

Women's Blogging: Where Gender, Technology, Power and Pleasure Collide

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- Abstract** Scholars studying media representations of femininities researched the pleasures and constraints women derive from them (Ang 1985, Radway 1984, Thornham 2007), with many focussing now on the increasing domestic and leisure-laden uses of computers (Cummings and Kraut 2002). In this context, where women can take charge of representations of femininity, renewed consideration must be paid to the following question: Where do pleasures and constraints now sit? Using semi-directed interviews with 23 women bloggers in Québec, home visits and blog analysis, this paper suggests that blogging embodies existing tensions between gender, technology, power and pleasure. Specifically, blogging is an incentive for women finding time for themselves, providing them with pleasure and a source of empowerment. Going beyond the sheer pleasures identified by women bloggers, it emerges that blogging provides most participants with an understanding of daily constraints they face and an awareness of social discourses disconnecting them from the technology.
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1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, studies of media representations of femininities focussed on the pleasures and constraints women drew from them (Thornham 2007). As such, the contributions of Radway (1984) on harlequin novels illustrated how women benefit from them, through spending time on themselves, gaining hope, feelings of empowerment, and imagining themselves in better realities. Ang's work (1985) on soap operas emphasised the importance of not dismissing the pleasures gained from engaging with popular culture. She further believed this might provide an efficient way of spreading feminist ideas. Other scholarly contributions are summarised by Sue Thornham:

Such work moved from the textual study of woman and media, away from a focus on 'images of women', towards an exploration of the ways in which ideologies of femininity are produced and reproduced in media representation. These representations offer pleasures – the pleasures of self-recognition, of finding women placed centre-stage in a 'woman's genre', of participation in a shared 'women's culture' – but simultaneously act to contain women within the accepted bonds of femininity. (Thornham 2007: 7).

In more recent years, with computer use shifting from work-related to predominantly a domestic and leisure-laden endeavour (Cummings and Kraut 2002: 221), pleasure has been analysed in relation to the development of internet communication technologies (ICTs). Scholars have placed their focus on the pleasures derived from blogging, namely through reading blogs (Fitzpatrick 2006), blog use as heightening 'global life satisfaction' (Moon et al. 2006), and "in relation to feminist strategies of 'talking back,' as [...] bell hooks termed it, to patriarchal authority" (Lindermann 2010: 210).

Even despite the fact that blogging and internet usage remain generally reserved for the most 'privileged' (as pointed out by contributions on the digital divide – Goulding and Spacey 2003; Kramer and Kramarae 2000), it brings more possibilities for women to take charge of representations of femininities (Lovász 2007; Lindermann 2010). Taking into account these reflections on ICTs, a new question arises: Where do pleasures and constraints now sit? By way of response, this paper deals with both the positive contributions of blogging identified by participants and points to their various lived realities that throw into question the purely positive perception of women's blogging. It argues that blogging also embodies and exposes existing tensions between the interlocking concepts of

gender, technology, power and pleasure. Furthermore, it is critical of “predominant discourses in feminist theory [which argue that pleasure] is there to pacify – and –ultimately – betray [women]” (Lovász 2007: ii). Focussing on power and pleasure in relation to gender and technologies, this article suggests that blogging permits an awareness of gender constructions and inequalities.

The data was collected in 2008-2009, while interviewing Québécoises blogging about their everyday lives. Twenty-three women participated in this project, and all contents of their blogs analysed. Home visits with 8 bloggers also took place, in order to better understand the physical space used to blog, with an additional 7 sending photos of their blogging spaces. Analysing socio-demographic data, it emerges that participants are generally representative of a ‘privileged’ portion of the Québec population – perhaps not surprisingly, considering the well-documented digital divide. They were on average 32 years of age; the majority self-identified as heterosexual; most were in a relationship; and the vast majority had completed their undergraduate degree, or obtained a college diploma. Mostly from French-Canadian ancestry, they all used French with great ease. Although there is an Anglophone minority in Québec, the keywords used to identify blogs may have excluded English-speaking bloggers.

