Connecting Through Comments: A Thematic Analysis of Blogging Comments

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Abstract

There are millions of blogs available for readers and a lack of existing research on the interactions occurring through the comment-based dialogue between bloggers and their readers. This study examines the comments from 14 blog posts from a well-established lifestyle blog, which yielded 640 unique comments, 25 emergent themes, and three categories for thematic analysis. An inductive approach was used to identify the emergent themes from the blog comments. The results of the study suggest interactions are occurring primarily between the blogger and their readers, with minimal reader-to-reader interaction taking place.

Keywords: Computer Mediated Communication, Blogs, Blog Comments, Online Community Dialogue

Introduction

With the increasing prevalence of mediated communication, there has been a reduction in face-to-face communication and an increase in face-to-screen communication. While there may be some adverse effects from increased use of mediated communication (Torr, 1999; Turkle, 2012), there has also been potential to form and build communities, some that could mimic the social communities of the past and eliminate the barriers of time and space through means such as blogging. Social media/new media/computer mediated communication (CMC) has been used

by over half of the population (Duggan et al., 2015). Mediated communication has permeated personal, professional, and academic interactions; therefore, understanding more deeply the role of face-to-screen interaction may benefit those who have engaged in this experience.

Blogging was considered "new media", defined as "the advancing presence of communication technology in everyday life" (Duhe, 2015, p. 153). New media has continued to evolve as Duhe (2015) stated, "These new media range from the first Internet-enabled PCs in the workplace to tweets and status updates across a 34-year timeframe" (p. 153). From a historical perspective, blogging has not become outdated and has remained relatively new; from a technology perspective, blogging has been well-established. New media, with ever-changing platforms and functions, has continued to include blogs and points toward interactivity as a key factor.

Blogging, in fact, has continued to increase in popularity, and blogging, in particular, has provided a rich face-to-screen environment. Rothenberg (2004) believed blogs would be a passing phase; in contrast, Porter et al. (2007) found that those surveyed in their study felt blogs were not going to go away. Recent studies examined the use of blog comments in areas such as health communication (Jenkins & Moreno, 2020) and information diffusion using social media (Liang & Kee, 2018).

WordPress.com (n.d.), a popular blog hosting site, has reached "409 million people" and showed updates to "more than 20 billion pages each month" (para. 2). In March 2021, data from WordPress.com (n.d) indicated substantial blog use, particularly comments, with new content of "70 million posts" accompanied by "77 million new comments each month" (para. 3). The data from WordPress.com (n.d.), which is only one of multiple platforms available for blog hosting services, has indicated a significant volume of blog posts, and more importantly, it has shown

many readers are commenting on blog posts. With the significant number of comments posted, it has become necessary to explore the purpose of such comments, to see if the comments are one-way communication or if there has been interaction taking place.

The conversational exchange—a form of interfacing through comments—has been important and has led to the thematic analysis of blog comments in the present study. Seltzer and Mitrook's (2007) findings support that an important element in blogging has been to create an opportunity to interface with readers. The dialogic nature of blogs has been related to Porter et al.'s (2007) findings that users who were familiar with reading blogs were familiar with the culture of the blog world.

Blogging has been shown to provide an enhanced sense of social support (Sanford, 2010). De Zuniga et al. (2013) emphasized that interpersonal elements intersect with new media when interaction has occurred. Walther (2017) emphasized the integration of mass communication and interpersonal communication. Blogging has included multiple forms of communication, such as dyadic communication—when interacting with a single comment author, small group communication—when responding or asking for input from readers, and mass communication—when readers lurk without comment in this one-way broadcast of the blogger's message. Walther (2017) has urged a closer examination of metaconstructs, specifically "distribution capacity, message persistence, audience, channels and cues, relationships, temporality, interactivity and mutual influence, message characteristics, and social goals" (p. 560). The core of communication quality in interactivity "is the responsiveness and interrelationships of the messages communicators exchange over the course of a conversation" (Walther, 2017, p. 566). Blogging has benefited from its interactivity between the blogger and the blog readers.

A significant body of research on mediated communication has been developed (e.g., Antheunis et al., 2012; Chen & Persson, 2002; Turkle, 2012; Walther et al., 2011). Walther et al. (2011) provided foundational research on how individuals may share at a hyperpersonal level through mediated channels. Research has been conducted on romantic and friendship relationships forming through mediated means (e.g., Best & Krueger, 2006; Henderson & Gilding, 2004), the risks and opportunities of anonymity online—including privacy issues—(e.g., Bae, 2016; Yang et al., 2016), self-presentation in mediated environments (e.g., Bonebrake, 2002; Huang & Leung, 2012; Simpson, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015), blog use and commenting with regard to political engagement (e.g., de Zuniga et al., 2013). Prior research about blogging and social support exists but has been limited (Sanford, 2010) particularly in the area of feedback (Walther et al., 2011). Research regarding relationships has been conducted previously, but in comparison the use of the mediated channel of communication to develop relationships, in this context, has remained relatively new (Marchionni & Thorson, 2014).

