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On the Dark Side of Lifestyle Blogging – The Case of Negative Anonyms

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blog elicitation lifestyle blogging negative anonyms online ethnography

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The social reciprocity between bloggers and their readers included in lifestyle blogs is inspired by casual exchange of information, opinions, and emotional support. Despite the obvious positive connotations, the world of lifestyle blogging also has a darker side to it. A negative anonym is recognized by bloggers as a reader who comments behind a pseudonym and distributes critical or abusive comments targeted against bloggers' physical appearance, personality, life choices, or commercial collaborations. Bloggers are often regarded as influencers of social media. In this study, however, the perspective is reversed as I explore some of the ways bloggers are influenced by their readers.

Lifestyle bloggers value their readers as one of the most important aspects of blogging, while at the same time they hold their personal lives precious and exercise a strict regime on their privacy (Nardi et al. 2004; cf. Viégas 2005). By controlling the disclosure of information, bloggers strive to determine where to draw the boundary between themselves and others – private and public. (McCullagh 2008, 12; cf. Sinanan et al. 2014.) My analysis of recurring critical comments and the strategies employed by Finnish bloggers to manage these comments is based on the idea of

blogs as ethical spaces, where, according to Lövheim (2011a; cf. Harris 2008), bloggers negotiate moral issues by using new technologies in order to handle the shifting boundaries and norms in contemporary Western society.

This study focuses on the impact negative anonyms[1] have in the Finnish blogosphere. I concentrate especially on the multiple ways lifestyle bloggers experience readers' comments and ask what is criticized by the negative anonyms who comment on blogs. I also discuss the recurring topics that negative anonyms rely on in their criticism, according to bloggers. Secondly, I am interested in the consequences of critical comments for the Finnish blogging scene: in this context, I focus on the strategies lifestyle bloggers employ to manage critical comments as well as the practices through which negative anonyms consequently affect the basic social structures of the online world of blogging in general. The contextual thematic analysis of the research is based on online ethnography, including extended online observation, 8 thematic interviews, and 17 blog elicitation interviews (BEI).

The relationship between bloggers and their readers

Lifestyle blogs[2] delight people and bring positive things into their lives, yet in anthropological terms, sociality reflects the whole variety of human existence including the positive and negative aspects of being together. The drawback of online communality in the blogging world is that not all followers in social media fall into the majority of benevolent readers. Similar accounts can also be found in other countries, such as Sweden (Lövheim 2011b), Singapore (Abidin 2013) as well as Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Eckert 2017), suggesting that the existence of negative anonyms often associated with trolling[3] and online bullying[4] has a transnational quality to it. The idea of putting oneself out there involves risks especially for female entrepreneurs in digital spaces, where they submit themselves to public scrutiny (Duffy & Pruchniewska 2017, 855).

According to Shao (2009), the majority of user-generated media followers do not engage in active conversation in blogs or comment on them at all. This argument concurs with Google Analytics, which is regularly used by the bloggers participating in this research to get information about their readers. As Viégas' (2005; cf. Östman 2013) survey from the mid 2000s, which marks the beginning of lifestyle blogging at large, indicates, the occurrence of personal

topics was positively and significantly correlated ($r = .0.3$, $p < 0.01$) with how often bloggers "got in trouble" with their readers. In the light of my research data, the issue of refraining from personal accounts that are too intimate to share is still as current in the Finnish blogosphere as it was over fifteen years ago.

The relationship between bloggers and their readers has been widely studied in the contexts of, for example, authenticity and trust (Abidin & Thompson 2012; boyd 2006; Colucci & Cho 2014; Chai & Minkyun 2010; McRae 2017), the debate over private and public (Livingston 2008; McCullagh 2008; Sinanan et al. 2014; Talvitie-Lamberg 2014), and commercialization of the blogging world (Herring et al. 2005; Abidin 2013; Hänninen 2015), all of which challenge the relationship between bloggers and their readers and predispose lifestyle blogging to the emergence of negative anonyms.

Less attention, however, has been paid to the actual focus of the criticism or the everyday life strategies bloggers employ in order to maintain their personal boundaries. Boyd (2006; Abidin 2013) argues that the conflict between bloggers and their readers is based on a discontinuity, where in the bloggers' view blogs are in fact a corporeal extension of the self, while the readers seem to agree that it is only a place to engage in conversation. According to Lövheim (2011b; cf. Rettberg 2014), the decision to protect one's private life is clearly set against the expectation that popularity requires sharing personal stuff with readers, and that establishing boundaries implies the risk of losing this position.

