
Prosumers with passion: Learning what motivates bloggers as digital influencer stakeholders

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Abstract

The rising influence of bloggers over consumers and other target publics has been noted in both scholarly and practitioner public relations, marketing and related strategic communications literature. Bloggers have come to be both feared and revered by strategic communication practitioners, painted as being able to damage a brand's reputation in a single keystroke or enhance it through virtual word-of-mouth. They have been labelled as 'prosumers' – that is, consumers turned producers. While motivations for blogging have been examined in previous research, the rise of the paid blogger has significantly changed the landscape bloggers work in. This paper examines the main motivations of a set of blogging prosumers: the so-called mommy/mum bloggers. While bloggers may be labelled prosumers, there is some academic opinion that mum bloggers may actually be vulnerable consumers. A total of 45 interviews were conducted with Australian mum bloggers and subsequent data analysed using the computer-assisted software, NVivo, and with a grounded approach to theory development. Findings distil six key motivators for the bloggers: community and connection; helping people; therapy and venting; being heard; improving or developing new skills; and making money. One standout finding is that previous research did not uncover moneymaking as a motivation for bloggers, despite the recent increase in sponsorship of bloggers by brands. The mum bloggers' motivations were also seen to evolve over time as they became more experienced and interacted with strategic communication professionals. Generally, these findings have

implications for public relations and marketing theory related to prosumption, and for organisations, and the strategic communication professionals working for them, who are seeking to engage with bloggers.

Introduction

Bloggers have been described as powerful new influencers, both feared and revered by strategic communication professionals for their power to boost or harm a brand (see, for example, Weber, 2009; Woods, 2005). Given the rise of blogger influence, practitioners are seeking to use strategic communication to influence these 'digital' influencers online (Gillin, 2008; Saminather, 2006). Bloggers write blogs (short for 'web logs'), which can be defined as personal websites, on many different topics (van Heerden, Salehi-Sangari, Pitt, & Caruana, 2009). While motivations for blogging have been examined in previous research, the rise of the paid blogger has significantly changed the landscape in which bloggers work. With the rise of blogger influence and the commercialisation of the blogging space, this paper investigates the motivations of an important subset of bloggers – mum bloggers.

Bloggers as prosumers

The concept of 'prosumers', consumers who are also producers, was discussed long before social media existed (see Toffler, 1980; Kotler, 1986). Kotler forecast that: "as society moves towards the post-industrial age, so will the number of pure consumers decline. They will be replaced by prosumers, people who produce many of their own goods and services" (Kotler, 1986, p. 510). With the rise of social media, the title of prosumers has now been applied to

social media users in general and bloggers in particular (e.g., Varey & McKie, 2010; Pihl & Wahlqvist, 2010; Macnamara, 2010; Kerr, Mortimera, Dickinson-Delaporte & Waller, 2012). Individual bloggers independently produce and promote content for their readers, usually without backing from organisations. Within strategic communications, including marketing and public relations, the new prosumer is heralded as an empowered consumer, able to defeat large organisations with a single blog post (see, for example, Hamelin, 2011; Kucuk, 2008; Weber, 2009). It has even been argued that “blogging’s ultimate product is empowerment” (Kline & Burstein, 2005, p. 248). However, some sociologists have suggested that prosumers may not be truly empowered consumers or producers. It has been posited that the democratisation of the internet and the power of consumers turned producers is an illusion (Beer & Burrows, 2007; Beer, 2008; Cammaerts, 2008; Comor, 2011; Chia, 2011). For example, Comor (2011) argued that prosumers’ engagement mostly serves status quo interests and that they are actually being exploited.

The rise of blogging mothers

Within the realm of blogging, bloggers who are also parents (in particular blogging mothers) are now being courted by multinational organisations (Anderson, 2011; Byron, 2008; Huffstutter & Hirsch, 2009). The rise of blogging mothers worldwide has been noted as a phenomenon (for studies of blogging mothers in different countries see Chen, 2011; Dubini & Campana, 2010; Lopez, 2009). With the rise in mommy bloggers, as they are known in the US, major multinationals and marketers have started to recognise the commercial importance of these new influencers (Friedman, 2010; Lopez, 2009; Thompson, 2007; Woods, 2005).