In a study of blogs, Sanford (2010) asserted that blogs are distinct in providing social support. "One key distinction is the higher level of control the blogger has over the form and format of one's communication" (Sanford, 2010, p. 569). Prior to blogs, there were greater restrictions and guidelines in online environments, such as chat rooms, "[t]hus in this earlier context, the Internet user was potentially limited in expression" (Sanford, 2010, p. 569). Blogging has made it possible for an individual to create an environment entirely their own, which may or may not reflect reality. The richness of the environment has allowed for self-expression and control of the message, which may allow for more openness or potentially hyperpersonal sharing (Sanford, 2010; Walther et al., 2011). In a more recent study, Bondi (2018) stated, "Within the framework of the blog site, each thread develops according to the

expected sequence of post and comment" (p. 50). This pattern of the blogger generating content and readers responding has been established along with a pattern for posting frequency. Periodically, a blogger may have intervened in the comments, but it has not been the typical practice; according to Bondi (2018), "Bloggers publish their posts regularly and other participants contribute with comments of different kinds, usually showing agreement or disagreement with the post or with other comments, occasionally also adding other references and well developed argument" (p. 50). Further, Bondi (2018) found it rare for bloggers to intervene in the comments even though they have the option to do so.

Related to increased openness, Porter et al. (2007) identified, "The final step in the evolution of blog use is to begin engaging in two-way communication" (p. 94), creating a multi-directional communication channel through commenting. The same study examined how bloggers began using blogs; their findings indicated readers were "using blogs routinely for informational purposes – seeking out alternative viewpoints, the latest news, and experimenting with blogs for research purposes. Then, use [shifted] to a more professional – albeit passive – orientation" (Porter et al., 2007, p. 94). However, Porter et al. (2007) examined blogging through the framework of public relations practitioners, those who strategically used blogging in a specific context, not from an interpersonal relational perspective.

Considerations of blogging have included audience analysis and identity management. Ford (2012) stated that bloggers have been strategic in their content decisions choosing what to post and what not to post based on their perceptions of their audience. "Bloggers manage access based on an interaction between the blog content and the author's relationships with members of particular publics. When the blogger wants to keep certain publics from seeing particular content, they take steps to *exclude* those publics from that content" (Ford, 2012, p. 551), which

aligns with the performance element discussed by Walther et al. (2011) and contrasts Bondi's (2018) findings that bloggers do not intervene frequently through comments. The effect of managing an online persona has affected both online partners and the individuals themselves (Reed, 2005; Walther et al., 2011).

Some of the effects on online tools, like blogs, have been positive, such as a sense of social support that emerged through blog reading and commenting, which may have developed interpersonal relationships between the reader and blogger (Sanford, 2010). To develop relationships between the blogger and commenters, and potentially among readers through comments, interaction must have occurred, and the rich medium of blogging may have served as a mediated channel for interaction. According to Sanford (2010), "The richness of each medium is based on (a) the medium's capacity for immediate feedback; (b) the number of cues and channels available; (c) language variety; and (d) the degree to which intent is focused on the recipient" (p. 579). Blogs have been a rich medium when considering the four criteria set forth by Sanford (2010) – they have allowed for the blogger and blog readers to engage through multiple mediums.

The present study has built upon existing research on mediated communication to advance the existing framework through an exploratory thematic analysis of blog comments. As part of the current study, it was necessary to determine if blog comments have been one-way communication (from the reader to the blogger) or if they have been bi- or multi-directional, meaning the comments are serving as a dialogue between the blogger, the reader, and among readers. If interaction has occurred, it necessitates consideration of the nature of the interaction and forming of connections. For purposes of this study, connections have been defined as

interaction through comments in a dialogue between the blogger and readers or between reader and reader. This research has addressed the following questions:

R1: What themes emerged from blog comments? And has there been interaction occurring in this space?

R2: Do those who interacted through commenting on blogs build a connection? If so, have they connected with other commenters? With the blogger?

R3: What role have mediated communication interactions played as a replacement or supplement to social groups? Has a sense of community been created using these mediated communication platforms? If so, how? If not, why?

