Exploring the Role of the Reader in the Activity of Blogging

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ABSTRACT

Within the last decade, blogs have become an important element of popular culture, mass media, and the daily lives of countless Internet users. Despite the medium's interactive nature, most research on blogs focuses on either the blog itself or the blogger, rarely if at all focusing on the reader's impact. In order to gain a better understanding of the social practice of blogging, we must take into account the role, contributions, and significance of the reader. This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study of blog readers, including common blog reading practices, some of the dimensions along which reading practices vary, relationships between identity presentation and perception, the interpretation of temporality, and the ways in which readers feel that they are a part of the blogs they read. It also describes similarities to, and discrepancies with, previous work, and suggests a number of directions and implications for future work on blogging.

Author Keywords

Blogging, blog readers.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous; K.4.m. Computers and Society: Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

By most indications, blogs are proliferating at an ever-increasing rate. Although specific figures vary among different sources [16,25] there is consensus that blogs have become an important, active, and influential part of online media. Research on blogging, e.g., [11,15,21], has revealed important insights about the activity of blogging, the attitudes of bloggers, and the practices surrounding blogs.

However, blogging is not a solo activity. While work has been done in areas such as analyzing conversations between

blogs, e.g., [7,10], and applying social network analysis to blogs, e.g., [8,19], little work has been done examining the role of the reader in the blogging process. This gap is surprising, considering Nardi et al.'s prediction that "future research is sure to pay attention to blog readers" [21:231]. Furthermore, according to Lenhart and Fox [16], as of July 2006, 57 million American adults read blogs, over a third of the 147 million who use the Internet. Sifry [25] puts the number of unique Technorati visitors at over 9 million in March 2007, up by over 50% from February 2007. Clearly, not only is the number of blogs increasing, but also the number of blog readers. The role of this ever increasing population of blog readers presents a promising and important, yet little-explored, area of research.

This paper is not the first call for a focus on readers. In the 1960's and 1970's, a shift occurred in literary theory from focusing primarily on the literary object itself to including the reader's response to the literature. Reader-response theory, or reader-response criticism, cf. [3,17], focuses not on the literature itself but rather on the audience's response to, and interpretation of, the text. The reader is not a passive recipient of content, this critique argues, but rather engages in an active process of interpretation. Reality and meaning exist neither solely in the text nor solely in the reader, but are constructed through the dialectic interactions between the two. Similarly, the reality and meaning of a blog exists neither solely in the blog itself nor solely in the reader, but rather in the reader's active interpretation of, and interaction with, the blog. Furthermore, technologies and practices such as commenting, linking, tagging, and trackbacks enable a level of explicit interaction with both the text and the author not available in previous textual media. This paper argues for a shift in the study of blogging similar to that in literary criticism represented by reader-response theory. This shift to emphasize the interactional aspects of blogging also fits into a larger trend in HCI research of moving from the user as information processor, to human actor, to embodied experiencer [5]. In order to understand the myriad contexts in which human-computer interaction takes place, researchers have adopted different stances toward users and taken different perspectives on HCI systems. Similarly, in order to understand fully the activity of blogging, we must study not only bloggers and the blogs they produce, but also the readers of those blogs and their interactions with the blog and the blogger.

This paper reports on the results of a qualitative study into the practices and culture of blog readers. How do readers contribute to and help shape the various blogs they read? When, why, and how do readers choose to comment? How do readers perceive the identity of the blogger? Do readers feel overwhelmed by the amount of information available through blogs? What habits do readers follow? While this paper cannot address these questions in their entirety, it is a first step toward understanding the role, contributions, and significance of the reader in the activity of blogging.

RELATED WORK
Recent work on blogging covers a wide range of topics (see [24] for an overview). This section highlights work that helps inform this study. Nardi [21] examined the social nature of blogging activity, illustrating that blogs are quite unlike a personal diary. Lenhart's [15] work pointed to the slow development of norms given the decentralized and non-standardized activities that occur on and off blogs. Herring et al. [11] provide a genre analysis of weblogs. Within the emerging medium of blogs, boyd [1] addressed the need for self-awareness tools to manage the fluidity of identity presentation in blogs. Some have applied existing analytic tools, such as social network analysis, e.g., [8, 19], to show that blogs are not highly interconnected in a decentralized fashion, but rather grouped in numerous clusters of blogs with limited links between clusters. Studies using conversation analysis have suggested that conversations across blogs and amongst bloggers are limited to a small number of "A-list" blogs [10].

Here, our focus is the audience. In Lenhart's examination of norm formation in blogging [15], she discusses the anonymity of the blog audience and their occasional terrifying effect on bloggers. Similarly, Reed [23] illustrates blogger self-censorship due to an audience made up of certain friends and family. boyd [2] describes the expectations that bloggers feel are placed on them by their audience and how bloggers negotiate the formation and fulfillment of these expectations. Nardi suggests that "readers create blogs as much as writers" [21:225], giving them an equal role in the activity of blogging. Despite acknowledging the presence and impact of an audience, no previous blogging research has made blog readers the primary focus. This paper aims to fill that gap.

