

## *Presentation of Self on the Web: an ethnographic study of teenage girls' weblogs*

**DENISE SEVICK BORTREE**, *University of Florida, USA*

**ABSTRACT** *Through their use of weblogs, teenage girls are bridging their offline and online relationships. As the girls use this medium to construct themselves and their relationships, they must address the dual nature of weblogs as a tool for interpersonal communication and mass communication. This study examines two aspects of teen girls' blog use: (1) challenges and hazards of conducting interpersonal communication in a mass medium, and (2) self-presentation strategies used to negotiate a dual audience. Methodology for the study included an ethnographic study of 40 weblogs, an in-depth analysis of six weblogs and a set of 13 in-depth interviews.*

More teenage girls are using the Internet than ever before (Gardyn, 2003). They are bridging their offline and online relationships and incorporating new ways of communicating. One of the new channels teens are using is the weblog or blog. More than any other group, teenage girls have flocked to this new medium (Perseus, 2003). Their use of blogs differs widely from most well-known blogs, which offer political commentary, commentary on daily news or commentary on a specific area of expertise. Rather, teenage girls are using the channel to build and maintain relationships with friends by sharing their daily experiences and thoughts. As the girls use this new medium to construct themselves and their relationships, they encounter challenges, most commonly the challenge of presenting self in a way that builds intimacy with friends while appealing to a larger group of teenage acquaintances who may be reading the same blog. The dual use of the blog as a tool for interpersonal communication and mass communication creates a conflict the girls must address.

This study examines two aspects of teen girls' blog use: (1) challenges and hazards of conducting interpersonal communication in a mass medium; and (2)

self-presentation strategies used to negotiate a dual audience. Methodology includes an ethnographic participant observation of 40 blogs maintained by teenagers. Further in-depth analysis was conducted on the blogs of six teenage girls who were a part of the larger group of teenagers in the study. The participant observation was followed by a set of 13 in-depth interviews with teenage girls who were not part of the ethnographic study but who maintained a weblog at the time of the study. The study was conducted between October and December 2003.

## Literature Review

In his classic book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) refers to life as a stage and individuals participating in it as ‘performers.’ Each performer uses verbal and nonverbal communication to express his or her identity. Self-presentation strategies may be engaged as a way of constructing self in a manner that pleases the audience (Baumeister, 1986). However, self-presentation strategies often are dependent on the presenter’s goals. According to Jones (1990), self-presenters’ most basic motive is to gain power in the relationship between presenter and audience.

Most research on the presentation of self has examined the ways individuals present themselves to strangers or to those who have little knowledge of the individual (Tedeschi, 1986). However, most interpersonal interactions occur with those who have some knowledge of the presenter’s previous behaviours—friends, family, etc. One study of the differences in the ways individuals present themselves to friends versus strangers found that individuals made more modest claims about themselves when in the presence of friends (Tice *et al.*, 1995). Even if only one friend were present in a group, individuals would make more modest claims. But when no friends were present, individuals would begin inflating their claims about self.

As well, most self-presentation studies look at verbal interactions. However, recent studies have looked at written interactions, specifically presentation of self on the Internet (Dominick, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002). Dominick (1999) measured the degree to which 500 web sites used five strategies for self-presentation: ingratiation, competence, intimidation, exemplification and supplication. The author describes the strategies, introduced by Jones (1990), in this way:

*Ingratiation: A person using this strategy has a goal of being liked by others. Some common characteristics of ingratiation are saying positive things about others or saying mildly negative things about yourself, statements of modesty, familiarity, and humour.*

*Competence [also referred to as self-promotion]: The goal of this strategy is to be perceived as skilled and qualified. Common characteristics include claims about abilities, accomplishments, performance, and qualifications.*

*Intimidation: Persons using this strategy have power as their goal. Typical characteristics are threats, statements of anger, and potential unpleasantness.*

*Exemplification: The goal of this strategy is to be perceived as morally superior or possessing high moral standards. Characteristics include ideological commitment or militancy for a cause, self sacrifice, and self discipline.*

*Supplication: The goal is nurturance or appearing helpless so that others will come to your aid. Characteristics of this self-presentational approach include entreaties for help and self-depreciation. (Dominick, 1999, p. 648)*

The study found that home pages expressed ingratiation most frequently. This is not surprising because ingratiation is most often expressed offline, as well. According to Jones (1990), ingratiation is the predominant self-presentation strategy, as most people desire to be liked above all else. However, in situations where performance is valued, competence or self-promotion is often employed. An interesting additional finding in the Dominick (1999) study was that most home page creators were male and younger than 30.

Studies of the younger generations have found unique language usage and communication on the Internet (Merchant, 2001). In their online written communication, teens frequently express intimacy by using informal language, limited capitalization or punctuation and abbreviated spellings for commonly used words and phrases, like 'btw' for 'by the way,' or 'y' for 'why' and 'c' for 'see.' They also use the communication channels on the Internet (chat rooms, e-mail, instant messaging, message boards, etc.) to broaden their friendship circles to include both virtual friends and offline friends. McKenna *et al.* (2002) found that the disclosure of the 'true' self online can create close relationships.

Adolescents may find the struggle with self-presentation a difficult one. At this stage in life they are experimenting with their identities and at the same time learning skills in expressions of self. Research has found that the characteristics of teens' presentation of self typically involve the desire to build relationships:

*...what comes to the forefront in adolescence are those characteristics of the other person that make it possible to establish relations of trust, closeness, and friendship. (Shil'shtein, 2001, p. 45)*

Adolescents are likely to express characteristics that make them desirable for relationships, and they look for these characteristics in others. The same study found that teens tend to identify 'self as a member of the group' (Shil'shtein, 2001, p. 47). In groups, adolescents find the safety to form their identities and express themselves with reduced risk of rejection.