The interest of commercial entities in blogging mothers is no surprise given that mothers are the most powerful of all market segments (Bailey & Ulman, 2005; Clements & Thomson, 2011). In the US, for example, mothers control more than \$1.6 trillion of annual household spending (Bailey & Ulman, 2005). In Australia, statistics specifically on

mothers as consumers are not readily available, but women, in general, are responsible for expenditure on 90 per cent of groceries coming into the home, 50 per cent of DIY and 90 per cent of over-the-counter pharmaceuticals, and they make 75 per cent of banking and finance decisions (Soccio, 2009). Recent research shows that women in Australia are responsible for 75 per cent of all purchases (Han, 2016).

Mommy bloggers, to use the American sobriquet, are, according to an online dictionary, mothers who blog about their children, motherhood, parenting or related topics (Mommy blogger, 2016). However, others advocate a broader definition. For example, Lopez (2009, p. 374) suggested that “for the most part, women categorized as ‘mommy bloggers’ are simply women who are mothers and occasionally write about their own children. The language used in such blogs is extremely informal and usually narrative, and the most popular writers employ a great deal of humor and levity to entertain their audience”. Lopez made the point that the topics on ‘mommy blogs’ are not limited to issues related to parenting and that these bloggers “also write about popular culture, food, current events, politics, their town, the weather, financial issues, their husband and any other possible topic” (Lopez, p. 734). Similarly, an Australian blogger supplied the following definition of ‘mummy bloggers’ (note the Australian/English spelling).

A Mummy Blogger is a Mum who blogs. She may write about parenting or she may write about fashion, food, work or craft. She writes about the topic/s she is passionate about and often that includes parenting her children. Some bloggers have a very specific and obvious niche, most don’t. That she writes about parenting doesn’t limit her interests to that field, or define her. Most Mums who blog write as a way to find or maintain their sense of identity as they balance family life, work and personal interests (Claire, 2011).

Given these definitions, for the purposes of this paper, the adopted definition of mum bloggers is ‘bloggers who are mothers’. The

Australian spelling and expression mum blogger (MB) will be adopted, unless in a quoted context from an American source. It is important to also note that the term ‘mummy/mommy blogger’ is contentious and debated, even amongst mum bloggers themselves (Lopez, 2009; Webb & Lee, 2011) as “it can be both a source of pride and a source of embarrassment; it can both compliment and demean” (Lopez 2009, p. 730).

Researchers have suggested that mothers represent a potentially huge ‘marketing opportunity’ and one that is far from fully understood or served by marketers (Bailey, 2008; Carrigan & Szmigin, 2004; Clements & Thomson, 2011). With mothers having a high spending power and with their increasing reliance on social media, there is a need for more research into mothers as consumers that includes consideration of their internet activities (Bailey & Ulman, 2005; Bailey 2008; Clements & Thomson 2011). There has also been a call for further research specifically into the field of weblog writing and female gender identity (Gomez, 2010). In a study that looked at pregnant women’s experience of time linked to their consumption, Carrigan and Szmigin (2004) suggested that more research should be directed towards mothers’ media habits and appropriate ways of communicating with them.

Liminality and vulnerability

As previously stated, despite alternative views from sociologists, bloggers are portrayed in the relevant strategic communications (including marketing and public relations) literature as empowered consumers and new influencers or prosumers. It is logical, therefore, that blogging mothers could also be viewed by strategic communications professionals as powerful prosumers. However, some marketing academics believe that mothers as consumers are actually vulnerable, due to their liminal state. Liminality derives from the Latin *limen*. Liminality denotes rituals of transition, a time out of time where one is ‘betwixt and between’ different social roles (Turner, 1969). Noble and Walker (1997, p. 32) define liminal transitions as “a change in a significant life role marked by a transitional or liminal period during which (a)

personal identities are suspended, producing significant psychological consequences, and (b) symbolic consumption may be used to facilitate the transition to the new role”. According to The VOICE Group (a collective of marketing academics with the aim of “Voicing International Consumer Experience”), women in this liminal phase are “potentially vulnerable, and their vulnerability often leads them to spaces that have become increasingly marketized” (2010, p. 384). They suggest that such vulnerability can be felt both as liminal vulnerability, when women attempt to make their way through a new phase in their lives, and as consumer vulnerability when women navigate a space of new consumption (The VOICE Group, 2010).

