualisation of negative emotions as derogatory to an individual's rational thinking. This again represents how the blogging platform can be seen as providing authors with different, and potentially transgressive, ways to self-represent.

The analysis of this chapter demonstrates that the cultural stereotype of women as emotional is pervasive and can impact upon both the individual female author, and the interpretation of their writing more broadly. The recent popularity of the gendered term 'overshare' also functions as a way of trivialising women who speak up about their experiences of emotional tension. However, the primary source blogs show that the platform does attract and encourage female authors to share with their audience, and can provide them with the virtual support and sympathy they desire. This supportive online community can also act as a contrast to the negative reaction the offline world often shows towards public displays of emotion. Unlike previous conceptualisations of blogging behaviour, the depiction of emotions is shown by the primary source blogs *not* to be intrinsically connected to the perceived anonymity of the author; with the sharing of emotional experiences being demonstrated to some extent by all of the anonymous, non-anonymous and post-anonymous primary source bloggers. The performance of emotion that is visible within the blogger's narrative is subject to the influence of external pressures that condemn women's emotional behaviour offline. Therefore, the choice to depict the 'undesirable' parts of their lives, such as their grief or depression, could be viewed as transgressive. The temporal proximity of the blog post to the emotional event it describes appears to provide users with increased levels of agency, and thus empower them to share their story in all of its painful and unattractive glory. The immediacy of the shared experience also brings with it an increased inclination for readers to perceive the depiction of emotional tension as 'honest', as well as highlighting the changeable nature of each individual blogger's mood. The female author's choice to represent her emotional experiences online also provides a powerful challenge to the reductive characterisation of women's emotions as irrational. Acknowledging the diversity in emotional experiences such as this, is integral to motivating a

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[439] Scott Barry Kaufman, 'The Emotions That Make Us More Creative', *Harvard Business Review,* 12th August 2005. <https://hbr.org/2015/08/the-emotions-that-make-us-more-creative> [Accessed 11th January 2016]

change in the problematic way that the expression of emotion is interpreted within contemporary society.

Chapter Four: Past, Present and Future

Many conceptualisations of the blogosphere as a communication tool focus on the immediacy of the narratives, and their temporal proximity to the event they describe. Blogs as a narrative form are similarly viewed as an example of stream of consciousness writing, which is one of the reasons they are not often not considered as literary texts. However, the primary source blog authors show that blog narratives are not always reactionary, and that the platform's self-representations are often as focused on the past as they are on the present. This chapter is focused on the construction of time within the primary source blogs; specifically, the categorisations of past, present and future. For some bloggers, the medium provides them with a unique opportunity to tell stories of past traumas, which they suggest they would not have had a chance to share in their offline life. The blogosphere also offers possibilities for authors to archive their historical narratives, in a way that has not been possible in previous autobiographical forms, which means they can utilise this blogged past to compare and contrast with their most recent self-representations. The textual constructions of self are also used to outline aims and aspirations for the blogger's future, which may or may not include continuing to write the blog itself. Despite their aesthetic focus on the most recent material, and the presumed temporal proximity of the narrative construction, blogs should be read as a space in which past, present and future combine in order to produce each blogger's individual performance of self. This presents unique opportunities for identity construction, narrative self-representation, and for the understanding of blogs as a literary (plat)form.

<u>Blogs as Archives</u>

One of the main features that identifies an online space as a blog is the reverse-chronological date-stamped posts.[440] This means that when a reader first comes to the blog's homepage, the most recent post is the one that they encounter first; then as they scroll down the homepage they will see the previous material listed below. This is in contrast to other forms of life-writing, such as diaries and autobiography, which are presented to readers in chronological order. Some bloggers also have a visible archive of all their older material in folders as part of the blog, often categorised by theme or date. David A. Huffaker and Sandra L. Calvert argue that 'the ability to archive blog posts creates a way to scaffold on previous impressions and expressions; thus, constructing identity can be a continual process […] and one to which they can refer'.[441] Their analysis demonstrates how the

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[440] The use of this and other features which are used to identify blogs are discussed in the Introduction, pp. 1-26.
[441] David A. Huffaker and Sandra L. Calvert, 'Gender, Identity, and Language Use in Teenage Blogs', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10:2 (2005).

archived blog posts can act as a record of previous selves, which could then be utilised by the author to contribute to their future constructions of self. Although traditional forms of autobiography contain descriptions of the author's earlier opinions and experiences, they are all written from the perspective of the present, and therefore textually constructed from the perspective of their current self. The blogosphere's archiving system is unique because it captures multiple versions of the author's 'present' or current self alongside side each other, even as they become the blogger's past, creating a series of concurrent selves. The nature of the medium also allows readers to access and explore these multiple performances of self easily and at any time.

Many of the primary source blogs use their archive to contribute to their textual construction of self, and specifically as a way of providing readers with an introduction to their online persona. For non-anonymous blogger *I've Never Robbed A Bank*, the content of her very first blog post, published in 2011, serves as part of her 'About Me' as it explains her motivations for starting her blog, referenced with the title: 'Wondering why?'.[442] Non-anonymous blogger *Dorky Mum* takes this idea further, and has a specific 'Popular Posts Tab' at the top of her blog page, where she has arranged her most-read posts to help new readers 'get a feel' for her blogging style.[443] She instructs readers: 'If you haven't visited *Dorky Mum* before, this is probably a good way of discovering the variety of things I write about'.[444] The choice to use her most read blog posts, rather than her own personal favourites, or ones that cover key life events, demonstrates her focus on attracting and maintaining readers, as their interest levels are prioritised. Other bloggers use the archived posts to collect together narratives that cover the same topic, but which do not necessarily run consecutively. For example, anonymous blogger *Fertility Doll* writes a series of ten 'IVF #2' updates over the course of a month, interspersed with posts about other subjects.[445] As the themed posts are all titled with 'IVF #2', and also use it as a topic tag, the posts are easily identifiable to the reader as part of a set, and they can therefore be accessed easily, and read together as a continuous narrative.[446] This demonstrates that there are short stories being told within each of the blogger's self-representations, and it is only through the archive feature of the blogosphere that readers can access the full breadth of material.

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[442] I've Never Robbed A Bank, 'About Me' <http://corzgalore.org/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[443] As discussed in Chapter Two: The Readers (p. 109), Dorky Mum, 'Popular Posts' Tab <http://dorkymum.wordpress.com/popular-posts/>
[444] *Ibid.*
[445] For example: Fertility Doll, *IVF #2 Time to Get Some Answers Around Fertilisation* (12th April 2014) <http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/2014/04/12/ivf-2-time-to-get-some-answers-around-fertilisation/>
[446] The use of 'topic tags' within the primary source blogs is outlined in the Methodology, p. 29.

The nature of the blog archive means that the blog itself contains a record of each self-representative narrative posted in the life-span of the blog, which in some cases can be several years.[447] However, because the blog author has complete control over their narratives, all of their blog material can be edited or erased at any time in order to align it with their current status or opinion. As José van Dijck notes in his work on 'Memory in the Digital Age', most individuals have 'undesirable autobiographical memories', which they may wish to exclude from their mediation of self.[448] For post-anonymous blogger *Seattle Poly Chick*, her old posts are part of her 'history' which she claims she does not want to 'rewrite or delete'.[449] This is textually constructed as a bold and brave decision for the author, and she admits to her audience: 'I'm embarrassed at the gushy mushy love stuff and my proclamations of certainty in situations that proved far from certain, but you know ... they are still valid'.[450] Despite this assertion, her narrative demonstrates several examples of her changing posts from the way in which they were originally published, although these changes are deliberately highlighted by the author with the addition of the word 'edited'. She also provides a justification for why the changes have been made, either stating that posts have been edited for 'being insanely long', 'full of typos', or out of respect for the people she is discussing.[451] The choice to identify her previous representations of self as flawed, rather than simply to remove them from her profile, could be read as an attempt by the author to construct herself as more authentic by showing her audience that she is fallible. Her choice to maintain her original narrative could also be perceived as an attempt to market herself in the same way; emphasising to her readers the fact that she is remaining 'true' to her original performance of self.[452] The use of the term 'valid' in her description of earlier posts suggests that the material does not have to still be correct to be an important element of her self-representation, as it is part of her journey to where she is now. She argues that: 'It's not fair to look back at myself or my life or my blog with the benefit of hindsight, which is always 20/20 and judge the person making those remarks'.[453] This represents the blog as a work in progress, and something that develops alongside the trajectory of the author's life. In terms

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[447] As outlined in the Methodology (pp. 27-32), all the blogs used as primary source material had to have been blogging for a minimum of one month prior to the period of data capture. However, several of the blogs selected had been blogging for much longer, for example *Tracey Louise* and *I've Never Robbed A Bank* who had both been blogging for three years at the time of capture.

[448] José van Dijck, 'Memory Matters in the Digital Age', *Configurations,* 12:3 (2004), 349-373 (p. 350).

[449] Seattle Poly Chick, *Blogiversary: One Year* (4th September 2013) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/09/04/blogiversary-one-year/>

[450] *Ibid.*

[451] Seattle Poly Chick, *Stop Kicking The Teeth* (17th April 2014) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2014/04/17/stop-kicking-the-teeth/>

[452] The concept of consistency as an indication of authenticity is outlined in the Introduction, pp. 13-17.

[453] Seattle Poly Chick, *Blogiversary: One Year* (4th September 2013) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/09/04/blogiversary-one-year/>

of the performative self, the development of a blog narrative suggests a fluid identity that changes over time. However, the archive of a blog means that each self-representation is maintained as a fixed performance, exposing the multiplicity of selves that exist for each individual blogger.