The position of the blog reader is often an ambiguous one. Most research on blogs adopts the view that readers, commenters, and participants are also bloggers themselves, e.g., [8]. However, according to the statistics cited above, there is obviously a large discrepancy between bloggers and people who read blogs – not every reader is a blogger. The question becomes, when does one move from being a blog reader to a blogger? Is simply owning a blog enough, or must there be regular updates? What is the requisite update frequency? Despite indications to the contrary, are there any bloggers who do not read other blogs? It is be argued below that, rather than attempting to split individuals into either the category of blogger or the category of reader, it might be more useful to consider the question in terms of degree of membership, where an individual may be both a blogger and a reader to varying and independent degrees. For the purposes of this study, we focus on those who have a high enough degree of readership to self-identify as a blog reader, regardless of their degree of bloggership.

THEORY
In examining the activities that surround blog reading, this study is partially informed by ideas from reader-response theory [3,17], which help provide a general framework with which to analyze the act of reading blogs. This section provides a brief introduction to reader-response theory, situating it in the context of literary criticism, and describes how the theory is applied in this paper.

Despite the general inclination to situate reader-response theory in opposition to formalism, which posits that only the materiality of the text is significant, it actually developed from within formalism itself (Tompkins, cited in [3]). In the 1950's, reader-response theory branched out from formalist discourse under the auspices of Gibson's "mock reader" – the persona a reader should adopt to understand the text [3]. Thus a slight variation within formalism became the seed from which the reader and her or his interpretation gained significance.

Later reader-response theorists, such as Crosman [3], argued specifically that the "construction of meaning ultimately resides in the auspices of readers, who approach literary texts…from their own subjective perspectives" [3:66]. This view is reminiscent of Nardi et al.'s [21] assertion that the reader and writer both participate in co-creating the blog, as well as Dourish's [5] emphasis on viewing the user as a situated, embodied actor that actively engages with a system in context. As an extension of Crosman's approach, Lewis [17] presents an alternate method of performing a literary critique. He suggests rather than judging books as good or bad and making assertions about someone's tastes based on the books he or she reads, "let us try to discover how far it might be plausible to define a good book as a book which is read in one way, and a bad book as a book which is read in another way" [16:1]. He argues that "good literature [is] that which permits, invites, or even compels good reading" [16:104], and that examining the type of reading that a given work permits, invites, or compels can tell you about the merits of that work. While there may be questions as to what constitutes good reading, the purpose at hand is not to separate good blogs from bad. Rather, it is to explore the extent to which we may understand a blog not by features of its content, structure, or technological aspects, but rather by the type of reading practices in which readers of the blog engage.

METHODS
The authors chose to employ qualitative and ethnographic methods in order to gain an understanding of the subjective

experience of reading blogs. Participants were recruited through physical fliers posted on community bulletin boards and in public posting areas, as well as through online bulletin boards for the local community. The posted criteria were that respondents read at least 5 different blogs at least 2 to 3 times per week. In total, 23 individuals replied to these advertisements: 21 responded to the physical fliers, and 2 replied to the online postings. Of those, 19 fit our criteria (18 from the physical fliers and 1 from the online postings). Some potential subjects decided not to participate or stopped responding, resulting in a total of 15 respondents. All participants were compensated up to $20 US depending on the extent of their participation. Participant names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Three main data-gathering techniques were used: two semi-structured interviews with each participant, logging software to track reading patterns, and a survey to gather some basic data, such as demographics. Since there is little focus on blog readers in the existing literature, the first set of interviews were largely exploratory and generative; although there were specific themes on which this study was to focus, the first interview was also used to find other interesting themes or issues in our respondents' blog reading practices. During the second interviews, participants were asked to discuss further some of the specific themes that emerged during the first round of interviews. Participants were also solicited to complete their second interview as a group interview. Four participants expressed interest in group interviews, but due to logistic constraints only one pair of participants completed the second interview as a group. One participant, Connie was unable to complete the second interview, and another, Jill, had to answer questions for the second interview via email. During both interviews, all participants spent time reading blogs as they normally would, showing and describing items of interest and parts of their blog-reading routines to the interviewer. All interviews and notes were transcribed and coded, initially using open coding and then transitioning to axial coding (see [18]). Coding was an iterative process during which two of the authors independently coded each interview transcript and then exchanged the transcripts to confer on the codes used and the themes they represented. The initial coding began after the completion of the first interviews, so that results from analysis of the first set of interviews helped inform and direct the second set. The axial codes form the basis for the findings reported below.