Each of these questions has been examined through this study.

Method

This exploratory study examined the content and interaction of blog comments through a thematic analysis, an approach recognized since the 1970s (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, thematic analysis has been appropriate during what Boyatzis (1998) refers to as the "fuzzy" stage, before things are fully focused (p. 5). It has also served as a bridge for elements of the study that are quantifiable, but not fully quantitative, and the deductive themes that emerged (Boyatzis, 1998).

For purposes of this study, comments were analyzed from 14 posts from a single well-established lifestyle blog using posts that were publicly available online. Since one aim of this study was to examine the potential creation of community through blogging, the blog selection was important. A lifestyle blog most closely represented face-to-face communities due to the range of topics addressed through posts and comments; therefore, it was a well-founded choice for analysis. The blog post topics ranged from health and beauty product recommendations, to

pregnancy and birth, to pets, to family and marriage, to diet and exercise, much like topics of conversation with friends or neighbors in non-mediated environments. Other types of blogs have more limited focus such as a particular interest area; some examples of more specialized topics have included photography, cooking or food, home design, or travel. The topics of blogs have been as varied as the bloggers.

This study examined how those who have read one lifestyle blog may or may not have interacted and formed relationships through the comment feature available on most posts. The comments have been examined as the interaction between the blogger and the reader, also referred to as the comment author throughout this study. During the early years of the blog used for this study, I followed the blog as a reader; however, I have not been a regular blog reader for several years and have never interacted with the blogger through comments or any other means. The blog has been well-established. According to Walther (2017), it may take more time to establish a relationship online, so it was important to examine interaction through comments on a well-established blog with strong potential to extend into the future.

Data Collection

To determine the posts and comments for the sample, I explored the blog's archive, opened each post, and manually counted and logged the number of comments written in response to each post. Rather than examining concurrent posts, a 12-month timeframe was selected to include a wide range of life events and opportunities for commenting to occur. In this instance, the posts included an array of topics and events such as holidays, vacations, and the birth of the blogger's second child. The blog post with the largest number of comments each month, excluding those requiring a comment to enter a prize give-away, were analyzed in this study. Comments for prize giveaways typically have a set criteria for a particular type of response and

encourage posts from readers that do not otherwise comment on the blog. Since there were two months where the two posts had the same number of comments, both posts have been included in the sample, which is the reason 14, rather than 12, posts were selected.

The posts were dated beginning in October 2018 and concluded with posts through September 2019. The number of comments for the selected sample ranged from 23 to 81. There were a total of 640 comments across 14 blog posts included in the sample for thematic analysis. Once the high comment posts had been identified, the posts and comments were saved as .pdf files at the time of data collection to ensure they were consistent and remained intact until analysis was completed. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the aim was to determine if interactions were taking place and, if so, whether those interactions occurred through comments, potentially as a dialogue.

Identifying Themes

The researcher identified 27 themes emerging from the comments, which fit into three broad categories. These themes, used to create a codebook, were grouped into categories, and two independent research assistants completed labeling of all blog comments individually. Training included the use of a sample blog post that was labeled by both research assistants. The labeling was reviewed and feedback was provided for adjustments required in the process, which led to the topic of each comment being labeled. Once the individual research assistants completed their reviews, they met and compared the labels applied to the comments. For any discrepancies, they came to consensus regarding the most appropriate label for the comment. The thematically labeled data was returned to the researcher for further analysis.

Results

From the comments analyzed, 27 themes emerged in three categories: Blogger response, social support, and interaction. In the first category of blogger response, sub-categories of gratitude, emojis, questions for comment author, refutation, and response to comment author were used. Included in the comments were shortened or modified word forms used as an abbreviated method to type content and a conversational style; as with informal conversation, one may not always practice perfect grammar, and in the blog comments, spelling errors and typographical errors occurred occasionally. Because such informal writing has been considered as part of the whole, these errors and stylistic writing choices have remained intact in the comments included in the following section. Broadly, the overarching theme was positivity. This positivity was demonstrated in the majority of posts from the blogger, which aligned with the authentic, healthy, vibrant, and positive tone of the blog. Comment authors, or readers, typically responded in a similar manner.

Considering Walther et al.'s (2011) concern for performance, it was considered that this tone may be part of the blogger's performance—or presenting self—to draw and maintain readership. Further, the blogger may have tended toward hypersharing (Walther et al., 2011) in an effort to build a sense of community with readers; however, the motivation of the blogger cannot be ascertained from the content posted when choosing what information was disclosed. The information on the blog was often highly personal (for example, issues with her children, husband, ex-husband), but if the reader only knew the blogger through this mediated channel, the reader may have perceived that the blogger was very open to sharing personal information, when the motivation could have been to garner "clicks" to build income. The analysis of each label has been discussed in the following paragraphs.