In contrast to the perspective promoted through her blog posts, *Seattle Poly Chick* consistently edits and updates her 'About Me' without a stated rationale. The 'About Me' from the beginning of the capture period focuses on her relationship with her then-husband, whom she stated she was 'very happily married' to.[454] However, during the period of capture, the narrative documents the breakdown of this relationship, and she subsequently removes any mention of him or their relationship from her 'About Me'. This represents a desire to distance her self-representation from their failed relationship, despite it being a topic she regularly discusses within her narratives, and therefore something new readers may require some background information on. As she is polyamorous, both her original and updated 'About Me' list the individuals she is 'currently involved with', which is also continually edited and changed.[455] The fact that she textually constructs herself as feeling so strongly about maintaining the original versions of her self-representative narratives, but chooses to subvert her 'About Me' entirely, demonstrates the importance of this section for bloggers to make their first impression.[456] It also suggests that although *Seattle Poly Chick* is aware that her material is being archived, she does not consider those posts to be as accessible, or prominent, as tabs such as the 'About Me' section. The desire to maintain an up to date 'About Me' section is also evidenced by non-anonymous blogger *Tracey Louise* who states the reason for her updated 'bio' is that her previous one 'was three years old'.[457] She therefore represents her textually constructed self as having an expiration date, after which she no longer feels it is appropriate. This highlights the way in which many of the bloggers approach their 'About Me', perceiving their identity to be routed in the present, and therefore being prompted to modernise this section and provide a fixed and up-to-date construction of self for readers to refer to. However, this is challenged by the archive of old self-representations contained within each blog page, which function to undermine the fixed or developing nature of self. Instead the multiple posts suggest multiple selves, each of which represents a blogger's performance of self in a past context. Rather than trying to replace her old 'About Me', anonymous blogger *Evening Light* places an update at the top of the

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[454] Seattle Poly Chick, 'About Me' <http://seattlepolychick.com/about/> [Original Captured 13th June 2013]

[455] Seattle Poly Chick, 'About Me' <http://seattlepolychick.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]

[456] The importance of the 'About Me' is highlighted in Chapter One: The Bloggers, pp. 65-72.

[457] Tracey Louise, 'About Me' <http://traceylouise.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]

page, but keeps the original one underneath, therefore acknowledging the concurrent differences, or developments in her mediated self.[458] Other bloggers, such as non-anonymous *Not Just A Mum Blog,* choose not to add material but to visibly edit the text that is already there. Her 'About Me' states:

> I ~~work as a school receptionist, something that I am recently new to and like any job it challenges me everyday~~ am now loving being a stay at home mum and although everyday [sic] presents a new challenge, I feel privileged to just be a parent.[459]

This allows her to maintain the description of her former employment, whilst also representing an up to date description of herself. Her 'About Me' therefore exposes the author's changing identity and developing self, as constructed both on and offline. For *Not Just A Mum Blog* this is particularly poignant as the information is related to her old job, and the fact that she left to become a full time mother; an issue that she represents contrasting opinions of within many of her posts.

By prioritising the most recent update on the home page, the medium of blogging gives the impression of temporal proximity to the events being described. The focus on the present is also emphasised by previous research into the blogosphere; for example Page's 2010 work, which highlights the fact that 'episodic narrativity is typical of storytelling in online contexts where recency is prized over retrospection'.[460] Despite this, some of the primary source bloggers choose not to share events that they have experienced recently or are currently happening to them, even if there is a temporal proximity between the writing and publishing of the post. Instead, the bloggers describe their desire to allow themselves some distance between the offline and blogged version of an experience. In one post, non-anonymous blogger *Sheryl's Pearls* implies that she has recently experienced the loss of a significant romantic relationship, but tells her readers 'At some point in the distant future, I'll blog about chances in love, particularly how we fail to recognize them and struggle to take them. One day, when I'm ready'.[461] In contrast to the concept of blog narratives promoting recency, the author constructs the temporal proximity to the event as something that stops her from wanting to share it on her blog. This demonstrates a rejection of the idea that blogs should solely represent the present, and returns the focus of the narrative to her self-representation. It also provides an insight into the literary construction of her narratives,

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[458] Evening Light, 'About Me' <http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]

[459] Not Just A Mum Blog, 'About Me' <http://notjustamumblog.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014] [Emphasis Original]

[460] Ruth Page, 'Re-Examining Narrativity: Small Stories in Status Updates', *Text and Talk,* 30:4 (2010), 423- 444 (pp. 439-440).

[461] Sheryl's Pearls, *Waiting for a Chance at Love* (12th February 2014) <http://www.sheryleigh.com/2014/02/13/waiting-chance-love/>

which she frames as requiring time and thought before she is happy to share them on her blog. By positing the suggested blog post in the 'distant future' she implies to her readers that her blog will continue for an indefinitely long period, meaning there is no pressure or necessity to provide information immediately. Non-anonymous blogger *I've Never Robbed A Bank* also draws attention to the process of writing in this way, as she states at the beginning of a post: 'Okay, yesterday I was trying to write out a post in the new updated version of WordPress for Droid and when I pushed for it to be saved as a draft, it actually posted to my blog'.[462] Although she chooses to leave the post on her blog, her decision to add this disclaimer demonstrates her desire to textually construct the narrative as having been shared prematurely, implying a desire to make her readers aware of this before they read it. She thereby emphasises the fact that although the posts she writes may appear immediate, they are often planned in advance.

In contrast, non-anonymous blogger *Not Just A Mum Blog* sees her narrative as located very much in the here and now. In her 'About Me', she tells her readers: 'So here we are in the present, working hard to get ahead, constantly being challenged as parents and relishing in the blessings we have been given to raise our children'.[463] This summary textually constructs her focus as being on her current position, and particularly her family life, the implication being that this is therefore what she discusses on her blog. However, her self-representative narrative still contains multiple performances of the role of 'mother', as her attitudes and approaches change over time. The date and time-stamps that are attached to her posts also indicate that the 'present' to which she refers is not necessarily immediate, given that she tends to wait until an evening at the end of the week to share her experiences with her readers, again implying a sense of distance.[464] This highlights the extent to which the appearance of blogs as fixed in the present is continually complicated by the medium itself, and the presence of previous selves, even if they are only from the recent past. These examples also demonstrate how the chronology of the blogger's stories, and their correspondence to a blogger's current offline situation, are dependent on the way in which each individual blogger textually constructs themselves through their narrative. Rather than being dictated by the blogging medium, this allows the authors greater freedom over how they construct their self-representations. For all the primary source bloggers, the fact that their previous narratives, and therefore alternative selves, are archived within their blog also complicates their textual performances of self; a problem which is unique to the blogosphere.

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[462] I've Never Robbed A Bank, *This Is A Planned Out Post About Aliens* (20th July 2013) <http://corzgalore.org/2013/07/20/this-is-a-planned-out-post-about-aliens/>
[463] Not Just A Mum Blog, 'About Me' <http://notjustamumblog.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[464] The idea of date-stamped posts is discussed in the Introduction, pp. 6-7.

Instead of the fluid identity seen to develop chronologically within traditional autobiographical texts, the blogosphere exposes the multiplicity and changeability of an individual's identity. In her seminal work *Life on Screen,* Turkle notes that: 'The Internet is another element of the computer culture that has contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity. On it, people are able to build a self by cycling through many selves'.[465] The cyclical conceptualisation used here is problematic, as the idea of a 'cycle' of selves suggests a return to an original self, and therefore implies an essentialist view of identity. Given the possibilities of disembodiment and performativity available online, this thesis rejects the idea of a blogger having a 'true' or original identity. However, Turkle's work does highlight the potential the online world holds for authors to engage in a variety of performances of self, and for the blogosphere to therefore simultaneously host multiple selves of one individual.

Recording and Remembering in the Blogosphere

For some of the primary source bloggers, the need to update and edit their self-representations emphasises the length of time that they have been writing their blog; something which their blog archive allows them to calculate, and reflect upon. Anonymous blogger *Evening Light* informs her readers:

> It's been 335 days since I began this blog, this journey, this cycle of change and growth. 335 days. A bit less than 47 weeks. 8040 hours, give or take. More than 482,000 minutes. Time measured, time spent, some of it wasted, all of it precious, and limited.[466]

By marking this passage of time, she demonstrates her investment in the blog and reiterates to her readers the importance of blogging to her everyday life. For others, the longevity of a blog is demonstrated by the life events that it has spanned. Non-anonymous blogger *Dorky Mum* observes that 'So far, the blog has followed me from Scotland to Hertfordshire to Tasmania, with many interesting detours along the way'.[467] Through her choice of language, the author's description personifies her writing by describing its existence as independent from her as the author. She also states: 'I can't wait to see where it takes me next', implying that the act of blogging is inherently connected with all the other actions in her life, and is not only a place to record events but something that is happening alongside them.[468]

Not all of the primary source bloggers choose to document every detail of their lives, and some even choose to take a break from their blogs, and stop writing updates all

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[465] Turkle, p. 178.
[466] Evening Light, *335 Days* (9th December 2013) <http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/2013/12/09/335-days/>
[467] Dorky Mum, 'About the Blog' Tab <http://dorkymum.wordpress.com/about-the-blog/>
[468] *Ibid.*

together.[469] For anonymous blogger *Fertility Doll* this is a conscious choice. She tells her readers: 'I won't be blogging through the process because my mind needs to focus on other things. I'm already obsessively googling and I can only imagine how I'll be then'.[470] For others, the gaps are not planned in advance, and readers are left in the dark as to the reason for their absence. Anonymous blogger *Free Chick* goes eleven weeks without updating her blog, and upon her return states that it was because she was 'a bit busy with things'; vaguely reassuring her readers 'I will be back at some point'.[471] Fellow anonymous blogger *Quarter For Her Thoughts* is also absent without explanation, as she leaves her blog for eight weeks without an update. Baumer *et al.*'s research suggests that it is more difficult for bloggers to 'get away' with a lack of engagement in the blogosphere if they are identifiable to their audience, as they are not able to disassociate the expectations of updating from their offline lived reality.[472] Both *Fertility Doll* and *Quarter For Her Thoughts* are considered by this thesis to be anonymous, and their blogging behaviour could therefore be seen to echo Baumer's findings. It could also be read as evidence that their anonymous status provides them with a greater sense of freedom over when and how they choose to participate in the blogosphere. Although unexplained absences from the blogosphere are still relatively unusual within the primary source blogs, as emphasised by the common etiquette of bloggers apologising for a lack of posts even when they only miss a week.[473] What these examples demonstrate is that although patterns of behaviour can be traced, even given the relatively small sample discussed here, the individual differences between bloggers naturally leads to differing approaches. Some are keen to maintain up to date information, with varying interpretations of what counts as 'regular' posting; while others acknowledge that the online platform cannot, and perhaps should not document their entire offline life, and are therefore more selective with what and when they share. This disparity is not often acknowledged by studies into the blogosphere, which primarily homogenise bloggers, and especially the magnitude of female personal journal bloggers; characterising them all as oversharing, self-indulgent and reactionary.