The cultural norms of the blogging community are continuously negotiated and co-created between bloggers and readers. In practice, this means that bloggers' income depends on sustaining the illusion of intimacy, or "perceived interconnectedness", with people they may not normally associate with, and that this relationship can be precarious and prone to stress. (Abidin 2013; cf. Bortree 2005; cf. Abidin & Thompson 2012.)

Of course, not all critical commenting falls into the category of negative anonyms, nor does disagreement *per se* constitute bullying. In this analysis, distinguishing constructive critique from abuse is based on the experiences of and connotations made by individual bloggers since the denotations of comments written by negative anonyms are often unspoken and rarely unambiguous (cf. Hinduja & Patchin 2008). The original connotations of a given negative comment are not easily deciphered even by the bloggers themselves. However, in order to

describe the recurring topics negative anonyms rely on in their criticism and the consequences critique has for the Finnish blogging scene, the lifestyle bloggers' point of view is central in this analysis.

Online observation and blog elicitation interview

The research data consists of extended online observation and 25 interviews conducted in autumn 2014 (8), autumn 2015 (3), and autumn 2017 (14) within the Finnish blogosphere. The extended online observation for this study was carried out between June 2017 and January 2018. Following the overall demographics of the world of lifestyle blogs, the majority of interviewees are girls and women, but the research data also includes two male bloggers. The age of the randomly chosen bloggers writing in both Finnish and English varies from 18 to 50. Geographically, the bloggers represent the whole of Finland, including expatriates who do not physically live in Finland[5], but who blog mainly in Finnish and/or under Finnish blog portals.

The bloggers participating in this study reflect the general hierarchy of the blogging world. Established professional and semi-professional bloggers receive more monetary compensation for their blogs and thus have a different take on the commercial side of blogging in comparison to writers who blog only as a hobby and have little or no collaboration at all with the lifestyle industry. As I am constructing an overall view of the relationship between bloggers and their readers in the context of negative anonyms, the focus of the research will be on all three groups of bloggers.

I have been observing the Finnish blogosphere for over ten years, partly as a personal pastime but also as an online ethnographer. During the first leg of my fieldwork in 2014, I studied lifestyle bloggers using a traditional thematic interview (8) and conducted an extended online observation (cf. Hopkins 2016) regarding the blogging world. After the most recent part of my fieldwork observation (June 2017–January 2018), which consisted of reading approximately 50 randomly chosen Finnish lifestyle blogs on a weekly basis (which I consequently still do), I focused particularly on the relationship between lifestyle bloggers and their readers and the idiosyncrasies of this interaction. I was also interested in the early ideal of lifestyle blogs as personal diaries dating back to the mid-2000s and the role the commercialization process plays in the everyday lives of Finnish lifestyle bloggers. In this analysis, extended online observation

primarily serves a contextual function triangulating the interview data. Approximately one third of the bloggers/blogs observed for this study have also been interviewed.

After conducting the first 8 thematic interviews in 2014, I soon realized that in order to fully grasp the visual and multi-channelled characteristics of contemporary lifestyle blogging, I should pay more attention to elaborating the thematic interview as a research method and started to develop BEI. New media phenomena such as lifestyle blogs are often based not only on texts and written material but also on a generous amount of visual aids such as photographs and videos, which Uimonen (2013; cf. Kaufmann 2018) describes as the online performance of selfhood being staged in digitally mediated and networked social worlds. In addition to blog posts, BEI is also equipped to dive into the Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Facebook environments used multi-medially by the majority of bloggers.

To apply BEI in practice, I instructed the interviewees to choose 2 to 4 blog posts that they thought were important for their blogging. During the interview sessions, I asked the bloggers to describe what these blog posts were all about and why they had chosen these particular posts for our discussion.

BEI is based on the photo-elicitation method deriving from the fields of digital and visual anthropology and sociology (Padgett et al. 2013; Harper 2002). It operates on the simple principle of placing one or more images, such as photos but also videos or any other type of visual representation, at the center of an interview and asking bloggers to comment on them. The images, or in this case blog posts, may be produced by the interviewees themselves (native image making technique) or provided by the researcher. (Bignante 2010; cf. Epstein et al. 2006.) The main difference between photo-elicitation and BEI is that instead of choosing only visual materials, bloggers were asked to comment on a number of blog posts consisting of both visual and textual elements they regard as important.