While initial conceptualisation of liminality has begun in marketing (Thomsen & Sorensen 2006; Cody & Lawlor 2011), no academic study in the strategic communications or marketing field appears to have looked into new mothers’ use of social media in this key liminal phase. It is suggested that “little is known about the potential incongruence between managed distinctions and suppositions of segmentation strategists and the meaning making consumption practices of those who exist ‘betwixt and between’ two sociocultural categories” (Cody & Lawler 2011, p. 224).

One of the key concepts linked to liminality is the *communitas*. *Communitas*, according to Turner (1969), is most likely to occur when people share a similar liminal state. It is an anti-structure or open society in that usual structures are modified. The community will set up its own structures and hierarchy through shared rituals developed within and by the group. However, *communitas* corresponds to a stage in time and is not permanent. Members of a community will share a specific identity that is beyond the bounds of normal society. Blogging could be seen as a solitary activity, so one could question whether the question of *communitas* may be relevant. However, given that motivations to blog in previous studies have highlighted the importance of connection, communication and community, there is evidence to suggest that a sense of *communitas* may well be an important motivator for blogging mothers.

Motivation

Some work has attempted to explain why bloggers blog. An early study, using ethnographic interviews and analysis of blog posts of 23 ‘ordinary’ USA bloggers (all bloggers in the study were university educated and middle class), identified five motivations for blogging: documenting the blogger’s life; expressing commentary and opinions; working out emotional issues; thinking by writing; and promoting conversation and community (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004). Huang, Shen, Lin and Chang (2007) examined blogger motivations in Taiwan through interviews and an internet survey. They found five key motivations – self-expression, life documenting, commenting, forum participation, and information seeking. However, this study was limited to bloggers who blog for non-financial purposes without considering motivations related to business or moneymaking. The study was also skewed to younger bloggers. Given that many bloggers are now moving towards ‘monetisation’ of their blogs (Thompson, 2007; Chia, 2011), this is an evident gap in research. Sepp, Liljander and Gummerus (2011) applied uses and gratifications theory as a lens to research 12 Estonian bloggers’ motivations through interviews. They found process, content, and social gratifications from blogging activities. New motivations found relative to previous research included the content gratifications of enlightening others, advertising, and promotion, and the social gratifications of communication, image management and vanity (Sepp et al., 2011). More recently, Bronstein (2013) found bloggers viewed blogs as part their selves, a communication tool, a writing tool and a favourite hobby.

Fullwood, Nicholls and Makichi (2014) developed and validated a blogging motivations questionnaire from previous literature. Their six factors included: emotional outlet; social networking; advertising; personal revelation; creative outlet, and selective disclosure. They found that women were motivated by ‘selective disclosure’ and men by ‘advertising’ and ‘emotional outlet’ (Fullwood et al., 2014). Other studies have also focused on the gender differences in blogging. For example, Pedersen

and Macafee (2007), albeit from a small sample of only 48 bloggers of both sexes, suggested that more women use blogging as an outlet for creative work and had a greater preference for anonymity while men had more ‘technical proficiency’. Chen (2012), focused on women, found that the need for self-disclosure and affiliation played a role and that the social aspect of blogging was key.

The centrality of community as a motivator is a key theme in the small number of studies which focus on mothers who blog (see Fleming, 2008; Lee, 2011; and Webb & Lee, 2011). As part of a larger study, McDaniel, Coyne and Holmes (2011) asked 96 blogging mothers to nominate their primary reasons for blogging from a pre-determined list of 10 possible motivations. The most commonly selected reasons were to document and share their experiences and to communicate with family and friends.

While many bloggers are now moving towards ‘monetisation’ of their blogs (Thompson, 2007; Chia, 2011), the literature on motivations appears to ignore this aspect in most cases. Given that mum bloggers have been described as both empowered and vulnerable, their motivations to blog are of interest. There has been little research, particularly beyond the US, looking at how bloggers in general, and parenting bloggers in particular, interact with marketers and consumers. Therefore, this research used the lens of prosumers versus vulnerable consumers to explore the research question: What are blogging mothers’ motivations for blogging?