Despite their differing levels of disclosure, all of the bloggers construct a persona that can be read through their narrative updates, and these performances of self are then recorded within the online platform. In his 2004 text, van Dijck suggests that 'People (and,

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[469] As outlined in the Methodology (pp. 29-30), any blog that stopped for more than three months was excluded from the data capture. Some of the primary source bloggers which were included, such as *Free Chick*, came very close to this boundary.

[470] Fertility Doll, *Oh Hai Der!* (13th September 2013) <http://fertilitydoll.wordpress.com/2013/09/13/oh-hai-der/>

[471] Free Chick, *The Wanderer Returns* (26th May 2014) <http://freechick.wordpress.com/2014/05/26/the-wanderer-returns/>

[472] Baumer *et al.*, p. 7.

[473] As identified in Chapter Two: The Readers, pp. 90-121.

one could argue, especially young people) wield media technologies to save lived experiences for future recall, while shaping their identities in ritualised processes'.[474] Although his assertion that the engagement in online media is primarily the domain of 'young' people would appear unsubstantiated and therefore reductive, his analysis highlights how blogging can be viewed as a way of recording a past, through representations of the present, in order to call upon in the future. This conceptualises blogs as an in-between or liminal space, in which the past, present and future are combined in order to textually construct a bloggers identity performance.[475] This is emphasised by anonymous blogger *Quarter For Her Thoughts*, who states in her 'About Me': 'I've told my readers about the men I've loved, and the man I currently love. I've shared with you my past, and I've opened up about my hopes for the future'.[476] As part of the introduction to her narrative, she stresses to her readers that her self-representative narrative involves an amalgamation of her past, present and future selves; which combine to form her online persona. She is therefore inviting those who read her blog to hear the story of her life, not just to read a snapshot of her current self-representation.

The amalgamation of archived past, present and future selves within a blog space represents the multiplicity of each blogger's performed identity; something which is unique to the blogosphere. By presenting each of these 'selves' to be read individually, out of context, or non-chronologically, the authors allow themselves and their stories to be read in a variety of ways. The archived format allows each author to create a nuanced self-representation across their blog narrative, and also provides readers with a detailed insight into the blogger's performed persona. In this way, blogs could be seen to resemble common metaphors for the human memory. As van Dijck outlines in 'Memory Matters in the Digital Age':

> Metaphors like the library and the archive were commonly used to explain the retention of information or the preservation of experience in an enclosed space, from which it can be retrieved on command. […] Of all connectionist metaphors that philosophers (and neuroscientists) have introduced over the years, the networked computer is probably the most prominent.[477]

In attempting to conceptualise the way in which humans remember information, theorists utilise the metaphorical notion of a 'networked computer' in which information is stored, and can be retrieved. Although current neurobiological research would argue that the storage and recovery of memories within the brain is a much more complicated process, the

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[474] van Dijck, (2004), p. 362.
[475] The idea of liminality and blogs as liminal spaces is outlined in the Methodology, p. 46.
[476] Quarter For Her Thoughts, 'About Me' <http://quarterforherthoughts.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[477] van Dijck, (2004), pp. 352-353.

comparison between a human 'memory bank' and the storage of a computer remains persistent in many cultural representations.[478] The way in which the self-representations of blog narratives are archived within a consistent host site, allowing access to previous ideas and presentations, could provide a more detailed continuation of this metaphor. However, although in theory the past of the blog remains fixed, what undermines this understanding is the ability of authors to edit their archives, and interfere with their representation of past 'memories'. Therefore, for van Dijck, 'blogging constitutes a new concept of memory, allowing for preservation and erasure simultaneously'.[479] He suggests that the digital world presents possibilities of longevity beyond any other form of documentation, but is also less fixed than memories, as the information stored online 'is capable of being reworked to yield endless potentialities of a past'.[480] The concept of the online world as more fixed than memory is undermined by the subjectivity involved in personal memory, in comparison to the digital memory of a machine. Although van Dijck's work usefully highlights the possibilities that the blogosphere offers users to record and edit their own self-representative narratives, the majority of the primary source bloggers do not alter their archived material.[481] In the context of this thesis, his concept of 'endless potentialities of a past' more appropriately describes the possibility for authors to textually construct a past that is different to their offline lived experiences, and therefore perform an alternative historical self.

<u>Living in the Past</u>

For many of the primary source bloggers, past experiences play a significant role in the way they self-represent. This is despite the fact that the reverse-chronology of the platform automatically places an emphasis on the most current material, and therefore on the blogger's most recent experiences. Post-anonymous blogger *What Kate Did Next*, describes events from her past as hugely influential in shaping who she constructs herself to be in the present. In her 'About Me' she immediately shares the most devastating event that she has experienced, revealing to readers that 'Daughter Number One died almost 6 years ago at 14 years of age'.[482] This event from years earlier is pivotal in how she describes herself, and it is shown to be the motivation and consistent focus of her narrative. Although

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[478] The example of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) is used to demonstrate this; Clay Routledge, Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut, and Jacob Juhl, 'Finding Meaning in One's Past: Nostalgia as an Existential Resource' in *The Psychology of Meaning* ed. by Keith D. Markman, Travis Proulx, and Matthew J. Lindberg (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2013), pp. 297-316.
[479] José van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (California: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 75.
[480] van Dijck, (2004), p. 370.
[481] As discussed above in the 'Blogs as Archives' section, pp. 144-150.
[482] What Kate Did Next, 'About Me' <http://whatkatedidnext.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]

none of the other bloggers are as consumed by something from their past, many of them hold up historical events as key moments through which to define their performed identity. For example, anonymous blogger *Evening Light* highlights the moment she ended her first marriage, telling readers 'It was – and remains – a very important moment in my life'.[483] The designation of life-changing moments is most obviously demonstrated by the primary source bloggers who have had children; all of whom use their narratives to emphasise the impact that becoming a mother has had on them. For post-anonymous blogger *Mum and More*, her daughter gives her life a purpose and this is reflected in her 'About Me', which simply states: 'I am a single mother to my daughter Rose, born November 2012'.[484] By defining herself through the birth of her child, the blogger positions the moment in her past when she became a parent as pivotal to her sense of self.[485]

The primary source blogger's decision to describe their past experiences within their narrative can be read as an example of nostalgia. In contemporary Western society, the term nostalgia is often associated with a positive remembering of the past, and the dictionary definition highlights the idea of 'longing', implying a desire to return to an earlier time.[486] Despite these positive connotations, nostalgia has historically been considered as a negative experience, often manifesting as extreme homesickness. Routledge *et al.*'s 2013 research into 'Nostalgia as an Existential Resource' highlights that although 'perspectives on the causes of nostalgia varied, it was, for the most part, viewed as a mental illness well into the 20th century'.[487] However, in the course of their research they conclude that: 'Reflecting nostalgically on the past betters one's affective state, bolsters and protects the positivity of the self, strengthens a sense of social connectedness, and […] imbues life with purpose and meaning'.[488] They therefore argue that nostalgia can be an important part of an individual's construction of self, and their social communication. One of the reasons that the past is so important to many of the primary source bloggers is that it symbolises historically experienced traumatic events, which they construct themselves as being unable, or unwilling, to leave behind. Several of the authors use their narratives as a place to share their stories with a perceived audience; many of which contain depictions of childhood abuse, abandonment and violence. Through their texts, they therefore construct the blogosphere as a space in which they feel they can safely disclose and discuss these

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[483] Evening Light, *Independence Day Now* (4th July 2013) <http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/2013/07/04/independence-day-now/>
[484] Mum and More, 'About Me' <http://roseandmumandmore.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[485] The implications of this on the author's self-representation are discussed in Chapter One: The Bloggers, p. 69.
[486] 'nostalgia', *The Oxford English Dictionary* <http://www.oed.com> [Accessed 13th April 2016]
[487] Routledge *et al.*, p. 299.
[488] Routledge *et al.*, p. 312.

experiences, in contrast to their conceptualisation of the offline world. The stories that the primary source bloggers share are often loaded with emotional tension, and are therefore framed negatively.[489] A 2004 study by van Dijck's suggests that 'negative emotional memories are retained in a lot more detail than positive emotional memories'.[490] The primary source blogger's narrative descriptions superficially appear to collude with this perspective given the detailed descriptions of traumatic events. However, it is not that the narrative descriptions of positively framed emotional experiences lack detail, but that they are not as present in the narrative as a whole. Although some authors choose to share happy things that they have experienced, they are not depicted as significant in framing the personae of the author. In contrast, the descriptions of past traumas are outlined as integral to many of the author's textual constructions of self, and are therefore repeatedly and specifically described within the narrative.