Blogger Response

A total of n=185 (28.91%) of the comments posted were responses from the blogger. Most prevalent in this category were responses to the comment author (n=152, 23.75%). The other themes within this category ranged from n=3 (0.47%) to n=12 (1.88%), with emoji only responses being the smallest number.

Gratitude

A total of n=12 (1.88%) comments expressed gratitude. Typically, these responses were concise and consisted of statements like "Thank you!" or "Thanks!" from the blogger. Since the use was minimal across all the comments, this theme did not provide a strong indication of a theme of gratitude across the comments.

Emojis

Posts in this category were limited (n=3, .47%) and were only posted by the blogger. Only minimal emojis were used: the smiley emoji ☺ and the symbols for a heart emoji "<3". While other comments periodically included an emoji symbol, there was accompanying text. Therefore, this form of expression as a comment was not analyzed further. Instead, it has been interpreted as a virtual acknowledgement to the reader that does not require a more comprehensive response; however, it served as an indicator of interaction between the blogger and comment author.

Questions for Comment Author

This category addressed instances when the blogger asked a comment author questions directly. With n=12 (1.88%) comments falling into the category, it was evident the blogger was infrequently asking questions of the comment authors; however, this did not indicate a lack of interaction—only interaction in this specific format. An example of one such comment included

"Can you share?! Broc Cheddar is my favorite soup!!" The use of "Broc" as shorthand for broccoli, served as an example of informal writing lending to a conversational style from the blogger.

Refutation

The next theme, refutation, was one of the least frequent formats of responses from the blogger. There were n=6 (0.94%) comments directly responding to a comment author. In one particular post regarding a dental issue for the blogger's child, she refuted a comment about the cause of the child's teeth grinding, "The pediatric dentist told me it was common. If you'd like to challenge him or project stress onto [name of child] you can, but I assure you he is not stressed out from all of his 'life changes.'" While there may have been an element of performance (Walter et al., 2011) in many posts and comments, this indicated the blogger was not always focused on reader perceptions, as she asserted herself through this response. It also aligned with research by Bondi (2018) that bloggers do not typically intervene in comment posting. Instead, this blogger elected to interact with (rather than remove or block) the comment author.

Response to Comment Author

Responses to comment authors were not necessarily to address a specific question; instead, those comments were of a conversational nature. Comments in this category made up the largest portion of comments (n=152, 23.75%) and were found in every blog post. In a post about a new kitchen tool (a popular pressure cooker), the blogger wrote, "I'm still using my rice cooker for rice but I'm using my instant pot for all other kinds of things!" Comments could also have been in response to advice posted by a reader through a comment, such as, "Thanks for the suggestions! We considered the hotel option and think just getting up is going to be equally as logistically hard. Since we'd still have to get up at 4:30/5 at a hotel." Some comments provided

positive affirmations to the comment author, such as the following reply written to a reader

regarding a post on flying with two children; the blogger stated, "You are so brave to fly alone!!"

These examples have provided a concise overview of the range of topics included within this

coding category. Thematically, the tone of these comments has been identified as positive and

consistent with the overall tone of the blog.

Social Support

In the broad category of social support, 10 sub-categories emerged with a total of 261

(40.78%) comments: Partnering (n=1, 0.16%), in-person relationships (n=1, 0.16%), correcting

blogger (n=3, 0.47%), food affirmations (n=5, 0.78%), physical appearance affirmation (n=5,

0.78%), support (n=8, 1.25%), family affirmations (n=33, 5.16%), general comment (n=46,

7.19%), positive affirmation (n=72, 11.25%), and advice (n=88, 13.75%). Categorically, this set

of comments made up the largest percentage of comments; of note was that these were

comments posted by readers of the blog; these were not comments written by the blogger. This

suggests the readers were seeking to be a part of the blog in some form. However, there was not

a clear indication a community was formed with the blogger and readers.

Partnering and In-person Relationships

A single (0.16%) comment was identified in each of these two categories. First, this

indicated partnerships were not a primary focus of this particular blog, which has provided a

signal that the tone of the blog was authentic, rather than a performance to help support the

income generated from blog posts. Second, it indicated if there were existing in-person

relationships with those who commented, the comment authors shared this information

infrequently. This phenomena may be explained by the fact that the face-to-face relationships

were known by the blogger and reader; therefore, it was not necessary to declare the relationship when commenting.