BEI can be used as an independent interview method focusing on elicitation in itself, or, as in this research, an extension of the thematic interview that enhances the depth of the interview. Thirdly, depending on the methodological framework of the research, the visual material produced by BEI can also be considered an independent data set and analyzed accordingly. The choice between these three methodological frameworks is based on the research questions and epistemological focus of the analysis.

In the context of negative anonyms, I found that the research data produced by BEI reflected mostly some of the positive elements regarding lifestyle blogging, including for example posts that have been commercially successful, evoked high visibility in social media, or even if not entirely positive, touched the blogger's sentiments by being personally appealing to the interviewee (cf. Norppari & Hautakangas 2012). It was thus clear that less focus was placed on the negative aspects of lifestyle blogging, such as trolling and bullying, and that while BEI played a pivotal role in terms of the overall data gathering, in this particular analysis, it served as an extension of the thematic interview.

In my fieldwork, BEI has deepened my understanding of the everyday lives and work of lifestyle bloggers by providing "behind the scene" information on the phenomenon, including insight on negative anonyms and the ways bloggers cope with them. Furthermore, BEI was especially engaging to the bloggers, who were able to choose their favorite blog posts and "show me around" their blogs. As the bloggers were free to choose blog posts for discussion, the interviews also include in-depth information on what the bloggers regard as memorable, and emotional in their blogging (cf. Collier 1987). BEI also provides necessary tools to overcome the often artificial barrier between virtual and real-life fieldwork environments characteristic to the blogging world (cf. Boellstorff 2008). Additionally, it promotes informant participation by emphasizing the collaboration between the researcher and interviewees (Jenkings et al. 2008). Lastly, BEI does not exclude the possibility to ask further questions (cf. Bignante 2010), which was something I did especially towards the end of each interview to avoid unnecessary interference by the researcher.

Based on the triangulation of the observational data and interviews in this research, the contextual thematic analysis starts with the critique targeted by negative anonyms on lifestyle blogs and proceeds to the strategies lifestyle bloggers engage in order to cope with negative anonyms. The overall aim of the analysis is to determine how negative anonyms, in fact, construct the basic social structures of the Finnish blogosphere.

Reoccurring topics of critique in lifestyle blogging

The three main categories of critique discussed in this chapter are issues related to bloggers' personal life, subjects that go against the idea of blogs as "happy places" prevalent in the

blogging world in general, and finally the often heated discussion on the commercialization of the blogosphere. Blogs are read, commented on, and commercially utilized by both bloggers and advertisers precisely because of their personal quality: the commodity a lifestyle blogger holds in the context of commercialization is the blogger herself. The number of blog readers has grown, in Finland from the mid-2000s until recently (OSF 2017). Small privately run blogs mainly written to family and friends have turned into commercially viable businesses, adding to the pressure bloggers encounter on a daily basis. As Emma[6] points out:

[…] you start thinking about what you can write about. The Internet can be a cruel place. And then you realize that you can't really give the right impression of yourself. You are constantly afraid of what's going to happen if you do. […]

The main problem of contemporary lifestyle blogging is, according to Maria, that "bloggers are considered celebrities without any human rights." Similarly, the concern over "right impressions" and privacy established by Emma focuses on the safety and welfare of the blogger including her family and friends. According to my analysis, it is clear that most bloggers participating in this research identify with this concern, and that whole areas of the bloggers' personal lives are to a various degree excluded from their blogs (cf. Eckert 2017, 14; cf. Abidin 2013; cf. McCullagh 2008).

Maria describes her take on privacy issues by measuring the personal information she shares online against that shared with casual acquaintances: "I only write about things I could tell a stranger at a bus stop." Additionally, many bloggers have decided not to use the real names of their children, spouse, relatives, or friends[7], or to post photographs that could compromise their anonymity (cf. Bortree 2005). According to my research data, many Finnish lifestyle bloggers are equally concerned about topics related to the places they live and work in outside the blogging scene, and asking permission to publish photographs of other people than themselves in their blogs.

The measures bloggers take to protect their privacy reflect the critical comments in their blogs. Everything that is "on display" becomes exposed to readers and their unpredictable actions. The examples of being attacked by a negative anonym range from body shaming, family dynamics, dietary choices, and conspicuous or unethical consumption, such as buying clothes, bags, or footwear made in Chinese sweatshops, to surreptitious advertising (cf. Hänninen 2015; cf.