Anonymous blogger *1 Year of Single* repeatedly tells readers stories of her dysfunctional childhood, stating: 'Neither of my parents were alcoholics, but they were both physically abusive and emotionally abandoned me'.[491] Within the material captured for this study, the blogger does not describe her experiences in great detail, but repeatedly alludes to it in the context of recent events, and cites a previous blog post in which she told her 'story'.[492] For example, in a post about her current relationship, she states: 'My parents never appreciated who I was, they never really allowed me to be myself […] subtle signals that implied I wasn't good enough'.[493] In this case the embedded intertextual reference becomes part of her testimonial, and the fact that she has this previous post archived means that she can utilise earlier narratives as part of her current self-representation. She also uses this same post as a way of explaining her behaviour in other traumatic situations, such as dealing with the abuse of her husband whom she describes as a 'serious alcoholic'.[494] In one post she describes how she felt unsafe in her own home, stating: 'The fear of being killed was overwhelming. My husband had a shotgun, knives'.[495] When, in the comment section of her blog, she is asked by several readers why she did not leave him earlier, she replies:

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[489] The description of emotional tensions within the blog narratives is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three: Emotional Experiences, pp. 123-143.

[490] van Dijck, (2004), pp. 353-354.

[491] 1 Year of Single, *The Pre-Thanksgiving Alcoholic* (9th November 2013) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/11/09/the-pre-thanksgiving-alcoholic/>

[492] 1 Year of Single, *How My Mother Made Me Desperate* (28th May 2013) <https://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/05/28/how-my-mother-made-me-desperate/>

[493] 1 Year of Single, *Why Men Love Bitches* (22nd July 2013) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/07/22/the-key-to-the-matrix/>

[494] 1 Year of Single, *GWLMIT* (22nd October 2013) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/10/22/gwlmit/>

[495] *Ibid.*

'Read "How My Mother Made Me Desperate," and it'll make more sense'.[496] In these examples she uses her past post in-lieu of new or present self-representative writing, meaning it functions as a personified textual version of her constructed blog identity. By referring to this experience in the context of another traumatic event, she also demonstrates her repeated victimisation, and indicates the affect that these experiences have had on her identity. The above quotations represent her childhood experiences as a rationale behind her lack of action, but they are also presented elsewhere in her narrative as the motivation behind moments in her past where she has demonstrated increased agency. For example, she describes how she made the decision to save her son from his alcoholic father, stating: 'I had to save his life like no one saved mine'.[497] In this instance the blogger represents her past as something that she has been able to learn from, and use to form a better future.

The trauma *1 Year of Single* experienced as a child is also referenced in the narrative as a way of explaining her current behaviour. Her blog posts often describe her failed relationships, and she describes how her insecurity is an example of herself 'competing with the preconditioning from my psychotic mother', again referencing the same post in which she shares the 'story' of her childhood.[498] The decision for authors to share stories of past trauma within their blog narratives emphasises how they perceive the blogosphere as a safe space; in other words, somewhere where they feel they will not be criticised or blamed for their experiences. This lack of judgement is constructed by the bloggers as a form of freedom, which allows them to self-disclose without the limitations and judgements they construct themselves as facing in the offline world; something which is read by this thesis as the authors demonstrating increased levels of agency over their narrative. This is particularly emphasised by the stories of childhood trauma, as the victims cannot always tell their stories at the time, and the blogosphere is therefore constructed by the authors as an opportunity to speak about these experiences sometimes for the first time. Routledge *et al.* highlight the importance of this type of sharing, as they describe an individual's nostalgic episodes as 'snapshots of the […] life experiences that infuse life with a sense of meaning'.[499] They suggest that although nostalgia can be characterised as a negative desire for something that is passed, the remembering of historical events and selves can actually provide an individual with a meaningful sense of satisfaction at what they have achieved, even if some past experiences are perceived as negative. This can allow

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[496] 1 Year of Single, Comments on *GWLMIT* (22nd October 2013) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/10/22/gwlmit/>
[497] 1 Year of Single, *The Pre-Thanksgiving Alcoholic* (9th November 2013) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/11/09/the-pre-thanksgiving-alcoholic/>
[498] 1 Year of Single, *Hey hey hey, Goodbye!* (15th September 2013) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/09/15/moving-on/>
[499] Routledge *et al.,* p. 303.

individuals to think more positively about their present, and Routledge *et al.* propose that using nostalgia to find meaning in previous experiences could therefore be used as a 'mental health intervention'.[500] There are several examples of this concept within the primary source bloggers, as many of the authors who construct themselves as suffering with mental health issues, also use their blog narrative to represent stories and events from their past.[501] Therefore, within their textually constructed self, they use their past as a way to find meaning in their present, and in turn make it meaningful for their future.

As with other narrative self-disclosure, the sharing of past experiences is done in different ways by each of the individual bloggers. For example, in contrast to the regularity with which *1 Year of Single* discusses her relationship with her parents, post-anonymous blogger *Seattle Poly Chick* only rarely reveals anything about the story of her dysfunctional childhood, despite often sharing confessional narratives about her sexual life. When she does share the story with her readers, it is done in the context of her current relationships. She tells her readers 'It took years of difficult work to see that I was lovable and that I even wanted love and […] to see where that shit came from'.[502] This concession constructs the continued impact of her past as a motivation for her behaviour, and she therefore seeks to explain her experiences to her readers. She describes how:

> My mom left the first time when I was about 9 months old and returned some time close to my 2nd birthday. She remarried my dad and then began to divorce him again a short while later. It took about 3 years for that second divorce to be final after hearing after hearing after hearing, and I lived with my father. […] He wouldn't ever tell me what she did. But I can guess.[503]

This description is less defined than the story *1 Year of Single* tells, which can be read as further emphasis of the author's youth and vulnerability at the time of the events. By constructing the events as simultaneously unknown, and knowable, without providing her readers with any more detail, the author also hints at the possibility that this will be a subject that she may return to in future posts. However, it is also something which could undermine the extent to which her story is interpreted by readers as an authentic account of her past. Especially as, unlike the past of *1 Year of Single*, *Seattle Poly Chick*'s past is consciously not being blogged, which may reduce the reader's feeling of 'knowing' an author's 'real' story. Carolyn Kay Steedman suggests that readers should be sceptical about the author's accounts of their own history, stating that 'Personal interpretations of past time [are] the

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[500] Routledge *et al.*, p. 311.
[501] The discussion of mental health within the blogosphere is outlined in Chapter One: The Bloggers, (pp. 81-85) and Chapter Three: Emotional Experiences (pp. 138-140).
[502] Seattle Poly Chick, *This One's For Me* (5th June 2014) <http://seattlepolychick.com/2014/06/05/this-ones-for-me/>
[503] *Ibid.*

stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit'.[504] Her argument demonstrates the extent to which an author's depiction of their own experiences and journey are inherently viewed through their own biased perspective, and therefore their self-representations of the past are no more guaranteed to be 'authentic' than those of the present. As van Dijck argues, 'Personal memories, at the moment of inscription, are prone to wishful thinking, just as memories upon retrieval are vulnerable to reconsolidation'.[505] Unlike with the descriptions of an author's present day experiences, the depiction of past events is not inhibited by an author's anonymity, as the authenticity of past experiences is much more difficult to challenge. The choice of bloggers to include stories of their past could therefore be viewed as an opportunity for the author to transgress their normal limitations of sharing, and tell more of their story to the blogosphere; even if it is only their interpretation of past events.

For other bloggers, the allusion to past trauma remains vague and subtle, despite being a deliberate contribution to their textual constructions of self. Post-anonymous blogger *Mum and More,* only mentions her past traumas in the context of how she can try and protect her own daughter, which is the main topic of her blog. She tells readers: 'I was used and abused, beaten both physically and verbally. And I was an adult, and my mother couldn't save me, just be there to pick up the pieces when I allowed it'.[506] Although this act of self-disclosure exposes something about her past, it is only seen as relevant to her in the context of her current relationship with her daughter. As well as emphasising her focus on motherhood, this also grounds the narrative in the author's present situation, which she frames as the most important. This same approach to disclosure is shown by anonymous blogger *29 to Life*, who shares details about her past to try and explain why she is fearful of having children. She admits to her readers: 'I'm very afraid of being resentful about having a child and not having the maternal feelings mothers are "supposed" to have. And I know my experience with my mother plays a large role in that'.[507] In this case, the events of her past are seen to dictate not just the blogger's current situation, but her potential plans for the future. More than just history, in these examples a blogger's past is seen as something which actively contributes to and informs their current identity, and therefore their narrative self-representation. Anonymous blogger *Evening Light* also considers the events of her past as a way of pinpointing previous versions of herself, that have combined to create who she

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[504] Carolyn Kay Steedman, 'Stories' in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 1998), pp. 243-254 (p. 244).
[505] van Dijck (2004), p. 370.
[506] Mum and More, *Exposure To Cruelty* (25th November 2013) <http://roseandmumandmore.com/2013/11/25/exposure-to-cruelty/>
[507] 29 to Life, *Miriam Carey Is Not So Different From My Mom* (4th October 2013) <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/10/04/miriam-carey-is-not-so-different-from-my-mom/>

is in the present. She tells readers: 'I am a trauma survivor. I am a domestic violence survivor. I am a rape survivor. I am a war veteran. These are *part* of who I am*'*.[508] This perspective is also emphasised in a later post, where she states: 'I don't believe one becomes whole by leaving part of oneself behind or by abandoning past pains, but by acknowledging those pains and by nurturing the part of oneself that felt them'.[509] Janice Haaken highlights how women's choice to speak about their pasts allows them 'to become authors of their own lives'.[510] The process of embracing the past is therefore seen as particularly important in women's autobiographical narratives, such as that of the primary source bloggers. The depiction of an author's history is not only seen to contribute to their current constructed identity, but also to provide them with an increased feeling of agency over the telling of their story.