2. Blogging to Make Time

Engaging with blogs appears to provide a means to find time for oneself. The domestication of the technology enables women to use it when they wish, to stop when they no longer do, or when other demands are present. Blogs are, as were magazines, ‘easily put down’ (Hermes 1995). As such, participants integrate blogging into their routines, when children watch television (Catherine), are napping (Lucie), when they need a break from homework (Ariane), or from paid employment (Cynthia, Michèle, Julie, Lynne), or simply as a way of guarding time each day, for oneself (Elsa).

Possibly to guard their time for blogging, despite other demands on their lives, many participants report that they must blog in order not to disappoint, worry or lose audiences:

If I told myself that some people may read me, who may wait, maybe, for me to write something, well it would motivate me to put some thoughts down. (Éloïse)

I really did it... for myself. And for others. It really was... both. I can't tell you that... But obviously, now, I'm at a point where... I'm at a point... I feel a certain responsibility.
(Simone)

However, many participants at the same time rejected outside pressures to blog, as they would not appreciate blogging if it became an obligation. Participants appreciate blogging's flexibility – always available, but not demanding constant attention through regular involvement.

Time, because limited, is devoted to one's preferred practice and writing (or not) is often done in relation to the feedback received, as it was for Kieva. Having invested a lot of time in an entry about feminism, Kieva found that it was not worthwhile as she was criticised. However, she attributes abandoning such topics to the time it took, not to the negative comments received:

I did write texts more opinion-based that shocked, a lot more than 'today, I put lipstick on'. Real opinions, and I got... criticised. And it... that's not why I stopped. It's only because I had... put in at least an hour, or two, per post, you know. And it was long and it was tiring. (Kieva)

Further, bloggers often characterise time used to blog in relation to others: as a way of giving news to friends and family, keeping track of children's memories, providing support to others, or being an active member of the blogosphere. They explain their investments in terms of relationship building or maintenance:

Probably because I know that people read me... Sometimes, I feel a little... pressure... in brackets. (Dominique)

Since I have friends who are... in Europe, just about everywhere: spread around, I thought, also, it's a good way to... I can tell them: I have a blog. If you want some news, this is where I will write, and that's it. (Bonnie)

The time used blogging is justified in terms of one's own enjoyment and how it benefits their readers, including retaining such readership. By blogging regularly, participants resist pressures to dedicate their free time to others, particularly family members, as pointed out in some interviews. Although data suggests that blogging serves as an excuse to make time for themselves, participants still limit the amount of time spent online. This is often in response to criticism about spending too much time on the computer, as in the cases of Sarah and Elizabeth, both

accused by their partners of spending too much time online. According to Valentine, this strongly relates to gender:

Women traditionally have made time for family and in "doing" family. In contrast, men's time is more often their own, and rather than spending time on producing and sustaining the family they tend to spend time with family members (Leccardi 1996). (Valentine 2006: 373)

Although limiting their time online, participants blog in the midst of other tasks and responsibilities. Certainly, this is one means of advancing their interests and focussing on themselves. In her interview, Dominique mentioned how the time spent blogging could be dedicated to other activities, but that she still chooses to update her blog instead of engaging in more solitary relaxation. Blogging provides more than an excuse to focus on herself – it also represents connecting with others.