The single instance when a reader identified the face-to-face relationship indicated it was not a close relationship, potentially an acquaintance who needed to re-establish how they were known to the blogger in the non-mediated environment. The comment author stated, "Hi [blogger's name]! It's [reader's name] from soccer! I wanted to let you know that I've been really enjoying your blog because I just had my first little one on October 18th…. It's really helpful to hear how life with [name of blogger's new baby] is going for you. Hope you are enjoying the day!" The face-to-face connection was established in the comment when the author indicated the relationship from playing soccer with the blogger. It also provided further evidence supporting Walther's (2017) findings that online relationships form more slowly.

Correcting Blogger

In three (0.47%) instances, a reader elected to correct the blogger. One comment from a reader clarified an erroneous remark in a video created by the blogger, stating, "Just a note – when I watched the oatmeal video you mentioned that possibly it was the gluten coming out of the oats that was making it creamy…. What is making the oatmeal creamy is the release of starch when the cell walls are disrupted from the cooking and stirring process. Looks like a delicious way to make oatmeal though!" This comment provided a point of clarification for the readers; however, the correction was posted as a comment on an unrelated blog post due to the fact that the video was a pop-up when a reader viewed a blog post. In this instance, the actual post with the comment was about creating meals using eggs as a key ingredient.

The following comment seemed to issue a warning to the blogger from a reader. The tone was somewhat friendly, but also suggested the blogger was unaware of potential guidelines from the company being discussed. The comment author stated:

Hi [blogger's name], Be careful! You mentioned that there are no sales quotas with [beauty product brand]. Well, technically true, because they use the term "activity requirements" instead of "sales quotas". In order to maintain consultant status, you have to meet a certain sales volume every six months. Yes, it can be in personal purchases, but yikes, I don't think you'll be keen on spending that much on products all yourself! We're looking out for you! Please ensure you understand everything about what you opted into.

While the comment author indicated concern, stating "we're looking out for you!", there was also evidence of judgement of the blogger; the correction suggested the blogger did not have the necessary knowledge or information to make an informed decision.

The third comment provided a clarification from another reader, "The brand is [popular pressure cooker brand]. Just pointing that out here because the name matters if you are talking about the specific brand. I love cooking in mine so much I have both a 6qt and 8qt!"

There were not a significant number of corrections posted in the sample of 640 comments analyzed in this study, which was consistent with prior research (Bondi, 2018); however, such comments have served as an indication the readers feel the need to clarify information for other readers. This clarification may have been an indication of a sense of community by addressing the other commenters; however, the data was inconclusive. The comment cautioning the blogger may have indicated a sense of a relationship with the blogger, but it was not clear if the comment indicated a level of care/concern from the reader or perhaps judgement of the blogger.

Food Affirmations

An important notation about this category was the name of the blog as well as the educational background of the blogger were both food/diet/nutrition related. However, only five (0.78%) of the comments were identified as food affirmations, comments providing a positive response relating to images of food or recipes shared through the blog post. Other comments related to food could also include a question for the blogger and were labeled under the interaction categories addressed in the coming paragraphs.

Physical Appearance Affirmations

A relatively small number of comments addressed the physical appearance of the blogger (n=5, 0.78%). All comments relating to the blogger's physical appearance were positive. The comments included topics relating to her eyes, skin, hair, and overall appearance. In some instances, comments were a direct response to the blogger's request for recommendations for products, such as eye cream.

Support

Comments coded as support were those where the comment author provided support for the blogger, which may have included coming to the blogger's defense. Labeling indicated a small number (n=8, 1.25%) of comments were in this category; comments that were primarily offered as support to the blogger focused on when her dog had undergone a medical procedure.

General Comments

General comments, or those that do not fit into the other 26 categories, included what can best be described as statements from the comment author. A moderate number of comments fell in this category (n=46, 7.19%). Such comments provided an outlet for the reader to make a statement about something posted in the blog or commented upon, but the remarks were not

affirmations, did not provide advice, or otherwise fit in the other categories; an example of such a post follows: "This post reminded me of how my oldest used to come home from kindergarten looking like a chimney sweep! Even his feet would need scrubbing (heaven only knows how the dirt got through his shoes and socks)! Glad he got lots of fresh air and exercise!!" This comment did not fit into the study's emergent themes. The comment indicated the reader was reminded of something from their past, the reader shared the memory, but the comment was primarily a personal recollection. An example from another reader:

> I try not to use bribery too often. Dental work is the perfect time to pull it out of your box of tricks though! My daughter has had fillings, sealants, a couple of crowns and 3?4? teeth pulled. The tooth fairy has been very generous with the pulled teeth! There was also a loom kit for weaving her own creations, ice cream, donuts….anything to make her get over the trauma!