Participants were also asked to install logging software on their computers to track their blog reading. The logger was implemented as a plugin for IBM's Web Intermediaries infrastructure [28], which recorded a series of time-stamped URLs. Unfortunately, most participants either elected not to install the logger or ran into technical difficulties. Since only five participants successfully ran the logger, an analysis of those logs is not presented here, but it was used to generate questions for some of the second interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents a profile of our respondents. Because subjects were recruited from the geographical area around a university, many are students or recent graduates. That said, they represent a diverse set of blog reading habits and practices. The data presented in this table were collected through an online survey completed by all but one of the participants (Connie). "Regular blogs" is the number of blogs the participant reads on a regular basis as determined by the participant, "example blogs" are a selection of representative examples from the blogs she or he reads, and "tools" describes the technology the participant uses to find and to read blogs. Since the purpose of these data is not to make statistical inferences about blog readers but rather to help create a picture of the various participants, and since the sample is not sufficiently large to generate statistically significant results, no quantitative analysis is performed. For statistics about blog readers, see [16].

This section includes a description of blog reading practices that were common among most of our participants, along with some of the factors that influence the myriad differences in approaches to reading blogs. Drawing on this diversity in blog reading practices, the section then addresses the question "what is a blog?" from readers' perspectives; discusses the presentation and perception of online identity, noting important similarities and differences with previous work; and describes ways in which readers can feel that they are "a part" of the blogs they read.

Common Blog Reading Practices

While reader-response theory helps make sense of the significant variations of the data, some aspects of our participants' reading practices are fairly consistent. Thirteen explicitly stated that blog reading is a form of "chilling out", "wasting time", "brain candy", or "doing nothing", similar to the pottering activities described by Wyche et al. [27]. The other two later indicated on the survey that blog reading was "sometimes" an activity during periods of boredom. Similar to some instances of pottering, blog reading can also have a habitual nature. When Fern reads blogs, she adheres to a self-prescribed system, despite her lack of interest in the content of some posts she reads. Lillian indicated that reading blogs became part of her morning routine. When we asked Charles if he looked forward to reading blogs everyday he responded:

> I don't know if I look forward to [reading blogs]… I don't really look forward to cigarettes anymore, but it's something that happens through the course of the day that I feel like I might need to do. It just becomes habit, I guess.

Though in all likelihood most blog readers do not share Charles's outlook on the intensity of blog reading's addictiveness, blog reading often becomes habitual. For Krish, who has only been reading blogs for eight months, "checking blogs is like checking one's email," which is similar to the habitualness described by nine other participants. For many, checking email is a routine, almost

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Regular Blogs	Frequency	Example Blogs	Years Reading	Tools
Connie	22	F	--	--	Every Day	--	--	--
Fern	19	F	Student	1-2	Every Other Day	xanga.com, blogspot.com, livejournal.com	5-6 Years	4, 5, AIM Profiles
Selena	18	F	Student	6-10	2-3 Times a Week	greatestjournal.com, myspace.com, xanga.com, asianave.com	6-7 Years	1, 4, 5
Charles	24	M	Admin. Assistant	6-10	Several Times a Day	dailykos.com, boingboing.net, blogspot.com, slashdot.org, poplicks.com	6-7 Years	1, 4
Lillian	33	F	Graduate Student	20+	Every Day	blogspot.com, indigirl.com/blog, carrieoke.net, doggedknits.com	4.5 Years	2
Judith	20	F	Student	3-5	Every Other Day	myspace.com, xanga.com, facebook.com	3 Years	4
Jill	20	F	Student	6-10	Several Times a Day	livejournal.com, flickfilosopher.com/blog, ingliseast.typepad.com/ingliseast	5-6 Years	1
Cindy	19	F	Student	1-2	Several Times a Day	xanga.com, livejournal.com	5 Years	4
Patricia	20	F	Student	1-2	2-3 Times a Week	sibol.in, mochix.com	4 Years	1, 2, 5
Natalie	25	F	Legal Assistant	11-20	Every Other Day	perezhilton.com, blogspot.com, myspace.com, livejournal.com	10 Years	1, 4, 5
Tony	31	M	Graduate Student	3-5	Every Day	slashdot.org, fark.com, treehugger.com, somethingawful.com	6 Years	1, 3, iGoogle
Matthew	26	M	Graduate Student	11-20	Several Times a Day	blogspot.com, firejoemorgan.com, kugelmass.wordpress.com, sadlyno.com	6 Years	1, 2
Laura	27	F	Admin. Assistant	3-5	2-3 Times a Week	mypapercrane.com, blogspot.com, livejournal.com, bloesem.blogs.com	2 Years	1, 4
Cheryl	24	F	Graduate Student	3-5	2-3 Times a Week	fourfour.typepad.com, 2manadvantage.com, nydailynews.com/blogs/mets	2-3 Years	1
Krish	22	M	Student	3-5	Every Day	metblogs.com, kiruba.com, blogspot.com, aparnasblog.wordpress.com	8 Months	1

Table 1 – Profile of participants. For tools, 1 is web browser, 2 is RSS aggregator, 3 is email client, 4 is blogging website, 5 is links from reader's blog. Participants listed specific regular blogs, from which the authors generalized and chose examples.

quintessential part of going online. Whether one expects an email or not is unimportant, because one will check her or his email account not with the expectation of receiving email but rather as part of an Internet ritual.