Methodology

The study took a qualitative, interpretive approach, which recognises the existence of multiple realities (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Given the rising of blogging mothers as an important influencer group over Australia’s biggest consumer group (mothers), this particular genre of blogging and group of bloggers was seen as important to investigate. The research was conducted as part of a larger, digital ethnography of the Australian mum blogging community. In-depth interviews with 45 Australian mum bloggers were conducted

for the research question under discussion in this paper. The number was in line with recommendations for large qualitative studies (Britten, 1995). The sample size was also determined by continuing to recruit participants until saturation of themes is achieved (as per Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Other relevant studies have used fewer participants. Brown, Broderick and Lee (2007) interviewed 30 high users of the internet for their study that conceptualised word-of-mouth in social media. While researching the consumption of prams, relevant to the liminal experience of new mothers, Thomsen and Sorensen (2006) interviewed eight mothers. Cody and Lawlor (2011) interviewed 15 'twens' when exploring liminal consumption among that group.

Ethics approval for the interviews was sought and granted through the lead author's university of study. The bloggers were recruited following attendance at two Digital Parents conferences and after searching for Australian mum bloggers via Google, via a combination of email and Twitter. Bloggers were all Australian, with only one living overseas. In the early stages of the interviews, snowball sampling was also used where bloggers were asked to recommend other bloggers for an interview. The bloggers write blogs relating to parenting but often with a wide scope; they are all mothers and the majority of the bloggers at the time of interview were not engaged in full-time paid work outside the home. A small minority made a substantial income from blogging. All who were approached were happy to be interviewed and interview times ranged from half an hour to more than two hours. Given the limited recent research on blogging motivations, this exploratory research was seen as a first step to understanding the blogosphere relative to Australian mum bloggers. Participants were first asked to elaborate on their blogging experiences and, among other questions, were asked about their motivations when starting blogging and at the current stage. They were asked if their motivations had changed and what their goals were for their blog. Interviews were conducted in person (at the blogger's home or a mutually agreed location such as a coffee shop) or on the phone, depending on the

blogger's location and preference. Bloggers came from Australian metropolitan and rural areas, with most in major cities (this reflects Australia's population).

The interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed and the responses were imported into NVivo10 (QSR International) for coding and analysis. An inductive process was used whereby an initial reading of the responses was used to generate a coding hierarchy, which was then used to code the data. Throughout this process, themes were identified that related to the bloggers' reported motivations.

Note that all respondents have been given pseudonyms. Ages of children and number of children are recorded from the date of interview. Some bloggers have gone on to have more children since the interviews.

Findings

Findings distilled six key motivators for the bloggers: community and connection; helping people; therapy and venting; being heard; improving or developing new skills, and making money. The mum bloggers' motivations were reported to evolve over time as they became more experienced and interacted with marketers.

Community and connection

The blogging mothers felt that community and connection was an important motivator for blogging. Community and connection was the most common reason for blogging. Their main priority, it seemed, was to satisfy their desire for community and connection. For some the blog was started to connect with existing friends and/ or relatives who were not in the same geographic locality. However, this need for connection for bloggers soon extended beyond people they knew to 'strangers', who, in the course of the blogging journey, became known to the bloggers (via comments on the blog, on Twitter, on Facebook or at blogging events). For many of the bloggers some of the 'strangers' became friends 'in real life' (IRL).

This quote typifies the importance of 'community' and finding connection via blogging.

It was really just a matter of an outlet for me, a way of sharing and connecting

with other people I think. Through reading blogs I realised that, you know, there's really a community for everybody, whatever your message is. (Cherie, two children, school-aged and baby, blog is now her business, metro)

For some, while their motivations may have evolved, connection remained paramount, as the following quote shows.

The main motivation probably hasn't changed. It's always been about connecting, and it's always been about me staying in some sort of social group. (Donna, adult children, retired, metro)

Given that blogging is a solitary activity, the need for connection is a paradox. One blogger, herself a former triathlete, used the metaphor of the triathlete community to explain this paradox – while all bloggers were in a sense 'competing' to improve their readership or other goals and working individually on their blogs, she felt they offered help and support for anyone new to the activity, just like triathletes.

Helping people

Closely related to the concept of community and connection is the desire by many of the bloggers to help others. If bloggers had experienced their own health or personal issues, they often used the blog to share their own story as a way of assisting others. For many, this opportunity to connect with others in difficult situations and offer some form of advice was a key motivator, as the following quote shows.

Feeling like what you have to say is helping other people is a great thing. (Bridget, two children in pre-school and school, blog has become her business, rural)

The concept of admitting that parenting was tough was also brought up by the bloggers as a way of empathising with and helping readers.