Such comments, while related to the topic of dental work in the blogger's original post, reflected on the comment author's past experience.

Comments in this category may have been similar to conversational flow in face-to-face communication. While they did not fit into another category for labeling, they were a form of self-disclosure. Such comments may also have fallen into the hyperpersonal category (Walther et al., 2011); however, without additional knowledge about the blogger and comment author's relationship, there was not adequate data provided to examine this potential hypersharing without further research.

Positive Affirmations

Comments labeled as positive affirmations were the third most frequent with a total of n=72 (11.25%). Comments of this nature were posted in 12 of the 14 blog posts examined in this

study. The highest number of positive affirmation comments occurred when the blogger wrote posts about and shared her recent family photos, what her children ate, motherhood, and the introduction of her newborn baby. Comments ranged from general remarks about the blog, such as a frequent comment author who posted, "I can't enough of your punny blog titles! I swear you have the best ones! 😁" Another comment from a reader stated, "What an adorable baby! Congratulations!!!" Comments in this category were positive remarks to the blogger regarding her posts, a product she was using or promoting, or other general points of interest to the readers.

Advice

In the advice category, 12 of the 14 blog posts included the use of the label advice, where readers provided advice—most often directed toward the blogger. Advice made up n=88 (13.75%) comments. The post garnering the highest number of comments providing advice was on upcoming travel where the blogger sought recommendations from her readers. A post on motherhood and recipes for a new pressure cooker had an equal number of comments, the second highest number of advice comments (n=17, 2.66%). One blog reader provided a lengthy comment:

> I would totally recommend bringing a stroller all the way to the gate. Granted, I am usually flying alone with my kids, but even when my husband is with us it is nice to be able to just sit down and take inventory after making it through security to the gate. The other thing to consider is a delay – and then you'd have to be wearing [initial of blogger's baby] or passing him back and forth. Just a thought. I have lots of friends who never bring the stroller to the gate! If he's not sitting upright well in an umbrella stroller (which sounds like your best option to bring to the gate), consider rolling some lightweight muslin blankets and putting them at his sides. I'm sure either way – stroller or no stroller

– once you get to the gate and can breathe, you'll feel like you've finished a huge part of the race that is traveling with more than one kid! The only other suggestion I have is to drive to the airport the night before and stay at a hotel. Oftentimes they'll have a shuttle and you can sometimes even park for free during the entire trip. On the way home, you can send your husband and [initial of blogger's oldest child] on the shuttle to pick up the car, and they can swing back to the airport to get you and any luggage they didn't take, or you can all just shuttle back to the hotel to get the car. Choose a hotel with breakfast, and if you have to leave too early they will sometimes pack a bag of fruit or something for you to grab and go. Happy travels!

This comment was laced with advice throughout. In contrast, another reader provided a more concise piece of advice, "You are super organized so I'm sure you'll do great. We used to travel with three kids under 3 1/2 and were no where near as organized. My only suggestion is to NOT take advantage of the early boarding. I would get on at the end to avoid time having to be still on the plane. Have fun!" The comment had both affirmations and advice for the blogger.

Other advice came in the form of recommendations for a beauty product, once again, at the request of the blogger. Comments included strictly product recommendations as reader posts: "[product name] Eye Masks are amazing." Others provided comments that include affirmations and links to products, such as the following comment, "Hi [blogger's name], you look beautiful and radiant! But as you asked for it I recommend this eye cream, I use it every morning and like it very much. [product link] Best [blog reader's name]." Particularly when recommending beauty products, the comments were accompanied by affirmations about the blogger's appearance.

Some advice about babies/parenting were also included in readers' comments, such as the following comment: "Just a tip that I didn't know when swaddling my own baby but learned

from the nurses in the NICU where I work. Try swaddling [name of blogger's baby] with his elbows bent and his hands out of the top of the swaddle. This will keep him snug and secure but with access to his hands to suck for self soothing. Babies sleep better when swaddled this way because they don't fight to get their hands free." Often, comments providing advice were thoughtfully, rather than judgmentally, delivered by the comment author, which may suggest an affinity for the blogger-reader relationship.