Leaving the Past Behind

Many of the bloggers acknowledge the past as a key part of their present; but instead of embracing their past, some bloggers would prefer to disassociate their current self from their past selves. For post-anonymous blogger *Seattle Poly Chick*, the separation of time allows her to distance herself from the issues she has struggled with in the past. She tells her readers: 'I got sober at 16 and have been sober for over 23 years [...] I am not remotely the same person I was then'.[511] Although it pre-dates her narrative, by describing this past experience the author is able to construct herself as strong, and emphasise to readers how far she has come in the time that has passed. Anonymous blogger *Quarter For Her Thoughts* also uses the contrast of past and present to demonstrate her personal progression, as she tells readers:

> It was around this time last year when I had my meltdown. [...] My life isn't perfect yet, and I doubt that's even possible, but I have come so, so far over this past year. I'm finally living for me, and I'm happy about that.[512]

As with the example from *Seattle Poly Chick*, by using her narrative to depict a negative view of her past, *Quarter For Her Thoughts* is able to represent her current self-representation as developed and improved. Non-anonymous blogger *Psychobabble* goes one step further than

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[508] Evening Light, *Strange Quiet Morning* (7th April 2014)
<http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/2014/04/07/strange-quiet-morning/>
[509] Evening Light, *Conversations With Myself* (21st July 2013)
<http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/2013/07/21/conversations-with-myself/>
[510] Janice Haaken, 'The Recovery of Memory, Fantasy, and Desire in Women's Trauma Stories: Feminist Approaches to Sexual Abuse and Psychotherapy' in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 1998), pp. 352-361 (p. 353).
[511] Seattle Poly Chick, *Opening Up To Possibility* (21th August 2013)
<http://seattlepolychick.com/2013/08/12/opening-up-to-possibility/>
[512] Quarter For Her Thoughts, *Around A Year Ago* (12th August 2013)
<http://quarterforherthoughts.com/2013/08/12/around-a-year-ago/>

this and uses her own archive of blog posts as a way of creating a historical contrast to her current self-representation. As part of a post announcing her pregnancy, she admits to her readers: 'I am incredibly thankful and blessed and in awe that my body is able to sustain a pregnancy, especially considering my [medical history]'.[513] The reference she includes is a post from 2012 that talks about her battle with ovarian cancer; meaning she can provide her readers with an explanation of how she feels, and why this is relevant, without having to directly discuss a traumatic period of her life.

Although it is common to *all* of the primary source blogs, for some authors, the literary technique of self-reflection is rendered more significant by the New Year. Non-anonymous blogger *Sheryl's Pearls* takes the time in December 2013 to reflect on the year she has had, specifically in comparison to a traumatic 2012. She describes to readers how '2012 was about tearing down. […] And once everything was torn down, after a long cry at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, 2013 has been about rebuilding'.[514] Fellow non-anonymous blogger *Dorky Mum* also spends her New Year's Eve considering recent history, stating: 'That was quite a year, wasn't it? […] what big changes there have been in our lives over the last twelve months'.[515] This sense of reflection is translated into a specific blog post in which the author uses her archive of previous narratives to collate some of her favourite and most significant posts from the last year, and share it with her readers. Although New Year's Eve is a traditional time of reflection in the offline world, this ability to explore and re-experience moments from the past, or recent history, is facilitated in a new way by the blogosphere. For anonymous blogger *Quarter For Her Thoughts*, the process of thinking back on 2013 is not only focused on the past and the present, but also her future. As she concludes her review of the year, she tells readers: 'Moving into 2014, I'm expecting the year to be mostly focused on the adoption process […] and hopefully by spring I'll be in the system and waiting to be matched with my future children'.[516] These examples demonstrate the extent to which the past is used within the blogger's narrative as a benchmark against which authors can measure their present self representation, and their plans for the future.

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[513] Psychobabble, *It's Alive!* (3rd February 2014) <http://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2014/02/03/its-alive/> Links to Psychobabble, *50/50, Cancer, and an Ovary* (7th February 2012) <https://psychobabblepants.wordpress.com/2012/02/07/5050-cancer-and-an-ovary/>

[514] Sheryl's Pearls, *2013: A Year of Rebuilding* (30th December 2013) <http://www.sheryleigh.com/2013/12/30/2013-a-year-of-rebuilding/>

[515] Dorky Mum, *Cheerio 2013!* (31st December 2013) <http://dorkymum.wordpress.com/2013/12/31/cheerio-2013/>

[516] Quarter For Her Thoughts, *2013 On Fire* (18th December 2013) <http://quarterforherthoughts.com/2013/12/18/2013-on-fire/>

<u>The Future Self</u>

The self-representations of the primary source blogs are often concerned with what the authors would like to do, or be, in the future. New Media Studies research, such as Brooke Erin Duffy's 2015 study 'Gendering the Labour of Social Media Production', highlights the aspirational nature of social media, which is seen as a symptom of the individualist and capitalist culture of desire prevalent in twenty first century society.[517] These studies are primarily focused on picture blogging sites such as *Instagram* and *Pinterest*, and social networks such as *Facebook*, which are seen as a place to represent an individual's 'best' self. Although they are not as focused on visual representations, personal journal blogs are also a medium through which individuals represent their desired self, much like traditional diary forms in which authors confide their hopes and wishes. These future objectives are not always directly addressed in the text, but are often alluded to by the authors. The most common way in which the bloggers portray their future goals is through a sense of self-improvement; striving to be something or someone 'better' than who they are representing themselves as currently being. Anonymous blogger *1 Year of Single's* whole blog is based around the idea of her creating a different kind of future for herself. This is motivated by past experiences and is represented in her 'About Me' with the assertion that she is: 'One girl, purposely single for one year'.[518] However, this plan for the future does not go as smoothly as she might have hoped, and she repeatedly 'resets the single clock' that is represented by a daily countdown in her narrative. In one post, she addresses the latest reason for having to reset the countdown, remarking to her readers: 'I'm making the frickin' To-Do list for my year this year and I'm resetting the mother-frickin clock to today. I'm frickin' single starting today'.[519] The narrative clearly demonstrates the author's frustration with herself for having entered into a relationship, and therefore not having been able to maintain her 'singleness' for the time she originally stated; emphasised through the text by the repetition of the pseudo-swear word 'frickin'. This issue highlights the extent to which the present can be seen to interrupt the blogger's plans for the future, and therefore emphasises the unpredictability of documenting life events as they occur.

The fluidity of blogging allows for this inconsistency, and can therefore be read as a form of live autobiography; a story that develops and changes as it is being told. This happens with *1 Year of Single* on two separate occasions, and suggests her aspirations to

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[517] Brooke Erin Duffy, 'Gendering The Labour Of Social Media Production', *Feminist Media Studies*, 15:4 (2015), 710-714. Another example is: Jen Almjeld, 'Collecting Girlhood: Pinterest Cyber Collections Archive Available Female Identities', *Girlhood Studies,* 8:3 (2015), 6-22.

[518] 1 Year of Single, 'Headline' <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/about/>

[519] 1 Year of Single, *Wake the Fuck Up and Smash the Rose Coloured Glasses* (30th July 2013) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2013/07/30/wake-the-fuck-up-smash-the-rose-colored-glasses/>

stay 'single' for a year are not necessarily achievable. Clearly, the constructed persona she desires to portray through her blog is based on a performance of self that she cannot successfully maintain. Her blog is unable to tell the story she wants to write, because her offline lived experiences repeatedly interrupt her, and so the story must change direction. Therefore, the persona upon which she originally constructed the blog is not always the one that she performs in the narrative, again emphasising the possibilities for blogs to contain multiple performances of self.

Despite this consistent struggle, being single is actually only one of *1 Year of* Single's many aspirations for her future self. For example, both she, and fellow anonymous blogger *29 to Life*, discuss in their blogs the idea of losing weight, which they believe could change their lives and offer them a better future.[520] They suggest that by losing weight they will be deemed more sexually attractive, and therefore more likely to be able to find a desirable partner. Their quest for a superficial ideal demonstrates the extent to which women in contemporary society are conditioned to believe that they must adhere to a model of female beauty. The performance of femininity is therefore framed as bodily, rather than social or psychological. Genz and Brabon argue that this creates a culture in which 'the possession of a 'sexy body' is presented as women's key source of identity', and therefore their ultimate aim.[521] By framing their aspirations in this way, the authors construct their plans for the future as inherently influenced by their interpretation of male desire, even if this is not their conscious motivation. Non-anonymous blogger *Not Just A Mum Blog* also describes aspirations that are focused on the pleasure of a man, in this case, her husband. She tells readers: 'I have plans to get my old self back and give my husband a friendlier, happier more loving wife'.[522] Both the focus on traditional standards of beauty, and the adherence to a stereotypical role of wife and mother, perpetuate patriarchal notions of women's role in society. In her seminal feminist text, *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf highlights this obsession with appearance as comparable with the historical focus on women's fertility. She states that:

> The Victorian woman became her ovaries, as today's woman has become her 'beauty.' Her reproductive value, as the 'aesthetic' value of her face and body today, came to be seen as a sacred trust, one that she must constantly guard.[523]

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[520] 1 Year of Single, *Losing That Last 15: Consider the Blocks of Butter* (8th February 2014) <http://1yearofsingle.wordpress.com/2014/02/08/losing-that-last-15-consider-the-blocks-of-butter/>
29 to Life, *Am I 20 Pounds Away From Mr Right?* (23rd September 2013) <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/2013/09/23/am-i-20-pounds-away-from-mr-right/>
[521] Genz and Brabon, (2009), p. 102.
[522] Not Just A Mum Blog, *I Want My Wife Back* (12th September 2013) <http://notjustamumblog.wordpress.com/2013/09/12/i-want-my-wife-back/>
[523] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1990), p. 222.