To help people, yeah. To say that it's okay to screw up during the day, you know, admit that you did a mistake, that's cool; children need to see that too. It's not always happy-happy-happy. (Naomi, two school-aged children, own business, metro)

For some the helping went as far as advocacy for a particular area of health or parenting. Starting out as a lone person behind the screen who was dealing with their own parenting challenges evolved into connection and advocacy, as this quote below shows. The reaction from friends as well as strangers was a benefit and motivator.

Look I get...it's really humbling for me that I do get emails from other parents and from other families that reach out to me and say we're going through a similar thing... I don't get many emails, probably one a month, but if they just invariably bring me to tears every time, because to think that I'm helping someone like that. (Raelene, one child, works full time, metro)

Well, interestingly enough, I think I'm having quite a bit of influence in the autism awareness area...so I feel like we've done quite a lot as a group and I think I've had a lot of influence there too. (Shona, two children, teenage and school. Stay-at-home mum, metro)

The following quote shows a theme, where bloggers sometimes coming from an initial experience of isolation then expressed the power of their blogging in overcoming this sense of being alone by helping or even inspiring others in similar situations.

I think it's sort of evolved into me trying to inspire other people as well...That's sort of now become more of a motivation for me to keep on going to inspire and somehow add some sort of value to people who might be in difficult situations; I mean really some women might be in similar situations. (Selena, two school-aged children, works full time, metro)

The helping extended, for some of the bloggers with a specific interest in food, into guiding others with nutrition.

I am, I am, I definitely am enjoying it. At the same time I know I'm helping other mothers out there that have picky eaters and that's the one thing that

everyone comments is, it's...I think my main motivation is to help other people out there who are looking for something to help their children eat. (Yolanda, two pre-school children, blog became a money earner, metro)

Blogging to help others saw bloggers work collectively on campaigns, joining up to promote causes such as Australia's RUOK Day (a day which raises awareness of mental health issues and encourages people to ask friends, families and workmates – Are you Okay?).

Therapy and venting

While community and connection and helping people were strong motivators for many, a very personal and more introspective goal was related to therapy for many of the bloggers. Writing about their experiences helped the bloggers to process their day.

Now I say that it's – I blog because it's cheaper than therapy – I stand by that, I say that to everyone. It's – I can say what I want to an extent. It's the way to work things out. (Tara, one toddler, stay-at-home mum, earns some money from blogging, metro)

Being heard and sharing

While blogging may have begun as a method of journaling and personal therapy, for some the need for their voice to be heard was the reason the blogs were actually published (rather than the women simply keeping private journals). The following quote illustrates the need to be heard.

I just read things and I just want to write about them and express an opinion or like to start a discussion on things that I've read or heard, and partly also too, a sort of a memoir as such, but it's things that I think about. (Michela, two school-aged children, stay-at-home mum, metro)

Improving, developing or keeping up skills

Many of the bloggers spoke about their desire to develop, improve or keep up skills and found that blogging was a way of doing this. Others did not explicitly mention this as a motivator but the resulting opportunities and skills learnt while blogging meant they could pursue paid work. Mastering new skill sets was a strong

motivator for some and an added benefit for others. Other blogging mums with a background in marketing described their desire to improve their digital skills in the following quote.

I started because I wanted to practise my digital marketing skills, because I actually went back to study and I studied digital marketing whilst I was pregnant with my son. (Lara, two children, pre-school, own freelance business, metro)

Making money

For some bloggers who developed skills while blogging and became influencers, the desire to explore paid opportunities presented by blogging developed as the bloggers' experience and influence grew. Turning the blog into a money-earner (known as monetising the blog), or pursuing career opportunities related to blogging were not always conscious decisions at the start of the bloggers' journeys. For some an evolution occurred, as evidenced in this quote.

It definitely has changed since blogging became – certainly in the last 18 months – it's started getting serious and you can start making money from it. I wanted to be a part of that – particularly as I had been doing it for so long and I felt like I had earned this right to be a player and I wanted to do it... (Bridget)

Making money from the blog also offered the flexibility of working from home and being able to spend time with the family, as the following comment shows.