Much work in information retrieval, search technologies, and related fields is based on the premise that the sheer volume of information available is simply overwhelming, often referred to as "information overload," and that users feel compelled to try and stay on top of the ever increasing amount of available information. This attitude dates at least as far back as Barnaby Rich's assertion, in 1613, that "one of the diseases of this age is the multiplicity of books; they doth so overcharge the world that it is not able to digest the abundance of idle matter that is every day hatched and brought forth into the world" (quoted in [4:63]). However, such a sense of information overload with respect to blogs was not common among our respondents. Only two of the fifteen, Charles and Lillian, expressed feeling overwhelmed by the potential information available through blogs. The other participants indicated that they are not bothered when they cannot stay current with the newest posts for the blogs they frequent. Some would eventually catch up on old posts

when the time suited them, while others simply choose the most recent or most interesting posts to read, skipping the rest. Laura reveals, "I don't kill myself over it, because it's not like I can't always go back and see, 'okay what happened two weeks ago' … I know what's there and I know where to find it when I need it." This attitude challenges the commonly accepted notion that users feel overwhelmed with staying constantly up to date.

It also raises interesting issues of synchronicity. Computer mediated communication is often considered either synchronous, e.g., live video or audio chat; near synchronous, e.g., instant messaging; or asynchronous, e.g., email. Clearly, there are not fine distinctions but rather a gradient from synchronous to asynchronous, and blogs are generally placed closer to the asynchronous end of the spectrum [21]. However, based on our participants' descriptions, they do not read blogs in a temporally situated manner. When returning to a blog that has not been visited recently, it does not matter if the most recent three posts occurred in the past week, in the past day, or in the past hour. What matters is the order in which posts appear on the blog. The most recent post on one blog, even if it is several

days old, is more likely to be read than the fourth post down on another blog, even if that post is from the previous day. This is somewhat similar to instant messaging conversations where time lapses between turns do not necessarily have an impact on the conversation [22]. Here, we introduce the term *non-chronous* to describe practices where individual events in one context, here a single blog, are considered in the temporal order in which they occurred, but not with regard to the specific time at which they occurred. This non-chronous approach does not mean that time-date stamps are utterly ineffectual, but they become much less important, especially with the advent of RSS aggregators, email clients, blog-host subscription lists, etc. For example, when Matthew falls behind on his regular blogs, he reads the five or so most recent posts in his RSS reader and his friends' blogs. Patricia notes the time-stamp's existence in passing, but does not take it into account while reading. Generally, participants in this study do not see themselves as struggling to handle a deluge of information streaming through blogs–a missed post is not usually a missed opportunity.

Stepping back from the details of common blog reading practices, there are dramatic differences in how blog readers understand the visible object of their activity. When asked about motivations for reading blogs, participants said they visit blogs for information, inspiration, entertainment, and to a certain extent because it is just what they have always done. However, when asked the deceptively simple question, "what is a blog?" the responses were far more vague and varied. Patricia responded canonically, "well there's the technical term and my own definition." How does she determine which definition to use at what time?

"It Depends"
Among our respondents, the manner of reading and interacting with a blog depends on myriad factors including, among others, the content of the blog, the intent of the reader, the perceived intent of the blogger, and the relationship of the reader to the blogger. We argue that part of the reason for the great diversity in approaches to blog reading is the great diversity of blogs. Previous work, e.g., [11,21], has tried to classify blogs as a genre with certain structural and content-based divisions into sub-genres. However, our findings align more closely with boyd's argument [2] that blogs are a medium, and that a variety of different activities and interactions can occur in and through that medium. Furthermore, drawing on reader-response theory [17], we argue that, in order to distinguish between different types of blogs, it may be less useful to look at the structure or content of the blog and more informative to follow the ways that readers read and interact with the blog.

The analysis presented here focuses on the following themes as dimensions along which approaches to blog reading may vary: the concept of a blog, perception and presentation of blogs, and "being a part" of blogs. From an analytic standpoint, uncovering data based on a consistent

definition of blogs seems to make intuitive sense, but given the fluid character of blogs it may be misleading to do so. Rather than trying to impose a definition of what counts or does not count as a blog, the authors strove for a more authentic, emic perspective by allowing our blog reader participants to decide what constitutes a blog. The styles of blogs that our participants read varied as much as the specific reading practices. These practices depend in large part on the reader's approach towards, and perception of, a blog, which shape and reshape the activity of blogging itself. An example of this iterative process is Krish's approach toward blogs; he generally views blogs as just another thing to do on the Internet when he's bored. He calls himself a passive reader of blogs, unlikely to search out a new set of blogs despite his disappointment in the lack of content in the blogs he reads. However, during his blog reading activity Krish began to note points of interest in his hometown that were described in a blog. Now, when Krish returns home, he applies the knowledge he acquired online to his experience offline. Although Krish's initial motivation for reading blogs shaped his self-labeled "passive reading" of blogs, his Internet-only experience reshaped itself into an activity with offline implications. Reader-response theory directs us to note the ways that individual readers read different blogs differently. While a blog reader may feel fine lurking on popular blogs, she or he may feel obligated to interact on the blogs of friends. Although examining format and content in order to categorize a blog may reveal a general understanding of a blog, this approach is likely to neglect the audience for whom the blog is, at least in part, intended.