Lövheim 2011b). The aspiration towards privacy in lifestyle blogging also includes the idea of blogs as happy places, as Hanna describes her disposition:

I like to emphasize nice things in life. I think that positivity is the stuff I like to bring forward [in my blog]. I have always said that my blog is a happy place and that I want to promote happy things that could delight my readers.

Similarly, lifestyle bloggers also report that they avoid explicitly controversial topics such as politics, religion, and sexuality (Abidin 2013)[8]. The idea of blogs as happy places is one of the predominant staples of the blogging world. Easy-going posts featuring the positive aspects of life outnumber the negative or otherwise difficult issues in blogs. Bloggers' reluctance to reveal the details of their everyday lives is based on their need for privacy and subsequently security. In the context of the discourse portraying blogs as happy places, this view is further complemented by the idea of "cutback reality" – a construction of reality that appears to be all there is to know about a blogger (cf. Lövheim 2011b), but, as Amanda points out, represents only a small, carefully selected part of the everyday life distributed to the reader:

My strategy has always been to create an illusion of abundance of the things I share [with readers] while in truth the majority of my everyday life remains completely out of bounds.

Of course, the cutback reality of lifestyle blogging is not merely related to the privacy issues or ethics of the online world. It also reflects the aesthetics of blogging, which Creeber (2009, 17) describes as an activity "indulging in increased levels of intertextuality, generic hybridity, self-reflexivity, pastiche, parody, recycling and sampling." In Barthesian (2001; cf. Hänninen 2012) terms, this cutback reality consists of various semantic elements that do not only leave out structures of the everyday lives of bloggers but also playfully rearrange and thus add to them in order to create something new.

Blogs are assemblages of carefully selected aspects of bloggers' everyday life and aspirations put on display by bloggers, yet what is not shown is often as informative as what is included (Sinanan et al. 2014). In practice, this means that the overall view a blogger creates through their blog is not a snapshot of their everyday reality as such but, rather, a stylized representation of this reality created by the blogger. Returning to the negative anonyms, I argue that alongside the

aesthetic aspects of happy places, the cutback reality also serves an important protective function in lifestyle blogging.

Too many positive, happy-go-lucky blog posts produce negative comments from some of the readers who regard this kind of content as superficial and therefore inauthentic. This argument has a clear affinity with the critique on commercialization in lifestyle blogging: an excessive number of commercial collaborations creates aggravation in a similar fashion to a large number of positive blog posts. Julia describes her experiences on the commercialization of lifestyle blogging as surprising as she had not realized that so many readers oppose advertising in blogs:

It was only last week, I had just done a collaboration with a bread company, and a couple of my readers commented on that post, saying that I have a lot of commercial stuff [in my blog]. I guess I was asking for it, but then I wrote a separate post about [commercial] collaborations in my blog, and it turns out that now everybody [the readers] thinks that I advertise too much.

Based on my fieldwork, the two common arguments against commercialization in blogs among readers are that advertisements corrupt the authenticity of the blogging world and that if advertising was to exist in the blogging scene at all, it should be executed in an ethical manner[9]. As Abidin & Ots (2016) point out, all three parties in blog advertising, i.e. bloggers, followers, and brand clients, are sensitive to what they regard as deceptive and unethical practices in lifestyle blogging and thus place normative pressure on bloggers. Unethical practices comprise, for example, insufficiently labeled collaborations or surreptitious advertising, and, as Julia points out in her account, a large amount of commercial content in a given blog (Hänninen 2015). Julia also discloses a third example of unethical practices in the blogging world, which is related to the way commercial collaborations are executed in the eyes of a critical reader:

I think they [commercial posts] are kind of stupid, too, if you first write like normally and then you say that this bread is good, it's the best bread ever blah blah blah. It's just ridiculous. […] But if I write just like I usually do and present the product in the context of my real everyday life, then there comes a reader who says that you are so clever. You always sneak in the commercial content so that she didn't even realize that the blog post was labeled as commercial.

Dissolving the boundary between everyday life and commercial content is a controversial issue, which clearly demonstrates the enduring gulf between bloggers and some of their critical readers.