3. Blogging as Fun

Data reveals that bloggers enjoy reading blogs, but also take pleasure in the act of blogging. Updating a blog is voluntary, needing intrinsic motivation, and it appears that pleasures derived from blogging are the greatest motivator. The enjoyment of using the technology, the crafting of the message and the satisfaction drawn from personalising the blog were named as pleasures:

I like being in front of my screen and writing words that are adding themselves to the screen. And it's silly, but I... I think it... yes, I like it. I like it, it's magical, and it's like technological, magical, you see. (Elsa)

I really thought it was amazing. Sometimes, even when I don't publish my posts, I still enjoy word-processing something and... word-processing texts... I love it! (Lucie)

I realised that the computer, as a medium, really interests me. [...] And, finally, it works well. It's clean, it's already clean [laughter] on the page, I can erase, and you know everything goes well. So it really satisfies me. (Kieva)

Pleasure is also found in the exchange made possible through blog conversations. Bloggers appreciate the recognition they gain by having readers, as explained by Shaindl and Bonnie:

But of course it's fun when one tells me 'listen, we know that you blog – could you send us something so we can have it?' I am like 'ooooh! of course!' (Shaindl)

That people tell me they read me, it makes me extremely happy. (Bonnie)

Also, bloggers enjoy the conversation that takes place with visitors, as expressed in these excerpts:

Well, I was a stay-at-home mum, but I had... I felt like I blossomed more with the blog, I would say. It filled the relationship [void]... my social network that I no longer had, from when I was a worker... [...] (Catherine)

So, often, it... yes, I feel like chatting with someone and... When I publish a post on my blog, it's as if I was chatting! (Lucie)

Blogs are used much like journals, where bloggers enjoy being able to go back to previous entries as a means of engaging with positive memories and their own life stories:

[...] it's like a photo album, you know [...] sometimes you feel like going through its pages. It's a little like that. (Bonnie)

I like going back to read what I wrote. I like it, it's nice to read, and it's nice to relive what I had at that time. (Elsa)

Also, reading others' blogs is pleasurable and entertaining, a distraction, or a way of finding people who share similar backgrounds, experiences and thoughts. Karlsson related this reading of blogs authored by people with similar socio-demographic characteristics to the joy of 'finding themselves in another person' (2007: 151). Simone made that clear:

[...] to realise that we're mostly the same, and that... There're lots about maternity... [...] There're loads of things you can't really say, and that our... our mothers-in-law, our mothers, our... they don't tell us. (Simone)

Thus pleasures are partly derived from blogging itself, both through creating the blog layout and entries, as well as from reading blog entries, their own or those of others. Experiencing pleasures from media consumption or production, which here are intertwined, is not necessarily liberating nor does it always involve a critical engagement.

However, blogging may consist in a 'form of cultural resistance', by which women take upon themselves to create what they believe to be more 'authentic' representations of their own realities and hence influence definitions of femininity and womanhood, as discussed by Lovász (2007: 174-175). More explicitly, this motivated Kieva to blog:

Seriously... most magazines from Québec, I think they're not at all reflective of... you know, for my age group, not at all. That's why, in some way, I started to blog, because I felt like it didn't represent me. (Kieva)

4. Putting Oneself Out There

Critics might rightfully allege that mainstream media tend to ignore blogs on the everyday (Herring et al. 2004), as their general public dismissal has also been underlined (Karlsson 2007). Nonetheless, bloggers do make their mark on the blogosphere and connect with others, building a support network with blog acquaintances.

Through putting themselves out there, bloggers gain empowerment: obtaining recognition by recording their lives, having others look at them, and in doing so rendering them more worthy. As such, one reason for blogging, identified during interviews, is affirming one's existence.

[...] I enjoy blogging. Because... it reassures me! To know... that I leave a mark in the blogosphere [laughter]. It reassures me in the sense that... well, it's a little silly, but it's like... for me, having my name in the phone book. When you have your name in the phone book, you really exist. If you have a blog, you really exist [laughter]. It isn't... it's not that I doubt my own existence, I know I exist, it's just leaving a mark... (Cynthia)

Many participants mentioned feeling less lonely, while others indicated how their lives may be of no interest, but they still enjoy blogging about it.