What is a Blog?
Definitions of the term "blog" cited in the academic literature often resemble Herring et al.'s, "frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological order" [10:1]. boyd [2] provides a survey of various definitions from dictionaries, researchers, mass media, and bloggers themselves. When we asked our participants, "what is a blog?" the responses were a mixture that pointed to updates, commenting capabilities, authorship, RSS feeds, personal content, etc. Unlike the bloggers boyd describes, there is little or no uniformity of definition among readers. For example Judith considered the notes on facebook.com and the blog option on myspace.com examples of blogs while many others did not agree. When asked to define a blog some participants did refer to the frequency of modifications, but there was no mention of dated entries or reverse chronological order. Rather than structural features, thirteen participants discussed interactional attributes. For many bloggers, a blog is not something you *have*, blogging is something you *do* [2]. However, among our participants, there was not such a clear distinction. For example, Patricia emphasizes the conversational nature of blogging:

> A blog is something that's still going on, that still has a conversation going on, that has people commenting, [it]

doesn't have to be all the time, but it does have this dialogue between the person who's posting and the people who are reading, yeah that's a blog…. [When the conversation stops], by my definition, yeah it's a dead site.

However, not all participants stressed conversational interaction. Providing another perspective, Natalie suggests that "a blog is a journal, like an electronic journal where people can express whatever they want, you know, and let everyone read it I guess…. it could be anything I guess."

Many respondents referred to "getting" a Xanga or "having" a blog, which foregrounds the blog as a possession and backgrounds the interactivity and process of blogging. Eight participants varied in their usage of the term "blog": sometimes it would refer to an individual blog, an individual post, e.g., "I write a lot of blogs," or even an entire blog-hosting site, such as when participants include LiveJournal in the blogs they frequently read.

In Patricia's definition, the interaction that occurs makes it a blog, while in Natalie's definition the content makes it a blog. "It could be anything" demonstrates just how fluid the notion of blog can be. Another respondent, Tony, listed a series of technical requirements, including commenting and RSS, when asked if a particular website was a blog or not:

> That website is [a blog], yeah, but it doesn't have live comments from people who read it. It has message boards that are associated with it, but they're not as directly linked with different page articles, I don't know. It's not a static page, I mean every week you go to it, it will have different articles, but it's not exactly the same format as a blog, it does have an RSS feed though so you can see what's new on it.

If readers and writers are both involved in the co-construction of the blog [21], how do differences in definitions impact this process?

As with boyd's [2] respondents, many readers used metaphors to define the term blog, and the metaphors with which they attempt to make sense of blogs in turn affect their understanding of, perception of, and interaction with blogs. Seven of the fifteen participants referred to blogs as a newspaper or magazine, and ten of the fifteen used the term diary or journal to describe at least one blog they read. These data point to the problematic nature of basing research on blogging activity upon the traditional format-oriented definition of blogs. Although a blog's format may invite a certain reading, reader-response theory helps us understand the actual interaction or lack of interaction that occurs between the blog reader and the blogger. Although definitions found in the research literature [11,21] can be useful from an analytic standpoint, they may be less useful or even misleading when trying to understand how the bloggers and readers themselves approach blogging. When seeking to understand blogging from the blogger's or the reader's perspective, the authors found it more useful and informative to consider blogs not in terms of academic definitions, but rather in the terms of those involved in the activity of blogging.

Presentation and Perception

Previous work [1,2,15,23] has explored how bloggers use blogs as a means of presentation of self (see [9]) online. This section explores the other half of that phenomenon, that is, how readers perceive the self that bloggers present. In some respects, these results align with previous findings. However, findings about our respondents also differ in a number of important ways from previous assertions about audience and perception in blogging.

Agreement with Previous Findings

Past work on authenticity, one aspect of bloggers' presentation of self, illustrates that audiences of blogs hope and expect authenticity, and that without it readership will be lost (McNeil in [15]). For blogs, authenticity does not hinge upon the accuracy of information they present, but rather upon their interpretability. (Langellier and Peterson in [15]). Lenhart bases her conclusion on Langellier and Peterson's examination of the persistent interpretability of narratives. Arguing that blogs are a form of narrative, she posits that the blog is perceived "as one person's 'take' on an issue, one person's perspective on a story, left open to the interpretation of, and evaluation by, the reader, rather than as an unbiased source of information" [15:58-59]. Among our participants, eleven described the blogs they read regularly as feeling authentic. Connie "definitely [gets] an inside look at their lives", while Natalie feels like she is traveling alongside the bloggers who write about their travels. All thirteen of our participants who read single-authored blogs recognize that posts of the blogs they read regularly were either opinion or personal narratives, which are important components of the perception of authenticity.

