



Selected Papers of Internet Research 15:
The 15th Annual Meeting of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Daegu, Korea, 22-24 October 2014

PRIVACY FOR PROFIT: COMMODYING PRIVACY IN LIFESTYLE BLOGGING

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Commercial lifestyle bloggers in Singapore publicize their personal lives on blogs and social media, using their lifestyles as a vehicle to advertise goods and services. In this paper, I look at young Singaporean women bloggers in the 'lifestyle' genre who engage with readers by performing a blog 'persona' (Abidin & Thompson 2012) that is created for their business, and distinct from their real identities¹. This persona is premised upon sharing selected aspects of their lives that are usually personal and publically inaccessible. Therefore, privacy becomes a commodity that is manipulated and performed to advance their careers.

Through a processual analysis of how bloggers manipulate privacy throughout their careers, I analyze progress from lesser-known 'low-status' bloggers to well-known 'high-status' bloggers. At low-status, privacy is thought as a necessary sacrifice for career growth until it is distinguished as 'persona' privacy and 'real identity' privacy. At mid-status, persona privacy is a calibrated performance to increase readership. At high-status, all privacy becomes a privilege with intrinsic value as it entices readers.

The data was collected during anthropological fieldwork between December 2011 and June 2013. Bloggers were interviewed in person, and their blog and social media enterprises observed. I also used a blog and various social media platforms to interact with bloggers, and gathered with them regularly in person. This paper, however, focuses only on blogs and analyzes notions of privacy specific to these informants. Pseudonyms are used.

Low-Status

In the early stages, bloggers have not yet developed persona nor distinguished it from real identities. They conceptualize privacy as a personal quality based on their real identities, and desire to preserve it. However, success in the commercial blogging

¹ Elsewhere I have discussed 'persona' as a facet of bloggers' identities, specifically enacted for blogging businesses. It is distinct from personal, non-commercial identities that I term 'real identities'. Both persona and real identity can be enacted across virtual and physical spaces, and are not defined as online or offline phenomena.

Suggested Citation (APA): Abidin, C. (2014, October 22-24). *Privacy for profit: commodifying privacy in lifestyle blogging*. Paper presented at Internet Research 15: The 15th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Daegu, Korea: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

industry is measured by the volume of one's blog traffic; higher traffic translates into greater potential earning power. Therefore, bloggers struggle between preserving their privacy but settling for low readership, or sacrificing their privacy and acquiring high readership.

Low-status blogger, Belinda, who has 1,200 daily blog views, is unwilling to sacrifice privacy. She perceives 5,000 daily blog views as a 'breaking point' at which she will lose privacy. Belinda has stalled her career by intentionally remaining "low profile", and only blogs about things she feels "will not attract too much attention". In contrast, Irene, who blogs about her underage sex to 30,000 viewers daily, feels she no longer "owns privacy". She attributes this not to the subject matter of her blogposts, but to her extensive popularity in the blogosphere. A high-status blogger, Irene deems this a "trade off" for her career.

However, trading off between privacy and readership is confined primarily to early stages of careers when bloggers have low-status. As they distinguish persona from real identities, this insecurity diminishes because privacy is conceptualized as two distinctive layers: one for the persona, and one for the real identity. Therefore, persona privacy is sacrificed while real identity eventually remains intact.

Mid-Status

After developing a blog persona, mid-status bloggers are concerned with increasing their readership quickly. Many capture attention by turning usually private events into a public performance. Privacy is manipulated into a public staging, in order to captivate an audience 'in search of spectacles' (Kitzmann 2004).

As the most taboo, sex captures the largest audience. 'Leaked' sex videos, 'staged' domestic violence, and breakup 'tell-all' exposés are intentionally produced to bait attention. Yasmine states on her blog that her 'leaked' sex video "needed the chance to get your attention and sink in". Like many bloggers, she intentionally stages intimate moments from her private life for voyeuristic consumption as a business strategy.

Mid-status bloggers worry about nuclear family members reading their blogs when they are 'staging privacy'. Since bloggers are generally comfortable with personal friends and romantic partners reading their blogs, the insecurity is not because readers know bloggers 'in real life'. Rather, nuclear family members are regarded as holding intimate knowledge of a blogger's most private real identity, and their presence thus potentially threatens the congruence of the narratives bloggers construct for their persona (Daniel & Knudsen 1995). For instance, Christine was "pretty okay" about blogging her "private life" until her older brother found her blog. He disagreed with some of her self-presentation and began to police her blog content, causing her much frustration. Belinda, however, "feels safe" because her mother is "not computer savvy" and unlikely to read her blog.

The presence of family and their intimate knowledge means bloggers have less freedom to 'stage privacy' without being 'exposed'. For established bloggers, however, family

becomes less of a concern; they no longer need to 'stage privacy' to sustain readers' attention.

High-Status

Once bloggers have captured a sizable audience and become successful, withholding information about their private lives acquires the same value as publicizing it. This is because the mystique over what is not displayed in their persona makes readers curious; the less revealed, the more enticed readers are.

Ellen notes that Allison can "afford to be private about her life now [because] she is more successful". While Allison used to publish raw pictures about life "behind-the-scenes", her blogposts are now infrequent and more polished. On her social media feeds, readers leave hundreds of comments asking about her relationship. Yvonne remarks that high-status bloggers do not need to "push themselves all the time, [because] people will still want to know about [them]". She sees high-status bloggers as "classy bloggers", because they no longer blog about distasteful topics, unlike their low- and mid-status colleagues. Hence for high-status bloggers, privacy no longer needs to be staged since withholding information has intrinsic value.

It is crucial to emphasize that bloggers also pride themselves as being 'ordinary people'; they are accessible to readers, and more relatable than mainstream celebrities (Turner 2010). Bloggers cannot lose this status because it jeopardizes their credibility. Therefore it is paramount that high-status bloggers carefully negotiate a balance between revealing their private lives to attract readers, and withholding some of it to entice and create anticipation.

Conclusion

For these lifestyle bloggers, privacy is no longer personal seclusion in which one is free from public attention. Rather, it is manipulated into a commodity for profitable gain from low-status to high-status careers. Privacy evolves from a personal good sacrificed for career progression, to being distinguished into persona and real identity privacies. Then, it is staged to lure readers while family is excluded for threatening the persona's congruence. Finally, privacy becomes a privilege when withholding information is valuable to entice readers, but this has to be done in moderation to sustain the accessibility of blog personas.

References

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