We can say things... Myself, I can say: my little self in my little house in the suburbs... I don't think I will make much difference in people's lives, but I can still give my point of view, and make a little space for myself... (Éloïse)

[...] only the fact that you found me, in my view, that's a prize. You know? I say to myself: wow! You know, I exist [laughter]. (Ani)

By writing about themselves, participants tell their stories in the first person; they are not spoken about – they speak for themselves. Similarly, in writing about etiquette literature authored by women, Jorge Ardití identifies this genre as a practice by which women ‘forge new discursive space within which women cease being the “other”’ (1996: 430). Further, women are empowered through the support and recognition from other bloggers. Many participants underlined how the received recognition generates pleasure and encourages them to continue:

And, sometimes, just feeling like you have people... who would say ‘we understand.’ It’s like, okay, it’s okay: I’m not alone. There is someone, somewhere, who understands me.
(Michèle)

I was so happy, you know, to be recognised for something I had written that... I gave the URL to my parents and gave it to my in-laws... So they could see it. (Julie)

Faulkner’s research on gender and technology adds weight to the link between pleasure, affirmation and blogging. While researching academic literature on engineers, she underlines how powerlessness and pleasure in technology may be intertwined (2000: 106). Similarly, it appears that the lack of recognition in one’s offline life, where one lacks power and influence, may provide a reason for women being attracted to blogging.

Blogging feels empowering to participants because they exercise control over self-presentation. Because women decide what information to disclose, and how to portray themselves, blogging provides a space where women feel empowered and speak for themselves. By choosing what to reveal or to conceal, they may be able, as suggested by Nicola Döring, who studied women and cybersex, ‘to overcome feelings of insufficiency and shame’ (2000: 878). Michele White, writing on gender and webcam use, adds that, contrary to previous analysis of the male gaze and women’s objectification, this technology enables control over one’s representation (2003: 9, 16).

Participants underlined the significance of this decision-making power regarding various dimensions of blogging, including stopping or abandoning their blogs:

I choose to write what I want, on my blog. Nobody forces me. (Ani)

Listen, if there are things that I would prefer not to let others know, because I'm not really proud of myself, then I just won't write it [laughter]. (Mireille)

Blogs offer the possibility for women to speak for themselves, be in control of what information they disclose, and craft their self-presentation. Women bloggers write their own stories.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, blogging emerges as a way of making time for oneself, as a source of pleasure and as a source of empowerment for women. However, regardless of participants' claims of putting themselves 'out there' and putting themselves and their desires first, data somewhat damper these claims.

Bloggers justify making time to blog, as a means of keeping in touch with friends and family, preserving family memories, or contributing to the blogosphere. Additionally, researchers argued that escapism from the demands of everyday life is part of the enjoyment of 'engaging in activities that are absorbing' (Mathwick et al. 2001: 44), while other scholars linked reading blogs to escapism (Keng and Ting 2009: 484). Here, participants write and manage blogs for similar reasons:

But, yes, it happened that I wrote from work, because I felt an emergency and said to myself: well, I'm taking my break now and I am writing. (Michèle)

Visibility created through their blogs assists bloggers to reflect on their identities and, as illustrated by participant Cynthia's comment comparing blogging to having her name in the phone book, help mark their existence. As discussed above, bloggers appreciate having the possibility of speaking for themselves and telling their own stories. This paper cautions that previous research relating pleasure and popular culture to ideologies of femininity comes up short, by not providing a full account of women's engagement with ICTs and especially with blogging. Women do feel empowered by making time in their everyday lives to indulge in blogging, or by engaging with the technology itself, or from exercising some control over their self-presentations, or by simply connecting with and gaining support from others. Empowerment, from a feminist perspective, is 'an individual learning process as well as a political emancipation process' (Döring 2000: 873). Women learn more about the daily constraints on their lives through blogging. They have confronted the daily demands on their time and have struggled to maintain the blogs

they enjoy and are empowered by. In doing so they are turning the blog into a space where gender, power and pleasure do, in fact, collide.

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