Interactions and Reader Interactions

This grouping of labels included the use of comments by blog readers to engage in communication with the blogger. There were a significant number (n=151, 23.59%) of comments in this group. The categories that emerged in this section included the following: Questions for blogger, responses to blogger, negative responses from reader, positive product comments, and pricing. Another collection of codes were used to indicate reader interaction, where the comment authors were interacting with other readers through the comments, which included a much smaller number of comments (n=43, 6.72%). The codes used for reader-to-reader interaction were as follows: Affirming another reader's negative comment, question for another comment author, questions for all, responded to all (not only the blogger), and responded to another comment author.

Negative Response from Readers

A total of n=9 (1.41%) comments from readers were a negative response to the blogger's post. The majority of the negative comments (n=7, 1.09%) were in response to a post perceived by readers as promoting a multi-level marketing (MLM) promotion. Although these were a small percentage of the total comments posted, the strong negative response to this single post, making up 15% of the total comments on that individual post, indicated a significant response from

readers. The readers expressed their disappointment in the blogger for promoting such a brand, which may have suggested readers felt some level of betrayal or a violation of their mediated relationship with the blogger. Further research on this particular topic could be used to determine if the comments indicate a breach of the implied blogger-reader relationship. One reader stated the following:

> I love this blog but I really dislike multilevel marketing schemes such as [beauty product brand]. . . [reader quoted report]. What bothers me most about these companies is that they especially take advantage of women (and ESPECIALLY stay at home moms) because the model is so misleading and it encourages women to invest in a business that does not see returns once you account for time and money spent on inventory and sales. The company benefits when you take on consultants but at what cost to the women that sign up? . . . It seems innocent enough, but when you understand how the model truly takes advantage of its consultants, its horrifying. . . . I know I'm a little fired up about it, but I HATE to see large companies take advantage of women's valuable time and desire to work hard for their families. I still support this blog and your other content, but definitely can not get behind the MLM machine.

This comment expressed a strong negative response. Another reader expressed similar dislike:

> As a long time reader, I am really bummed out that you joined an MLM. ☹ I don't care how great the products might be, the MLM business structure is predatory and the vast majority of people who sign up (those without blog platforms and built-in customer base!) lose money. I'd encourage anyone thinking about joining [beauty product brand] to do their research and check out their financial disclosure statement to see how much people REALLY make.

Yet another lengthy post expressing a strong, negative reaction from a reader. An additional

lengthy comment came from a self-identified longtime reader:

> Hi [blogger's name], long time blog reader here. I really have enjoyed reading your blog
>
> over the years and I haven't had a strong opinion about how you format your blog and
>
> what topics you've covered as you've changed throughout the years, mostly I've enjoyed
>
> it all. But I have to be real with you, I hear that you're insisting [beauty product brand]
>
> isn't MLM so I'll trust you on that. But I'm already skimming sections going into detail
>
> on products and skipping your stories … You sound like an MLM saleswoman in a way
>
> your sponsored posts rarely do. I thank you for your years of working on this blog and I
>
> admire you for building a lovely business that I enjoy consuming content from. I'm just
>
> not so excited about content related to your makeup sales business.

This comment addressed the tone of the blogger as the issue that was negatively received by the

reader. The comment authors of the negative comments, while attempting politeness, wrote in a

direct manner to express their disappointment, disagreement, and opinion of MLM. The blogger

responded, defended her position, and provided additional evidence for her position that the

company was not a MLM.

For those who identified themselves as long-time readers, a point of interest was their

decision to comment at this particular time. It was unlikely as a longtime reader one would

identify themselves in that way if they were also a regular comment author. This perceived

potential violation of reader trust was enough to elicit these negative comments, many of which

were substantive comments. While the context has not provided data rich enough to confirm this,

meaning further study would be required, it was a potential indication of a blogger-reader

relationship and possibly the formation of community.

Positive Product Comments and Pricing

While many readers responded negatively to perceived MLM strategies being used, there were positive comments regarding products (n=27, 4.22%) and pricing (n=1, 0.16%). Positive comments in this coding category were frequently from readers who also used the recommended product and supported the blogger.

Responses to Blogger

In this category, readers responded directly to the blogger through their comments, often to a question posed from the blogger. Comments in this category made up a moderate portion of total comments (n=49, 7.66%). Some responses included links to other resources; one reader responded to the blogger's question with the following:

> I use this guide: [link to online resource] If I'm just making a bowl for myself, I use a regular ceramic bowl for my potin-pot and eat out of that – one bowl to wash! If I'm making a batch for two or three people, I use a stainless-steel bowl and serve out of that – if I'm not doing the jars like I mentioned above. ☺ Now I'm off to make the egg loaf – thanks for the idea!