By drawing attention to the cultural conditioning inherent in the 'beauty myth', Wolf problematises the way in which women are subordinated and constrained by the desire to adhere to these ideals; something which many other feminists have also sought to challenge. The fact that the primary source bloggers are engaging with this conceptualisation of femininity, without problematising it, suggests a rejection or ignorance of these feminist arguments. It could also be read as evidence of postfeminist culture impacting upon the way in which they construct their female self-representations. As a postfeminist theorist, Genz argues that 'The postfeminist landscape generates complex and ambiguous portrayals of femaleness, femininity, and feminism, exploring the contingent and unresolvable tension between these subject positions'.[524] Therefore, the decision of the authors to construct themselves as adhering to offline ideals of femininity and beauty could be seen to represent a negotiation of these differing identities, and perceived as an example of the blogger's individual choices in how they construct themselves. However, in her 2007 text on 'Postfeminist Media Culture', Rosalind Gill critiques what she considers to be the dominant features of postfeminist discourse. For example, 'the notion that femininity is a bodily property; […] the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; […] a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference'.[525] The impact of these conceptualisations are reflected in *1 Year of Single* and *29 to Life*'s desire to control their weight, and the way in which *Not Just A Mum Blog* frames her quest for self-improvement around her husband's happiness; all of which appear to undermine the agency of the author rather than emphasise their freedom to choose. Therefore, these examples further emphasise the way in which offline social structures continue to impact upon women's behaviour within the offline world.

In contrast, non-anonymous blogger *Tracey Louise*'s plans and hopes for her own future are removed from her offline relationship, and focused on her own aspirations and ambitions. One particular moment which she refers to as pre-determined is the end of her blog, and her plan to remove herself from all social media. She tells readers, 'I decided the finishing date of this blog on the day I began writing, it's on a timer, but the alarm isn't due to go off yet'.[526] By revealing that the end of her blog is imminent, *Tracey Louise* presents the narrative as exclusive and therefore more desirable, as it is available for a restricted time only. This may be a deliberate way of enticing readers with the prospect of the content being limited, regardless of whether it will remain archived on the host site *Wordpress*. The use of

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[524] Stéphanie Genz, 'Singled Out: Postfeminism's "New Woman" and the Dilemma of Having It All', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 43:1 (2010), 97-119 (98).
[525] Rosalind Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10:2 (2007), 147-166 (p. 149).
[526] Tracey Louise, *Hitting The Fan* (17th June 2013)
<http://traceylouise.wordpress.com/2013/06/17/hitting-the-fan/>

the term 'alarm' is metaphorical, but it still implies a sense of urgency and immediacy that encourages readers to try and make the most of her posts while they can. For other bloggers, the future represents unknown possibilities, and their blog is a space in which they can discuss this, and share their ideas with an audience. Despite her blog name appearing to suggest reflection, anonymous blogger *29 to Life* states that it 'is more of a celebration of the future and maturity than Swan Song to my second decade of life'.[527] She emphasises that, for her, the most exciting things are yet to come, and the blog allows her a space in which to explore those things as they occur. Fellow anonymous blogger *Evening Light* reflects a similar attitude, stating:

> There are so many experiences I would like to have – I'm not sure 50 years is actually enough for the *easy* ones, and I'm often doubtful I'll get to some of the odd stuff I'd like to explore […] but there *are* things I want to do – not 'before I die', just 'at all' because I want to.[528]

Although she reflects that '50 years is a much longer time to contemplate going into it, than it is looking back', her self-representation remains focused on the positive elements that the future can offer.[529] For her, blogging is part of this planned future, and this represents the possibilities of long-term engagement that such a flexible and accessible medium can offer users.

Within the blogosphere, authors always have the option of editing their narratives, and therefore the archives of posts are not a permanently fixed record. However, the analysis of the primary source blogs suggests that the bloggers generally do not alter their original posts, even if they choose to edit sections such as their 'About Me'.[530] The posts therefore remain archived as a record of the blogger's opinions and experiences, potentially remaining even after the blogger has stopped posting updates. This is demonstrated by the data capture of this thesis, which began with forty primary source blogs but ended up with only seventeen, as twenty-three were abandoned, or deleted completely by the author and were therefore inaccessible.[531] Of the twenty that were abandoned, eighteen of the original primary source blogs are still accessible, and therefore the posts that were made by the author are still able to be read and consumed, existing in suspended animation.[532] For one of the primary source bloggers who was included in the final analysis, post-anonymous *What*

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[527] 29 to Life, 'About Me' <http://29tolife.wordpress.com/about/> [Last Accessed 13th June 2014]
[528] Evening Light, *Time, Perspective and 50 More* (29th June 2013)
<http://chaosanddamage.wordpress.com/2013/06/29/time-perspective-and-50-more/>
[529] *Ibid.*
[530] As discussed in the 'Blogs as Archives' section above, pp. 144-150.
[531] The complete outline of the data capture process is available in the Methodology, pp. 27-32.
[532] Correct at time of writing, July 2016.

Kate Did Next, the concept of social media as a permanent record has personal implications. She tells readers:

> How I WISH my Daughter Number One had been around to have facebook [sic]. How I wish I could now still look at her photo's [sic], photo's [sic] friends may have tagged her in, music and other links she shared, what books she read, the statuses she posted. How I wish she'd had Instagram and Twitter – all of it [sic]. These are the ways I stay connected to her friends and I watch their lives and learn of their passions and I love it.[533]

This heartfelt desire demonstrates the extent to which social media is considered a space where individuals leave a trace of their identity; one which can potentially outlive the person it represents. Not only could this be seen as a powerful record of the past, but also as something to save for the future. Blogs could therefore create a tangible legacy for individual authors, and document life stories that would not otherwise be read.

This chapter shows that although personal journal blogging represents many features of traditional life writing and other autobiographical forms, the features of the online platform allow for a unique collection of past, present and future performances of self within one narrative. The way in which blog narratives are archived offers unprecedented longevity to the medium, whilst the fluidity of online texts means the bloggers may change or remove content at will; therefore, the blogs are simultaneously vulnerable to the whims of their authors. Despite the primacy of the present within the blogosphere, the analysis of this thesis shows that the past, both blogged and pre-blog, plays an important role in the bloggers' textual constructions of self. This is particularly highlighted by the commonality of bloggers who share stories of their traumatic past experiences; a pattern which emphasises the authors' perception of the blogosphere as a safe space. It also highlights how the authors view the platform as a place where they can share stories that they construct as previously being kept secret; giving a 'public' voice to experiences that are not normally spoken about. By using the past as a benchmark, bloggers are also able to compare and contrast their current situation, in order to frame their present as more positive. The bloggers are concurrently seen to look to the future, reinforcing the conceptualisation of social media as an aspirational space. Overall, the fluidity with which bloggers are able to use their narratives to move between their past, present and future selves represents the flexibility of blogging as a narrative form, and its potential to be a liminal space in which female authors can self-represent.

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[533] What Kate Did Next, *Beautiful Girl Stay With Me* (7th June 2014) <http://whatkatedidnext.wordpress.com/2014/06/07/beautiful-girl-stay-with-me/>

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the possibilities that the blogosphere's anonymity could offer female users to have more control and creative freedom over their self-representation, and questioned whether there is therefore 'agency in anonymity'. It has, in essence, investigated the extent to which being disassociated from their offline lived reality allows female authors to write more freely, or share their stories in a different way. Anonymity is highlighted by many previous studies as a key factor in attracting authors to the blogosphere, and encouraging them to self-disclose.[534] However, one of the key findings of this thesis is that the conceptualisation of anonymity needs to be rendered more complex than a present/absent binary. This thesis therefore defined anonymity as the disassociation of a blogger's online world from their offline world; acknowledging the intermediate area between being fully anonymous and fully identifiable. However, despite this progressive and fluid interpretation of anonymity, the findings of the analysis demonstrate that anonymity is even more complicated and subjective than formerly considered. Unlike previous research, which suggests that users are motivated to conceal their offline identity by the possibilities of audience, this analysis demonstrates that it is other users in the blogosphere who impose an anonymous status upon the author, through their reading of the blog narrative. The primary source bloggers do not discuss their own anonymity within their blog narratives, and only a few are seen to consciously acknowledge their choice to hide their offline identity. When they do so, it is primarily through the comment section of a blog post, and therefore in direct correspondence with a reader. Although their anonymity is not reliant on their audience, it is the readers who are seen to prioritise the importance of anonymity, rather than the bloggers themselves. In contrast to the findings of previous studies, the lack of anxiety surrounding their anonymous status suggests that although a useful feature, the anonymity of the platform is not the main attraction for the primary source blog authors examined here. This is exemplified by three of the primary source blogs who were originally judged to be anonymous, but who during the period of data capture changed and adapted their levels of hiddenness; acquiring the unorthodox position of existing as both anonymous and non-anonymous. To accommodate this unique development, a third category of 'post-anonymous' was created to distinguish these primary source bloggers. Although the shift in anonymity alters the way in which the blogs are considered by this analysis, it does not inherently change the behaviour and narrative construction of the bloggers. As with the other anonymous primary source bloggers, the concept of concealing their identity is not explicitly

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[534] As outlined in the Introduction, p. 12-13.

addressed, and of the three newly defined 'post-anonymous' bloggers, only one of them is seen to acknowledge their new visibility.