Blogs are generally considered a one-to-many medium, but are often experienced by bloggers as one-to-one [15]. In this study, eight participants have experienced blogs as one-to-one communication between them and the blogger. Selena says, "for like some people…, I guess sometimes I feel like they're writing to me."

This study also shows that negotiations between online and offline identity for blog readers are similar to those of bloggers. Early research into online identity, e.g., [26], argued that people used online worlds to create alternate identities or to explore certain facets of their personality that were not as prominent. However, more recent work, e.g., [1,20], has pointed to the ways in which a person's online identity is a part or an extension of their offline identity, such as the way that Trinidadians use the Internet as just another way of being "Trini" [20], and that attempting to sever the two can be misleading and confusing. Similarly, while blogs and "real life" experiences are still distinct realms for readers, there is a relatively tight coupling between readers' online and offline identities. Describing one of her friends, Fern says that "the way he types is the way he talks and thinks," and Lillian hesitates to refer to only her offline friends as her "real" friends. Were there a connection with Patricia's online and offline life, she says, "I [would be] a little bit surprised and

a little bit happy that there was this link between my online life that I publish online with just a typical school day that it could be considered that I'm still the same… my screen name versus me." However, she is also wary of creating too strong a link between her online and offline identities. "I don't want my dad to find me because there was this whole breakup thing [between my mom and dad] and he wasn't such a good person." While Lillian was initially cautious about linking her knit-blogging with her life as a graduate student, and she still does not give out her full name online, she also feels that her blogging activities are "a part of [her] and it's not worth hiding it." This sort of ambivalence was common among participants; they do not view the set of identities they construct through blog reading as identical to their set of offline identities, but they also do not view the two sets as totally disjoint; most of them continuously negotiate and redefine the relationship between the two.

Differences from Previous Findings
Previous work on blogs has overlooked several elements of presentation and perception, possibly due to its focus on bloggers as both producers and consumers of blogs. Blog readers are often perceived by bloggers as an unnerving and anonymous group of lurkers or instigators [15], placing expectations on the blogger, creating awkward social situations, or sometimes presenting an unwanted, invading presence [2]. However, blog readers often approach different blogs differently, and may contribute differently in different contexts. Each participant shared that she or he would variously comment, lurk, or instigate, depending on the blog. As for commenting, eleven respondents stated that they would semi-regularly encounter statements or sentiments with which they disagreed, but only four participants shared instances where their views differed significantly and decided to express their disagreement through comments. However, only one of these four would make comments with the aim of instigating an awkward situation or invading the blogger's space. Lillian is of the opinion that "it's not worth being negative." She strives to ensure that "whatever comes out of [her] mouth… or what comes out of [her] fingers is positive." Kirsh, though, said that he enjoys bashing on bloggers or simply kindling "flame wars" of nearly unfounded, ruthless arguments.

While previous research has described the expectations readers place on bloggers, readers feel that there are certain expectations of them, as well. According to Patricia, "a good post deserves a reply from the audience," and Jill sees "[commenting] as a courtesy." Furthermore, while some comments are used as simple, lo-fi communication or notification mechanisms (discussed further below), many readers spend a significant amount of time formulating their comments in order for them to be coherent and insightful. In the rare event that Charles comments, he needs "time to sit down and plot out a cogent response." While bloggers feel pressures about the content and identity they present, readers feel pressures about ensuring that their comments make a significant contribution. Similarly, while bloggers

may feel pressured to update, ten of our participants felt obligated to read or comment, particularly on friends' blogs or blogs of which they felt that they were "a part" (see next section). Selena "admits" that there are some posts, even on blogs of close friends, that she does not read. Lillian was relieved to learn that other readers did not follow every single post and skimmed many. However, while a reader can "get away" with not reading every post without much notice, it is more obvious when there are lapses on the part of the blogger. Though expectations and obligations may not be symmetrical, the activity of blogging nevertheless exerts social pressures on both bloggers and readers.

However, the situation with respect to readers' expectations is somewhat more complex still. Thirteen respondents expressed expectations with regard to update frequency, visual style, navigability, responsiveness, appropriateness, and other aspects. However, just as readers read different blogs differently, they have different expectations of different blogs. Expectations are often more lax for friends' blogs and greater for more popular "big" blogs. On the other hand, for example, when readers comment on these big blogs, they rarely expect a response, while a comment on a friend's blog almost demands reciprocation. Natalie is interested in travel, and so often reads and comments on travel blogs. She does not expect the blogger to respond to her questions, but is pleasantly surprised when it happens.

Differences in expectations of blogger and reader are not split only along the lines of friend blogs vs. big blogs. For example, on knit blogs, Lillian comments, answers questions, and provides positive feedback, but she is unwilling to do the same on other blogs she reads, such as a science blog that relates to her graduate studies.

Many of these differences—in expectations, in commenting, in other regards—can be traced to the reader's perception of the blogger or blog, and to the reader's motivation for reading. Lillian views the knit and craft blogs as a community and often attributes certain characteristics of the community to its primarily female composition. Tony accounts for his commenting practices as something he enjoys doing as an engineer. Charles reads blogs as a routine that helps him obtain information. Judith reads primarily to keep in contact with friends. It is not only the way the blogger presents herself or himself that affects the readers perception of the blogger, but also the purpose for which the reader is reading.