Incorporating commercial content into the everyday life of the blogger is regarded, on the one hand, as unethical, as the reader does in the description above, or on the other hand, as an example of a good, professional blog post – a position common to bloggers.

The three categories of critique – i.e. issues related to bloggers' personal life, content that goes against the idea of blogs as happy places, and the critique on commercialization – share a common denominator, which is the concept of authenticity. Marwick (2013) describes it as a palpable sense of truthful self-expression, a connection with and responsiveness to the audience, and finally an honest engagement with commercialization. All three categories emphasize the importance of integrity and trust in the relationship between bloggers and their readers. Understanding the controversy between bloggers and their readers relies on the core values and ethics of lifestyle blogging. I also argue that the values in lifestyle blogging are not something that could be predetermined. Instead, they live in and off of an ongoing debate on the integrity and trustworthiness of bloggers – requirements that constitute "an imperative of authenticity" in the blogging world.

Managing negative anonyms – The passive and active strategies

The strategies bloggers employ to cope with negative anonyms in their everyday lives range from ignoring the negative comments to hiding their hurt feelings or, in extreme cases, filing a police report on a hostile stalker. In terms of the various ways bloggers manage their relationship with negative anonyms, these initial examples fall into passive and active strategies.

As one passive strategy, lifestyle bloggers typically regard negative anonyms as the necessary evil of social media (cf. Moor et al. 2010). Critical or abusive comments are something that cannot be avoided while blogging and bloggers just have to deal with the *status quo*, or as Hanna summarizes it: "[…] you toughen yourself up and stop caring." Rather than confronting negative anonyms or giving them a piece of one's mind, bloggers for the most part prefer to ignore bad behavior in their blogs and hide their true feelings from the public (cf. Abidin 2013). Privately, however, bloggers do show emotions towards negative anonyms, which, as Anna describes her sentiments, evoke sorrow and anxiety:

[…] On a good day, I laugh [at the negative comments] and forward them to my mother: “Just look at this!” I feel sorry for the people who have the energy to write them to me. But sometimes late at night when I can’t sleep I start to think […] about all the freaky comments I’ve received and it gets me down.

As was briefly touched on in the previous chapter, another passive strategy is that lifestyle bloggers start to avoid provocative issues that could produce critical comments or draw negative anonyms to the blog. Deep personal contemplation is replaced with more superficial descriptions of everyday life happenings. Holding oneself back from provocative or intimate issues has a great impact on the actual substance of lifestyle blogs. The influence of negative anonyms also extends to the form, such as sarcasm, which can be misinterpreted by readers either deliberately or by mistake as something completely different from the original intention of the blogger (cf. Papacharissi 2011). There were several bloggers among the interviewees who reported that they have adjusted their writing styles according to the negative comments they have received.

In order to prevent unnecessary conflicts, bloggers are, in fact, exercising careful self-censorship in their blogs – censorship that does not necessarily require further input from negative anonyms as it is based on the blogger’s or her colleagues’ previous negative experiences and carried out in advance. This passive strategy also reflects upon the intimacy of blogging, which, in the bloggers’ view, has suffered from the negative comments. According to Maria, writing to a large audience that one does not know properly can be intimidating and difficult to manage:

How many people would be willing to open up their personal lives to tens of thousands of people – things that could potentially be used to hurt you in the coming years? I think it’s certain kind of self-protection that you only tell the fluffy and cuddly, superficial stuff in your blog that cannot be used to hurt you on a personal level.

Blogs can quickly start to appear shallow, superficial, and distant to readers, who do not leave the stylistic change unnoticed or without a comment. In the long run, this kind of relative abstinence can produce dissatisfaction among blog readers. In more theoretical terms, this phenomenon also reveals a classical vicious circle, which explains the sources of abusive criticism and bullying in the blogging world. The more bloggers try to hide aspects of their personal life because they are concerned about negative comments or try to protect their privacy,

the greater the pressure among readers as they want to know more or find that blog posts are becoming superficial.

To fade away from one's own blog is a radical process for a blogger, leaving her without the voice she used to have for example at the beginning of her blogging career, when the number of readers was often smaller and bloggers had more freedom to express themselves through their blogs[10]. The consequences of fading away from one's own blog can be drastic as bloggers sometimes end up quitting their blogs temporarily or for good. This can happen directly because the bullying itself has become too much to handle, or indirectly after losing one's voice and interest in blogging.