In contrast to the prior response, another blog reader shared details of a vacation destination in a concise comment, "We stayed at the Ocean Reef Club on Key Largo. It was amazing! Lots of great resort options in the Keys!" The responses thematically were positive and friendly, potentially indicating an informal conversational tone.

Questions for Blogger

In this sub-category, readers were asking questions directly of the blogger. This activity accounts for n=64 (10%) of the comments in the analysis. A theme emerging from these questions was often in regard to a product shown in a photo on the blog, for example, several

comments asked about a lunchbox the blogger's oldest child used and a bathing suit shown in vacation photos. Thematically, these comments were not considered strong evidence of performance nor hyperpersonal sharing (Walther et al., 2011).

Affirming Another Reader's Negative Comment

This label accounted for a single comment (0.16%) out of 640; however, it had additional relevance. In this instance, the reader was supporting another reader's negative response to the post perceived by many as a MLM. It was noteworthy because it was the only instance of a reader supporting another reader through the comments in such an obvious manner. The blog and comments together did not show if this was significant in a face-to-face environment; it is not clear if the two readers may know each other and/or the blogger outside of the blog, which may have further informed the understanding of this particular comment.

Question for Another Comment Author, Questions for All, Response to Another Comment Author, and Response to All (Not Only the Blogger)

The questions labeled in the first two areas (questions for another comment author and questions for all) accounted for three (0.47%) comments each. The third label (response to another comment author) had somewhat more frequency (n=19, 2.97%). The final label accounted for n=17 (2.66%) of the comments. These labels were significant in this study because they provided evidence readers were interacting with one another. However, with such a small total number of comments, it was evident interacting with other readers may not be a primary reason for engagement in blog comments, which indicates there was only minimal evidence that readers were forming community with the blogger and other readers as a group.

Discussion and Implications

The thematic analysis conducted for this study was guided by three research questions:

R1: What themes emerged from blog comments? And has there been interaction

occurring in this space?

R2: Do those who interacted through commenting on blogs build a connection? If so,

have they connected with other commenters? With the blogger?

R3: What role have mediated communication interactions played as a replacement or

supplement to social groups? Has a sense of community been created using these

mediated communication platforms? If so, how? If not, why?

R1 is answered with a total of 25 themes emerging from the analysis that are further

divided into three categories: Blogger responses, social support, and interaction and reader

interactions.

R2 is partially answered; yes, some connections are potentially being made. There is

minimal evidence of interactions occurring among readers; however, interaction is reoccurring at

a greater volume between the blogger and the readers. Readers do interact with each other, but

the sample in this study does not show support to be a significant reason for commenting on the

blog. The themes indicate readers have some desire to interact with the blogger.

R3 is partially answered. The evidence from the thematic analysis is inconclusive

regarding the role mediated communication interactions play through following and commenting

on blog posts. It is also unclear if the connections—bi or multi-directional interactions through

comments—that appear to form can serve as a replacement or supplement to social groups; the

analysis does not lead to strong support for communities being built.

Further research is necessary to determine the significance of the relationships occurring

face-to-screen, face-to-face, and in blended environments. A potential limitation of examining

the comments alone is the fact that a blogger may have some control over what appears on a

blog; readers may be required to register, or the blogger may moderate or delete comments. Thus, the comments shared publicly on a blog may not reflect all the comments from readers. For a deeper understanding of the relationships and the role of comment moderating and to build upon this exploratory study, additional methods of examination may be necessary, such as interviews with bloggers and their readers. There may be reluctance, particularly for the blogger, to reveal information since it may change readership and potentially sponsorship. Another area with potential for further examination is the frequency with which an individual comments on the blog. Since the reader enters their own name or pseudonym, it is not possible to determine if any comments are written by the same individual, particularly with the use of only first names and variations that may be entered each time an individual comments.

Particularly with the recent COVID-19 outbreak, face-to-screen interactions are increasing as society adapts to isolation and quarantine environments; this is also creating significant modifications in interactions, causing a heavy reliance on mediated communication channels as individuals seek to fulfill unexpected social and familial voids. Since the data collection was completed months before the outbreak, it is not considered as part of the study; however, additional research is needed in this area to determine if interaction changes between the blogger and readers during a crisis.

What can be learned from this study is that bloggers and readers are interacting through comments. They are engaging in a dialogue to connect and learn from each other as identified through the themes presented here. While there are limitations, there are opportunities to build upon this research to gain a deeper understanding of these interactions and the potential to form, maintain, and deepen communities in mediated environments.

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