Although this paper focuses on blog readers, only three of the fifteen participants do not have their own blog. Despite the fact that many of our participants are also bloggers, at least nominally, the findings presented here are still applicable to blog readers, because, as argued above, there is no evidence in the literature that there exist bloggers who do not read blogs. However, one difference is the tendency for the non-bloggers to read only popular, highly trafficked blogs, whereas, of the twelve blog readers with blogs, ten used their blogs to keep up with friends. Ultimately, though,

the activity of blog reading is neither a dichotomy of blogger versus reader nor a set of transactions that are confined to the materiality of the blog. "It depends" describes how the experience of blog reading is highly contingent on the individual reader and not solely the blog.

"Being a Part"

When discussions with respondents turned to themes of participation in, and contribution to, the blogs they read, eleven of them described feeling that they were a "part" of a blog in some way. This is distinct from the feeling of membership or belonging in a community [6,12]. Some respondents felt that they were part of a blog without ever making their individual presence known to the blogger or other readers. Being part of a blog is more than consistent readership, a sense of community, or a feeling of connectedness, although it includes all those things.

Readership is one component to being a part of a blog. Connie stated that, "just by reading I feel like I'm participating." Nevertheless, a few question if they are part of any of the blogs that they read. For Charles, the idea of a community is a central component to the definition of a blog, and thus he does not feel part of a blog because he does not consistently contribute as he might expect a community-member to do. Importantly, Charles reads mostly "big" blogs—ones that are relatively popular, generate a high volume of traffic, and receive copious comments—and while other participants could be a part of a big blog without commenting, some sort of interaction was necessary for Charles. While an important component of being a part, readership alone is often not sufficient.

Six of the fifteen participants said specifically that they felt "connected" to a blog or blogger. Kuwabara et al.'s examination of FaintPop [14] revealed that the ability to express things that might not be considered an important topic of conversation, such as moods, help construct a feeling of connectedness. In the blogosphere, such examples are lo-fi comments, ones that are short, do not convey much content-wise, and are relatively generic. These comments also share certain aspects with the communication afforded by the Virtual Intimate Object (VIO) [13], in that they are relatively low bandwidth communication but carry a high degree of meaning and value for both reader and blogger. However, of the participants who expressed a feeling of connectedness, only Natalie described a feeling of presence similar to FaintPop or the VIO. When reading travel blogs she feels as if she is traveling with the blogger, sharing the blogger's experiences, supporting her or his travels. Furthermore, though lo-fi comments are not the exception, they are not the rule, either. Although Cheryl feels connected to one of the sports-fan blogs she reads, she has yet to feel the need to leave comments of any sort. On the one hand, there is an argument that the readers who do not comment are not really connected, or that those who comment are more connected. Drawing on reader response theory, this paper

argues instead that connectedness is constituted differently in different contexts; being a part of a blog looks different for different readers, and connectedness, even when achieved by different means, is still connectedness.

Connectedness does not always entail feeling connected to the blogger as a person. Despite the distinctive personal style and presentation of self in many blogs, not all readers visit blogs for the blogger. Instead, they are more interested in the content or information presented on the blog. Among our respondents, ten of fifteen read certain blogs because they know or are familiar with the blogger in person, while eleven of fifteen read certain blogs because they want information about a particular topic. However, motivations can change over time. During the interviews, eleven participants described situations where they began reading blogs for information purposes, but continued reading because they developed a connection with the blogger. Cheryl reads fourfour, a blog with pop culture news and commentary. Initially, she started reading for the blogger's witty and insightful entries about hip hop and "snarky commentary" about reality TV shows. However, the blogger would also occasionally post about his cats.

> At first, when he was posting pictures about his cat, not that I thought it was a little nutty, but it was like, 'what's the sense in doing this?', but then I would read the entries and they would be really cute or hilarious pictures so then I became even a fan of the cat postings then I was like, 'oh my god, this is so petty'…. he's a charismatic person so pretty much any topic you'll get some sort of satisfaction or chuckle…

Even though Cheryl was initially drawn to the blog for the content, she ended up feeling connected with the blogger due in part to the personal information with which he supplemented his posts. In contrast, there were no instances where a blog reader began reading a blog for the blogger, and despite a falling out or loss of feeling connected continued to read for the content. This pattern suggests that, contrary to previous findings [2,23], it is important not to conflate the blogger with the content of the blog when considering the perspective of the reader.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This section highlights salient themes from the above findings as well as potential implications. These include not only design implications, but also more broadly future research directions and societal implications.