The active strategies lifestyle bloggers employ against negative anonyms include, for example, discussing abusive comments with friends, family members, and colleagues in the Finnish blogosphere. Eckert (2017) points out in her comparative study in Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States that there is a designated buddy system among bloggers who wish to share their experiences on bullying, whereas in Abidin's (2013) analysis on the Singaporean blogosphere, bloggers rarely confided in each other regarding online abuse. In Finland, sharing similar experiences and emotions, and especially humor and laughter provide a necessary outlet for bloggers to cope with the negative feedback they receive in their everyday life. Negative anonyms are also actively managed by blocking abusive comments or moderating them (cf. Lövheim 2013).

Another way to deal with negative anonyms is to publish all comments regardless of their content, but to ignore the negative ones, or to react to them only with smiley faces or a short reply thanking the reader for their input. The function of emoticons here is to publicly demonstrate to the readers that the provocation has no effect on the blogger and is subsequently useless. According to my extended online observation and interviews, confronting negative anonyms or trying to reason with them is generally not advised among Finnish lifestyle bloggers as it can worsen the situation and thus turn the comment field into an unpleasant place for the blogger as well as the readers (cf. Eckert 2017; cf. Turtiainen 2017).

It is also common that bloggers get in touch with the administrators of various online forums in order to delete false, too detailed, or abusive threads concerning their blog posts usually describing private aspects of their personal life. Some negative anonyms compile information on

bloggers from various online sources and publish their findings in similar places. According to Heer & boyd (2006), online environments can disturb the segmentation of place in social reality, where different spheres and groups of everyday life, such as work and family, are often kept separate from each other. Privacy management is difficult in social media, where nothing one posts online ever really disappears or becomes forgotten (cf. Viégas 2005). This can result in a sensation of "losing control" (Grudin 2001), which consists of a decontextualization of a blogger's original texts, photographs, and meanings, and can return to haunt the person even after a long period of time.

Another active way to make use of the critics of the blogging world is to harness their negative energy for one's own benefit in exchange for online visibility. As Abidin (2014) points out, the meaning of privacy in blogging has changed: it is no longer personal seclusion free from public attention, but rather a commodity manipulated by lifestyle bloggers. Thus, there exists a completely new, yet not entirely surprising, attempt to endorse the happy place among lifestyle bloggers, which is manifested in Maria's description of her take on negative anonyms:

One can actively avoid them [shits storms] and that's my game because I like to keep my blog a happy place. Alternatively, you can also use your blog as a source of power by creating them [shit storms] – that's one perspective to it. […] If you want to maximize the total number of your readers, this is a guaranteed way to do it. Just remember to wear a bulletproof vest.

The idea of bloggers as instigators of online "shit storms" or "blog storms" (cf. Hänninen & Kotonen 2015) portrays bloggers as active agents in social media capable of and willing to manipulate readers' reactions and stir controversy for their own benefit. Jones (2013) adds to this argument by stating that online bullying includes a generative function since it can act as a 'clickbait', which provides opportunities to increase traffic for the blog. It can of course be rewarding in itself to gain new followers, to get reposted or "to have a say" on a matter that one finds personally important. Visibility also serves as an instrument to other desirable commodities in the blogging world, such as extra income, which is often based on the scope and quality of a blogger's online presence.

In the blogging world, adopting active and passive strategies against negative anonyms overlap to some degree. In fact, being active or passive in the context of negative anonyms is not something that could be determined in terms of an individual blogger because she can

simultaneously employ both strategies in her blogging. The overlap also manifests itself in the interface between the two strategies as the passive qualities of a given act can be interpreted as active and vice versa depending on the context of implementation. In practice, the quality of a given strategy is always determined by an individual blogger.

Conclusions

Lifestyle blogs constitute ethical spaces in new media. The recurring topics of criticism and the strategies bloggers employ to manage these comments suggest that negative commenting has a profound impact on the basic social structures of lifestyle blogging in itself and influences both the content and form of a given blog post.

Bloggers frequently describe their blogs as happy places with a focus on the good and beautiful rather than the difficult or just mundane aspects of everyday life. In the context of negative anonyms, this idea is further complemented by the concept of cutback reality, which portrays the blogging world as a construction of reality that appears to be all there is to know about a blogger, while it, in fact, portrays only assorted, and in aesthetic terms stylized segments of the whole. In this context, I argue that the cutback reality serves an important protective function in lifestyle blogging.