All of the primary source bloggers, including those who choose to maintain anonymity, show a lack of concern for their perceived anonymous status. What is prioritised by the authors is their own sense of anonymity, and personal perceptions of hiddenness, which exist separately from external interpretations of their narrative. Therefore, anonymity can be seen as another aspect of the author's textually constructed self, and as performative rather than definitive. Through their textually constructed selves and varying interpretations of hiddenness, the anonymous and post-anonymous primary source bloggers reflect the definition utilised by this thesis of anonymity as a disassociation between a blogger's online and offline life. This hiddenness could also be applied to the non-anonymous primary source blogs, some of whom represent their narratives as a 'private' experience that they do not share with offline friends and acquaintances. The anonymity of all the different primary source blog authors therefore exists on a spectrum, which includes anonymous, post-anonymous and non-anonymous. The disassociation between online and offline is encouraged, even for non-anonymous authors, by the computer mediated nature of the blogging platform, which is textually constructed as providing a feeling of distance. This shifting interpretation of anonymity demonstrates the problematic nature of trying to determine how bloggers use this feature to aid or inhibit their self-representation. Despite this thesis' fluid interpretation of anonymity, the differing narrative styles within the primary source blogs are shown to extend beyond the categories of anonymous, non-anonymous and post-anonymous, and to vary more between the individual authors. This underlines the fact that anonymity is not an *essential* part of why female users choose to share their narratives in this space.

One of the key aims of this thesis was to investigate to what extent the blogosphere, and more specifically the anonymity offered by the platform, could be considered to provide authors with the ability to present alternative performances of self than they could in their offline lives. The extent to which the blog authors are considered to challenge the limitations of the offline world is based on the blogger's own constructed context, and whether they present themselves as having transgressed their own boundaries, or the ones they construct as being imposed upon them in their offline lived reality. The blogosphere presents many opportunities for users to challenge the stereotypes and constraints of the patriarchal offline world. However, this is not always an opportunity that the primary source bloggers choose to take. Given the internal and external factors that influence each blogger's narrative construction, the concept of 'free speech' is not always presented as possible for the individual authors. Unlike the patterns shown by previous studies, the analysis of this thesis

suggests that self-disclosure it is not increased by the author's anonymity, or by a visible online community to write into. The self-disclosure evident in all of the primary source blogs is instead rooted in the nature of the blogging platform, which is in various ways shown to encourage female authors to feel like they can perform an alternative female self. Despite this, many of the primary source blogs are seen to perpetuate gendered ideas of female behaviour and women's role in society. The pressures on women to be sexually attractive, happy, humble and self-depreciating can all be seen to influence the way in which the bloggers textually construct themselves, even when their narratives are anonymous and therefore disassociated with their offline lived reality. The online world, and specifically the blogosphere, is not as utopian and free from social constraints as previous theorisations suggested. In many ways, it simply replicates the offline world in a computer mediated setting, as the platform is infiltrated by offline social constructions and constraints, which limit the potential agency of the bloggers.

However, the way in which the primary source bloggers describe their online communities shows that 'free speech' is encouraged, and the lack of filtering system means the female blog authors can pretty much write whatever they wish; both of which mark it as progressive in comparison to the offline world. Although in many examples the primary source bloggers are seen to replicate and collude with pre-existing social norms, the analysis also shows there *are* some ways in which the blogosphere is being used as a transgressive space. For example, several of the primary source bloggers show how the platform can act as a space in which they are less confined by the pervasive stereotype of women as emotional, and therefore feel they can more openly express their emotions. For other bloggers, the perceived freedom of the blogosphere allows them to share their lack of emotional response to offline experiences, which could also be considered as transgressive. These examples show that while the female authors are representing their own individual experience, they are simultaneously reflecting problematic discourses that surround all women. The findings of this thesis therefore represent the dichotomy of the blogosphere and the online world more broadly, which offers both exciting opportunities for change, and disappointing reproductions of existing issues. However, neither the promises of early techno-enthusiasts, or the negative conceptualisation of more recent commentary reflect the full potential of the online world, and the array of stories that play out within the blogosphere. Despite highlighting a lack of progression in some areas, this thesis demonstrates that bloggers perceive 'free speech' as something that *is* encouraged and accepted more in the blogosphere than in the offline world. The platform can therefore be seen to offer users a *freer* if not entirely free platform in which to self-represent.

The perception of the blogosphere as a free and safe platform is emphasised by the primary source blogger's depictions of mental health issues, and traumatic past experiences. The identification of these themes as a commonality amongst the primary source blogs was unprecedented, and is therefore one of the most significant findings of this study. It is not confined to one category of anonymity, but can be seen across anonymous, non-anonymous and post-anonymous blog narratives. Many of the authors use their writing to tell stories of their past; several of which contain harrowing descriptions of abuse, suffering and pain. For some bloggers, the narrative offers them an opportunity to specifically tell the stories of their childhood, which they may not have had the chance to share without the blogging platform, especially given the prolific silencing of victims that occurs in the offline world. The concept of retelling the past, and experiencing nostalgia, can be used as a treatment for individuals who struggle to find meaning in their present. The way in which the primary source bloggers share stories of their past demonstrates how blogs could provide an appropriate space for this, although there is no evidence to suggest that that is why they are choosing to disclose in this way. However, the concept of the past as integral to the performance of a present self is clearly something that has value for the authors, and they construct their blogs as an effective space to process and express this. The same could be said of the discussion of mental health, which is addressed by several of the primary source blogs. The commonality of depression and other mental health issues amongst the female primary source blogs could be used to homogenise this sample, and the personality type of female bloggers more broadly. However, using this information to make generalisations about female bloggers is reductive, and does not offer anything new to the field of research. The significance of mental health as a reoccurring topic lies in the fact that these discussions are being facilitated by the blogosphere. The platform provides a space that the female primary source bloggers perceive as safe and supportive, which therefore encourages them to self-disclose intimate and personal experiences. The author's choice to share these stories is often textually constructed as a contrast to their experiences of discussing mental health issues in their offline lived realities, where it is largely considered taboo. This issue is also gendered, as women who experience mental health problems may feel doubly subordinated offline by the stigma of their illness and the patriarchal nature of society, both of which function to keep them silent. The blogosphere therefore offers them a space in which they feel they can transgress these limitations by performing a self that usually remains hidden; something which is considered by this thesis to represent the increased agency of the author. This demonstrates how the blogging platform could be particularly important for women, and other marginalised figures in the offline world, providing them with an opportunity to express themselves and share their voices.

Many previous studies have explored the technological, sociological and communication features that make blogosphere different to previous online spaces. In contrast, this thesis examines the narrative content of blogs from a literary perspective, conceptualising them as part of the trajectory of autobiographical writing. The findings of this study therefore have implications for the genre of women's writing, and literature more broadly. The analysis of narratives written by ordinary people also highlights how the blogosphere could offer an opportunity for *anyone* to become an author. Alongside their literary potential, the primary source blogs are also inherently influenced by their unique online environment, as are those who read them. This is demonstrated by the interactivity of the platform and the new 'active' reader, who participates in the narrative and becomes part of the blogger's textual construction of self. This disrupts previous definitions of autobiography as solely focused on the author, and redefines the genre as participatory rather than individualistic. The interaction between the primary source bloggers and their readers is also shown to disrupt the traditional power relation of author/reader, and therefore represents a less hierarchical reading experience. In some examples, the power of the reader to influence the narrative construction goes as far as to position them on an equal footing with the author themselves. This new level of equality signifies the inclusivity of the blogosphere as a reading and writing space in which anyone with access to a computer can take part; marking it as more accessible than previous literary forms. This ease of access also changes the way in which the texts are written; they do not require specific writing conditions, can be created on any Internet enabled device, and from almost anywhere in the world. The primary source blogs demonstrate how the temporal proximity between the author experiencing an event, and them then writing and sharing this experience on their blog can therefore be almost simultaneous. The authors are seen to disclose more when they share their story immediately, rather than take time to process their thoughts, consider their perspective, or align themselves more with an 'ideal' of female behaviour. This thesis therefore considers the temporal proximity of blogging to provide users with an increased level of agency over their narrative self-representation. This is particularly emphasised by the emotional fluctuations in the blogger's online persona, which represents the ups and downs of the individual as they feel them. This also marks a difference between blogs and other forms of life-writing, as the authors are constructing themselves and their experience in the moment, rather than with the benefit of hindsight, which could therefore be seen to increase the similarity of the description to the actual event being described. Although the interrogation of a blog/blogger's 'realness' is often the subject of analysis, this thesis is focused on the textual constructions of self, rather than their resemblance to the offline lived reality of the author. Therefore, it is irrelevant whether temporal proximity may increase the 'realness' of the self-representation, other than to acknowledge the extent to which this

represents a contrast to traditional autobiographical forms which are written entirely from one perspective looking back.

The immediacy and ease with which narratives can be shared in the blogosphere has also been used as a criticism of the platform. The self-representative writing is framed as an oversharing of information, written in a reactionary manner, and therefore as a narcissistic act. However, to consider blog narratives in this way ignores their literary potential, and marginalises the women who are choosing to share their stories through the platform. The ease with which narratives can be written and shared is shown to increase the agency with which some of the female authors construct themselves as writing. For other primary source bloggers, the process of writing a blog is constructed as a considered process, which includes the creation of drafts, and intentional delays between writing and posting. This undermines the conceptualisation of blogs as a reactionary oversharing of information, and emphasises the literary nature of their creation. Many of the primary source blogs also utilise their past, both prior to blogging and from the archived material of previous posts, in order to inform or explain their current situation. The individual blog narratives are therefore seen to be constructed in a variety of different ways. The appearance of immediacy does not necessarily indicate a temporal proximity to the event, but a choice to self-disclose and tell their stories in their own time and way. This undermines the dismissal of blogs based on the conceptualisation of them as simply an online stream of consciousness, and emphasises the authorship of the bloggers. As well as using the past, and sharing the present, the bloggers are also seen to discuss their futures within the space of their blog. Blogs therefore offer users a liminal space where past, present and future all combine to create a textual construction of self. Due to the archival nature of blogs, this textual construction is made up of several constructions, personae, or selves, that are collected within the blog space and interwoven into all the narrative posts. By inhabiting different times and spaces, and presenting multiple selves through their narratives, the bloggers therefore demonstrate a challenge to, and transgression of, the offline structures that frame traditional self-representative narratives.