Hopefully my motivation now – once the blog sort of grew and I did start to generate some income from...it's now my means of staying at home with my girls. Yeah even though I consider blogging my job it certainly is not as, I imagine, I mean...I haven't worked outside the home since I've had the girls but I imagine in some ways there's a lot more flexibility to it. (Cherie)

While most bloggers did not put making money as their main motivator, for others it was

explicitly stated, as the following comments show from two different bloggers.

I'm going to be very honest where a lot of people will say it's just for my enjoyment but for me it's to find a career. (Gina, 3 children, school and pre-school; working part time, metro)

So I've avoided it but when it comes down to it I need to put food on the table. A PhD salary is just not going to do it for me so I'm starting to embrace the whole sell-out thing. I'm thinking of doing a...buyers' guide for Christmas. (Jacinta, 3 children, adult to school age; studying and working full time, metro)

As discussed previously, some of the women had developed businesses or gone into (new) occupations directly as a result of their blogging and social media networks and skills. Their skills and networks, which had developed as a result of their blogging, were eventually seen as valuable by industry and/or the market. The women effectively invented job positions which may not have existed previously. This is exemplified by one blogger who had not worked in any form of marketing or media before she started writing her blog but eventually created her own business connecting brands with bloggers. Reflecting on her journey from a stay-at-home mum, who had a background in Christian ministry, to becoming a brand-blogger agency owner-operator, Lilian made the following comment:

Basically when I was a year 12 student 12 years ago a 'social media consultant' didn't exist as a job. (Lilian, 2 children, pre-school, school; own business, metro)

Discussion, limitations and conclusion

This research highlighted and confirmed blogging motivations that had previously been uncovered, including community and connection; helping people; therapy and venting, and being heard. However, while previous research has uncovered advertising and self-promotion as motivators (see Sepp et al., 2011, for example), the current research appears to be the first to explicitly uncover

making money as a key motivation. Given that the blogosphere in Australia is still an unregulated space, it is important for strategic communications practitioners to be clear in their dealings with bloggers about the nature of any commercial relationship. The issue of 'stealth marketing' and disclosure of payment for commentary on blogs is one that requires further attention in future research.

Mum bloggers could be viewed as a vulnerable group (The VOICE group, 2010), so it is interesting to note that their motivations evolve over time (Sepp et al., 2011). The extrinsic motivation to be part of a community did not change over time, but the intrinsic motivation of therapy and the need to write did appear to evolve somewhat. Bloggers often spoke of their initial liminal experience – for example, being home with a new baby after working full time, moving to the country or another city, having postnatal depression or coping with the demands of a child with health issues. For marketers and public relations practitioners, the ethics of dealing with a potentially vulnerable population within a commercial setting is one that requires reflective practice.

In the course of the study it became evident that instead of resolving the paradox of the vulnerable/empowered prosumer mum blogger, and answering the either/or debate, the findings supported evidence that a paradox exists and should be embraced. The concept of the vulnerable empowered blogger has resonance with work by feminist/communications scholar Dubriwny (2012) who used the term and theoretical construct of the 'vulnerable empowered women' in her book discussing women's health in the post-feminist 21st century. Dubriwny brings her feminist lens to women's health, and in one of her essays she focuses on one of the original and arguably most powerful influencer/prosumers, American blogger Dooce (Heather Armstrong) and her depiction of postnatal depression in her book. Dubriwny explains her concept thus:

The vulnerable empowered woman...is one who appears to have some agency and power to shape her own life. She is, in more ways than one, a thoroughly

post-feminist woman who, through her various practices of risk management and consumption, functions to support a variety of neoliberal power structures...(Dubriwny, 2012, p. 9).

During the write up of this research, two examples of the vulnerable empowered blogger emerged in the popular media. In Australia, teen Instagrammer Essena O'Neill publicly 'quit' social media in late October 2015, describing it as "contrived perfection made to get attention", documenting the work behind the seemingly effortless and 'beautiful' posts, meanwhile calling for others to quit social media" (Hunt, 2015). The American blogger Dooce, described as the Queen of the Mommy Bloggers in the Guardian and New York Times, also announced that she was quitting blogging (or at least quitting the paid posts) in 2015. Her reasons included the need to please brands in her stories, the increasing nastiness and demands of (some) readers, and the relentless nature of the business, particularly in relation to sponsored posts (Ronan, 2015). The recent case of Belle Gibson, the Australian health blogger who lied about having cancer and initially earned money from her blogging and book deal in marketers' race to capitalise on her popularity (see Donnelly & Toscano's 2015 The Age newspaper article '*The Whole Pantry author Belle Gibson admits she lied about having terminal cancer*'), is an illustrative case in point.