The values in lifestyle blogging cannot be defined in beforehand. Instead, they live in the margins of an ongoing debate on the integrity and trustworthiness of bloggers – requirements that constitute an imperative of authenticity in the blogging world. From a theoretical point of view, this means that all three main categories of critique discussed in this analysis – bloggers' personal life, criticism against happy places, and commercialization – share the prerequisite of authenticity as their common denominator.

The passive strategy of narrowing down intimate or provocative issues in lifestyle blogging affects the emotions and opinions of bloggers. This, in turn, can make blogs appear superficial and distant to readers and provoke dissatisfaction among them. This passive strategy also reveals a vicious cycle between bloggers and their readers: the more bloggers try to conceal aspects of their personal life, the greater the curiosity of readers to find out what exactly is hidden and why.

The active strategies include discussing abusive comments with friends, family members, and colleagues, as well as blocking abusive comments from the blog or moderating them. In their blogs, bloggers can also manipulate readers' reactions by stirring controversy with provocative issues and thus turning negative comments into clickbaits. In this light, bloggers are, in fact, active agents of social media capable of controlling their readers' reactions for their own benefit.

Critique is an integral part of blogs as ethical spaces. The role it plays in the blogosphere is equally important to the positive comments, which usually postulate agreement between bloggers and their readers. However, there are multiple occasions documented in this analysis where this dialogue falls apart and negotiation turns from constructive critique into bullying.

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Notes

[1] In the Finnish blogosphere, negative anonyms are known by various abbreviations, such as anonyms and anos.

[2] The concept of lifestyle blogging is notoriously wide and overlapping in its scope, ranging from, for example, fashion, cooking, and health to interior decoration, family-oriented topics,

and beyond (Norppari & Hautakangas 2012; cf. Jäntti et al. 2017). According to my fieldwork, it is also not uncommon that bloggers affiliate themselves with two or more categories at the same time. A fashion or family blogger may regard herself as a lifestyle blogger, which is considered one of the more general categories of the blogosphere, and vice versa. For the purposes of this study, I asked the bloggers participating in the research whether they regarded themselves as lifestyle bloggers, and almost everybody agreed that they did. This does not mean, however, that all lifestyle bloggers are lifestyle bloggers only since every individual blogger represents a very specific profile based on their personality and interests. One explanation for this "perceived consensus" lies in the commercialization of the blogosphere: being a lifestyle blogger creates more professional opportunities for an individual blogger than restricting oneself to only one of the more specific categories.

[3] According to Herring et al. (2002), trolling consists of online activities where an individual "baits and provokes" other group members and draws them into a fruitless argument while diverting attention from the stated purposes of the group.

[4] Online bullying differs from traditional bullying in that it is based on an increased potential for a larger audience and anonymous bullying, lower levels of direct feedback, decreased time and space limits, and lower levels of supervision (Sticca & Perren 2013, 739). The difference between constructive criticism and online bullying can be difficult to grasp in lifestyle blogging. Most researchers agree, however, that online bullying is a form of bullying based on the use of electronic communication technologies (Kowalski et al. 2014; cf. Olweus 2013; cf. Ybarra et al. 2012; cf. Tokunaga 2010) and involves aggressive behavior that is repeatedly and intentionally carried out against a defenseless victim (Sticka & Perren 2013, 740–741; cf. Menesini et al. 2012).

[5] These two countries are not disclosed in this article because the contextual information could compromise the identity of the interviewees. A total of nine of the twenty-five interviews were conducted with Finnish bloggers living outside Finland.

[6] The bloggers' names have been converted into pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

[7] Less than a decade ago, the identity and appearance of the bloggers themselves now blogging with their real names and faces were placed under a similar scrutiny to the one experienced by their children today.

[8] Bloggers also post on highly personal and difficult incidents in their lives, such as divorce, eating disorders, bullying, and death in the family, which constitute an enlightening exception to this rule.

[9] There has been a historical shift between these two discourses in the sense that ten years ago, when lifestyle blogging was a new phenomenon in Finland, many readers and bloggers alike thought that advertising did not belong to lifestyle blogging at all. Today, the emphasis is focused more on the ethics of the commercial practices of the blogosphere.

[10] Taking an indefinite break from one's blog can also happen due to health reasons, work and family related issues, or because the blogger feels that she needs to take a break from blogging and/or social media.