Routine – All of our participants mentioned in some way the habitual nature of blog reading. Charles' statement that reading blogs is "something that happens" frames the reader as passive, neither self-aware nor reflective about their reading. While some participants were conscious of *why* they read blogs, few were reflective of *how* they read. For example, participants rarely reflected on the routine or time-consuming nature of blog reading prior to participation in this study. This finding suggests that designing tools to raise self-awareness and encourage reflection could be valuable in transforming routinized blog

reading into a more engaging, fulfilling experience. Future work should also compare blog reading to other routine media use, such as watching television, checking email, reading the newspaper, or listening to the radio.

Not Information Overload – Research on information retrieval (IR) and related areas often asserts that the copious quantity of information available leads to information overload, wherein overwhelmed users are unable to find relevant or important information in the ever-growing deluge. However, among this study's participants, only two feel overwhelmed by the information content available to them. These readers do not feel the need to be constantly up to date with everything posted in the blogs they read. More studies should explore information overload, or lack thereof, from users' perspectives in other contexts, so as not to spend research time developing IR algorithms that alleviate a problem not actually experienced by users.

Non-chronous – While readers experience blog posts in temporal order, the exact times of the posts does not significantly impact the reading activity. The recency of a post has more to do with the number of other posts that have occurred since the post in question than with the amount of time that has passed. Not only does this finding have implications for the design of blog reading tools with respect to determining what content users/readers will find important, but it also points to the ways in which technologies such as blogs influence perceptions of temporality. The passage of time here is marked by the occurrence of certain events, i.e., posts, such that the significance of a period of time and even the perception of how much time has elapsed are influenced by how much happens in that period, i.e., how many posts occur. Future studies should pay attention to the ways in which the design and use of other technologies and communication media, such as instant messaging, email, or Twitter, influence how users perceive and constitute the passage of time.

Identity– This paper builds on previous studies of online identity by exploring readers' perceptions of bloggers' identities. The findings here agree with previous ones, for example, that online and offline identities are not completely separate and distinct from one another [2,20], but there are also differences. For example, while previous work has looked at the obligations the blogger feels from his or her audience, this paper looked also at the obligations readers feel toward the blogger. Also, these findings indicate disconnects between the pressures felt by bloggers and the expectations of readers. While these findings provide future directions for exploring identity perception and presentation in social media and its connection to other aspects of interaction, such as privacy, appropriateness, and authority, they also suggest a design space for tools to allow more nuanced interactions between bloggers and readers.

"Being a Part" – Being a part of a blog involves regular reading, a feeling of community, and a sense of connectedness, though these aspects are neither necessary nor sufficient. What it takes to be a part of a blog varies depending on the individual reader and the specific blog, especially whether it is a "big" popular blog or a personal friend's blog. Based on these varied interactions between reader and blog, readership is defined and constituted differently in different contexts. Future work should examine the feeling of "being a part" both in different social media, such as YouTube or Wikipedia, as well as in instances where the division between authors and readers is more nebulous or even nonexistent, such as social networking sites or Twitter. Furthermore, it will be important to examine how participation in these and other online interactions impacts our definition of what it means to be a member of a community, both online and offline.

Interactional Approach – drawing on reader response theory [3,17] and recent trends in HCI research [5], the research presented here takes an interactional approach to studying blog reading, shifting the focus from structural, technical, or content-oriented aspects of blogs to the reader's experiences with them. This approach leads to novel, reader-centered definitions of the term "blog" based on the types of reading and interaction it allows and encourages. Focusing on interaction also foregrounds the ways in which blogs are not a genre but a medium for multi-directional communication among bloggers and readers. Previous work focused predominantly on the blogger, and this paper focuses mostly on readers. Future work should take an integrative approach, looking at the same interaction from both the blogger's and the reader's perspectives, as well as looking at interactions between blog readers in specific contexts, such as political blogs, religious blogs, or mommy blogs. What interactional aspects of blogging, including both blogger and reader, are unique to each of these communities? What aspects transcend individual communities to characterize blogging in general? How do common practices from blogging impact social interaction in other contexts beyond blogs?

CONCLUSION

In examining the increasingly common social activity of blogging, we must consider the experiences, roles, and contributions of readers, even when less readily apparent than those of bloggers. This paper presents a qualitative study that focuses on blog readers, their reading practices, their perceptions of blogs and bloggers, and what it means to be a part of a blog. The findings presented here indicate that the activity of blogging, of which readers are an integral part, is far more heterogeneous and multifaceted than previously suggested. Even though ten of our fifteen participants are between 18-25 years old and eleven of fifteen are students, the ways in which they read blogs, and even their definitions of what constitutes a blog, are dramatically different. The analysis here draws on reader-response theory to argue that, rather than using structural or content-based features in order to classify blogs, it may be more informative to consider them in terms of interactional features and readers' experiences. This focus resonates with

current trends in HCI, such as embodied interaction [5]. This paper describes various ways in which blog reading is more than just reading. It leads the reader to form complex definitions of the term "blog," each of which differs to varying degrees from the definitions used by bloggers. The paper also offers a view into the perception of the digital presentation of self in blogs. Blog reading allows for widely varied means of "being a part," giving rise to new notions of community and belonging. This paper outlines the role of the reader in the activity of blogging, laying a general foundation for future work.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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