In the Ronan (2015) New York Times article, Dooce describes the evolution of her working on paid posts:

Starting out as someone who didn't do any of that, it was hard for my readers to accept sponsored posts. There was a lot of complaining. Then for me, it also got to a point when I was like, I don't want to dress my kids up in Old Navy clothes. I was like, What the fuck am I doing? This is not how I want to spend my time. Mommy bloggers are going to come after me with knives for saying that. I love Old Navy, but eventually, it was like, Really, you want me to do another post? (Ronan, 2015).

Reflecting back on her blogging, which has now spanned 14 years, and asked about the term 'mommy blogger', Armstrong said:

I find the term extraordinarily dismissive. The problem is that it stuck, so I've embraced it. We pioneered an industry. Thousands of women were making really good salaries for years in writing about what is happening in their homes with their kids. I love it when people ask, 'What's the point of a mommy blog?' This is how we connect, communicate, heal. The internet saved my life. Hands down. The only way I got through my postpartum depression was by writing about it and talking with other women who'd gone through the same thing.

Ironically, given her antipathy towards sponsored posts, Armstrong will now be consulting to brands on how to work with and market to mothers, thus using the skills gained through her blogging to help the marketers (Ronan, 2015). Armstrong's conversion from blogger to a consultant to brands is not an isolated case, with bloggers interviewed for this research making the transition, some coming originally from a professional background outside the marketing sphere. Similarly, other high-profile blogging mums in Canada and the USA have gone on to work as consultants or in-house for major multinationals such as Nestle, Disney, and McCain Food (Krashinsky, 2014).

This research argues that those Australian mum bloggers who have encountered approaches from brands are vulnerable empowered prosumers and the evolution of their blogging and the blogging landscapes also mirrors the Australian materialistic, market-driven economy. While mum blogs were initially seen as reflections of 'real' motherhood, and a way for mothers to genuinely connect (as suggested in The VOICE Group 2010 article), the blogging mothers' relationship with 'uninvited brands' (see Fournier & Avery 2011), through paid posts, brand ambassadorships and sponsorship deals, ensures that commercial interests are intertwined in the blogging (and reading) mothers' sense of community and identity.

However, this research found that not all blogging mothers are motivated to earn money from their blog, but as they gain readers and are approached by marketers this evolution towards monetisation of the blog often occurred. One well-known blogger, Eden Riley (winner of the best Australian blog in 2011) decided against writing sponsored posts or being a brand ambassador (while still taking banner advertising) for commercial interests. Originally part of Australia's first major blogger-brand agency, Riley does continue to work/write for a not-for-profit charity she believes in and takes banner advertising but is no longer part of the agency.

This research also suggests that the simple delineation of personal versus non-personal bloggers is not appropriate as there is a grey scale from bloggers who blog for profit to those who only blog for personal reasons or to promote their own business. The paradox is that those mum bloggers interviewed who blog for money are often still very much 'personal' bloggers (that is, they write about personal experiences) and began as such. In fact their personal approach is what may resonate with their readers and cause them to have influence and, in turn, the ability to make money.

This research has limitations in that it only looks at a small 'genre' of bloggers in an Australian context. The research was qualitative and interpretive in its approach and is therefore not generalisable. Future research could look at 'dad bloggers' and other varieties of bloggers (for example, food, fashion or tech bloggers) to investigate whether similar motivations exist. Research from the point of view of strategic communicators liaising and working with bloggers (through sponsorship and other means of exchange) and the development of scale items to assess blogging motivations in the context of empowerment/vulnerability would also be useful. Writing in the 1980s, Tofler and Kotler were unaware their theory of 'prosumption' would have such resonance in the social media age. This exploratory research into the 'prosumer behaviour' and motivations of a relatively new group of influencers may be a first step to enable strategic communications professionals in the digital age to better serve

not only their own brands but also society and consumers as a whole. Hotlhausen and Zerfass' (2013) definition of strategic communication as "the practice of deliberate and purposive communication a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals" (p. 284) is worthwhile. However, the practice of strategic communication also, it could be argued, needs to extend its reach to consider how deliberate and purposive communication may affect potentially vulnerable stakeholders within the public sphere.

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