This thesis considers the blogosphere as a performative platform, and each of the blog narratives therefore represents a textually constructed performance of self. These self-representative performances allow the blog authors to construct an online persona, or personae. Previous research highlights the importance of anonymity in allowing authors to construct their persona outside of the expectations or limitations of their age, race, gender, or offline circumstance; and therefore with increased perceptions of freedom.[535] However,

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[535] As outlined in the Introduction, pp. 12-13.

this thesis found that the decision to write anonymously is not necessarily indicative of the level of agency that an author is considered as demonstrating; something which is seen to vary within the three categories of anonymity more than between them. The possibilities the blogosphere offers for multiple and adaptable performances of self are desired and utilised by all the anonymous, non-anonymous and post-anonymous primary source bloggers. This is not necessarily focused on *being* somebody different from what they represent as their offline lived reality, but on the ability to change and develop their personality within the continuous narrative of the blog. This is highlighted by the bloggers who describe their reluctance to write an 'About Me', and therefore fix their identity within one post. These findings represent an alternative interpretation to the so-called freedom of the blogosphere by suggesting that it is the format of the narrative that facilitates and encourages authors to self-disclose, rather than just the possibilities of anonymity. Although for many of the bloggers some level of hiddenness is maintained, there is no pattern within the primary source blogs to suggest that greater anonymity results in increased self-disclosure, or a higher degree of agency being exhibited by the authors. What is demonstrated by the analysis of the narratives over the period of a year is how, unlike previous autobiographical forms, each post represents an individual textual construction of self, which symbolises the author's perspective and persona in that moment of time. Due to the archive nature of blogging these different selves are collected and housed within the blog, and can be explored by readers, and reused by the bloggers themselves. The perceived authenticity of a blog author is not dependent on them being identifiable (non-anonymous), but is judged primarily on the consistency of the self being performed across these multiple posts. Although this does not necessarily mean that they all represent the same perspective, as shown by *Seattle Poly Chick*'s range of emotions.[536] This is also supported by the close textual analysis, as even an objective reading of the blogs showed an unconscious tendency to assume that some narratives are authentic, and others not, regardless of their level of anonymity. The blogging platform therefore challenges pre-existing ideas of anonymity, and the process of narrative self-representation. It also creates an intimacy between authors and readers, who feel like they are getting to 'know' each other, which in turn creates a personal investment; something that goes beyond previous autobiographical forms, and many offline performances of self.

The majority of primary source bloggers frame the ability to construct a sense of self that is multiple and changing as their main reason for choosing the blogosphere as a platform for self-representation. Instead of focussing on the long-term interpretation of their behaviour and opinions, the blog narratives represent the author's current perspectives, and

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[536] As highlighted in Chapter Three, pp. 132-133.

allow them to constantly update what they construct this as being. The platform is therefore seen to provide users with a higher degree of agency over their constructed self than previous confessional forms, and for female authors this has particular significance in terms of their subjectivity. The critical framework of this thesis emphasises the performative possibilities of the blogosphere to challenge offline representations of women, and the primary source blogs represent performative identities further beyond this sense of fluidity. The authors use their blogs to represent an affirmed female identity in a variety of ways, some of which replicate problematic gendered stereotypes, and some of which challenge social conceptions of how a woman *should* behave, or what a woman *should* think. Although the blogosphere offers female users the chance to write outside of the offline constraints of their gender, the primary source blogs do not necessarily represent alternative ways of conceptualising women, and what it means to be female in contemporary society. However, the blog narratives allow the women to constantly write and rewrite themselves, meaning they can exhibit increased agency over who they *are* and who they want to be on their blog. They therefore demonstrate the power of autobiographical blogging to empower female authors, and potentially women in society more broadly.

For many of the female primary source bloggers, the concept of audience is a key part of their choice to write within the blogosphere. They describe their desire for readers of their self-representative narrative, and the importance of these readers to their enjoyment of blogging. This reflects the findings of previous research which states that interactivity and participation in the blogosphere are key to women's engagement with the medium.[537] The communication between a blog author and their readers is conducted through a variety of mediums, some of which become part of the blog itself, such as comments, and others which are not visible. The data capture of this thesis included the comments made on all posts, and they are analysed alongside the primary source blog narratives. The way in which the blogosphere can be used as a communication platform has been extensively researched, but the direct communication between users within the blogosphere has never been examined in this way, as part of a wider close textual analysis. Although this approach generates a lot of extra material, it means this study is able to explore how the communication and interactivity between author and reader functions to influence the blog writing process directly, and to become part of the blogger's performed self. The non-visible forms of communication, such as direct messages, emails, or even face-to-face meetings are not part of this performance as they happen 'off-stage'; although evidence of their existence can be seen in the narrative constructions of the primary source bloggers' online communities. What this invisible communication demonstrates is an element of hiddenness

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[537] As discussed in Chapter Two: The Readers, pp. 90-97.

within the shared space of the blogosphere. It is something that can never be fully assessed or understood by those outside of the blog, but can only be fully appreciated by the blogger themselves. They are the only one who can ever access the full text of the blog. This serves as a reminder that analysis of the blogging platform, like with other mediums, can never tell the full story.

The potential community of the blogging platform is shown by previous studies, and by the findings of this thesis, to be particularly important for women.[538] The primary source bloggers specifically outline their hope, and later their experience, of receiving support and encouragement from other people in the blogosphere. They specifically suggest that the sympathy and empathy they receive on their blog represents something that they desire in addition to their offline lived experiences; either because they are not allowed to express themselves fully in their offline lives, or their self-disclosure does not receive the reaction that they want when shared offline. The spaces which the primary source blog authors have created online are perceived by them to be safe, and they therefore construct themselves as being encouraged by this environment to share their story. This is read by this thesis as evidence of the female authors demonstrating an increased level of agency, as they are encouraged to share stories they suggest they have not told before, and speak about things they construct as that which they would usually keep hidden. As well as the cathartic nature of sharing, the creation of online communities represents an important opportunity for women to voice their stories in what they perceive as a public domain. The 'public' nature of the blogging platform is greatly contested, and it is impossible to estimate given that the potential audience of a blog is the whole of the online world, but the reality can be very few or even no other users. However, the focus of this thesis is on the narrative construction of the blogs, and all of the primary source bloggers represent themselves as existing in a community of other users. These communities could therefore be considered as 'public sphericules' which give the illusion of a public platform, but within a limited arena. The promotion of 'free speech' within these platforms therefore offers a space in which a variety of different women's stories can be told, and their voices 'heard'. The analysis of this thesis is focused on the textually constructed lives of the authors, and therefore does not examine their offline lived experience to see whether this transgression continues outside of these 'sphericules' and into their offline world. However, the implication of these findings is that *if* the blogosphere can encourage women to transgress in this way by providing them with a space they perceive as safe, then it is possible that this phenomenon could be replicated

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[538] As outlined in Chapter Two: The Readers, pp. 99-100.

within a different (and potentially offline) space; meaning women could transgress a variety of gendered limitations, and have their voices 'heard' even more widely.

The analysis of this thesis demonstrates the many reasons why personal journal blogs deserve to be considered as an autobiographical literary form, and why they are therefore worthy of academic attention. Blogs are shown to provide a constantly updated example of contemporary culture, and therefore represent not just an individual voice, but new ways of examining broader social realities. In many ways, blogs are also developed beyond traditional forms of life writing; given their multi-modal forms of representation, and the possibilities the blogosphere offers for audience. Blogs therefore represent a unique narrative form, that is yet to be fully explored. One reason for the lack of thorough research into blogging is the problems in gathering material from the online world, as shown by the data capture of this thesis.[539] Many blog narratives are either abandoned, or erased by their authors, meaning that their narrative content is halted or lost forever into the 'black hole' of cyberspace. The primary source blogs analysed within this thesis therefore represent a specific 'moment in time' on the blogosphere. Although the narratives that have provided such fruitful material for this study, are also vulnerable to the whims of their authors. This dichotomy encapsulates precisely why the blogs are not only worthy, but also *important* to study; especially given that the opportunity to appreciate and examine these narratives could at any moment be taken away.

This thesis challenges preconceived theoretical notions of anonymity, agency, autobiography, femininity and online technology, whilst also exploring the constructed feelings, experiences, opinions and *lives* of different, ordinary, women in contemporary society. It reconceptualises not only what it means to be anonymous online, but also how anonymity is utilised by users regardless of their perceived level of hiddenness. The female authors are shown to use the blogosphere in exciting and innovative ways, challenging social expectations of female behaviour, if only within certain limitations. The methodology and theoretical framework mean that the analysis provides a more detailed insight into how and why women are seen to dominate this platform than research has been able to, thus far. The findings therefore go beyond previous conceptualisations of female blog users, and of the blogosphere more broadly. The stories shared within this online platform are often those which would otherwise never have been told, and the blogosphere allows them to be 'heard', even if only within their own public sphericule. The female users appear to find agency not only in the anonymity of the blogosphere, but in the computer-mediated nature of the communication, the temporal proximity of their online sharing, and the community in which

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[539] As outlined in the Methodology, p. 27-32.

they construct their narrative; all of which combine to empower the blog authors. The medium of blogging, as this thesis has shown, therefore represents a powerful place for women to write themselves.

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Appendix

In the hard copy of the thesis, there will be a CD Rom attached below. This contains all of the blog material from the data capture period (13th June 2013 to 13th June 2014). In order to make it as accessible as possible, the primary source bloggers are categorised by level of anonymity (anonymous, non-anonymous and post-anonymous), then further sub-categorised by each individual author's name. For each of the seventeen authors there are folders for every month of the period of capture, and within those separate month folders all of the posts are recorded as single Microsoft Word documents. These documents are saved under the name of the original post, and the date that it was published. All posts quoted within this thesis are contained within this sample, as well as any other material published by the primary source bloggers between 13th June 2013 and 13th June 2014.