The study reported here refers to participants as teenagers because they fall within the category of adolescence, typically defined as age 12–18 (Speer, 2000). Participants in this study were between the ages of 16 and 18.

### **Teen Use of Weblogs**

One new medium teens are adopting to express themselves and relate to friends is the weblog. Weblogs, commonly called blogs, are online journals that provide a forum for a writer's daily posting of messages (Perseus, 2003). Herring *et al.* (2004)

define blogs as ‘frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence’ (p. 1). Use of blogs ranges from professional to the very personal. Because bloggers tend to link to other bloggers’ sites, blogs have the potential to create a virtual community (Blanchard, 2004).

Blood (2002), an author who studies blog usage, describes blogs in this way:

*Some provide succinct descriptions of judiciously selected links. Some contain wide swaths of commentary dotted sparingly with links to the news of the day. Others consist of an endless stream of blurts about the writer’s day; links, if they exist, are to other, similar, personal sites. Some are political. Some are intellectual. Some are hilarious. Some are topic-driven. Some are off-the-wall. Most are noncommercial and all are impassioned about their subjects. They are weblogs. What they have in common is a format: a webpage with new entries placed at the top, updated frequently—sometimes several times a day...weblogs are hard to describe but easy to recognize. (Blood, 2002, p. 1)*

Teen blogs most typically fall into the category of ‘an endless stream of blurts about the writer’s day; links, if they exist, are to other, similar, personal sites’ (Blood, 2002, p. 1).

A study published in 2003 found that more than four million blogs have been created on public blog services such as Blogger, LiveJournal and Xanga (Perseus, 2003). Estimates from the study project more than 10 million blogs will have been created by the end of 2004. Unlike the home page creators in the Dominick (1999) study, the majority of blog writers or bloggers are teenage girls, according to the study. Fifty-one percent of bloggers fall in the age range of 13–19, and 56% are female.

Research has identified self-presentation characteristics specific to teen girls online. Stern (1999) reported three tones of self-expression in teenage girls’ home pages: spirited, somber and self-conscious. Girls who created spirited web sites constructed ‘themselves as those who use the web primarily for self-description and self-glorification’ (p. 26). Creators of somber web sites portrayed ‘themselves as those who consider their home page as asylum from a difficult and hostile world, as a place to say the things they would never—or could never—say in real life’ (p. 26). Finally, creators of self-conscious sites presented ‘themselves as cautious home page authors, confused over whether to discuss the contradictions they encounter between their real experiences and inner thoughts...Their self-presentations imply that they are eager to speak, but nervous about revealing too much’ (p. 26).

My specific interest in conducting this study was discovering the ways teenage girls use blogging as a tool for self-expression, both for interpersonal communication (to friends) and mass communication (to a broader audience of teenagers).

## Methodology

I began the study by following links from the main page of the web site Blogger.com. When a public blog hosted by Blogspot.com<sup>1</sup> is updated, a link to that blog appears on the home page. Because most bloggers provide their own links to others’ blogs, I was able to travel from blog to blog and get a sense of the blogging community.

As I followed the maze of links, I came across many blogs maintained by teenagers. I decided to focus on one set of blogs which I defined as a 'group' of blogs. When one blogger provides links to others' blogs, I believe a group is being established by defining all those included within the list of links as part of the group<sup>2</sup>. I decided on a group of 40 blogs maintained by American teenagers who appeared to be friends. Reading through the blogs, I found that the teens linked from one teen's blog would be mentioned by someone linked from another teen's blog. This confirmed that the teens, who all appear to live in the same community and possibly attend the same high school, could be called a group.

This study used the nonprobability sampling method known as snowball sampling because of the difficulty of locating groups of teenage bloggers. The links on the young bloggers' web sites acted as a referral from one blog to another, eventually allowing the researcher to identify groups of blogs. While this approach severely restricts the generalizability of the findings, considering the qualitative nature of this study, the goal is not to generalize but rather to explore more deeply the nature of this phenomenon (Rowan & Huston, 1997).

The 40 sites were authored by teenagers aged 16–18 who appeared to know each other through extracurricular activities, including bands and sports, etc. I chose this group because it reflected what appeared to me to be a typical group of teenage bloggers—primarily female (29 female, 11 males), all living in the same geographical area, most attending the same school. This group offered a variety of posting frequencies from more than five times a week to less than five times a month. Within the group of 40 blogs there were a variety of friendship groups. As discussed earlier, teenage relationships often are understood in the context of groups (Shil'shtein, 2001). The smaller friend groups tended to shift and change over time. At times teens would drop a link to one friend and add new links to new friends. In the text, some friends were spoken of often then never mentioned again.

At the time of data collection, most of the 40 blogs had been online for less than six months; however, some teens indicated that they had been writing in a different blog but abandoned it to start a new blog. An attempt was made to locate the old blogs, but only a few were found.

## **Findings**

I started the data collection process by looking at the design of all 40 blogs and by reading the five most recent posts on each. From that, I found that most bloggers used the design templates provided by the two services in this study, Blogger and Xanga; however, most teens modified the color of the template. A few had done more modifications, including adding graphics, pop-up windows, music and background pictures. In a study of home pages, Papacharissi (2002) used the term 'creativity' to identify the advanced use of HTML to both alter a template and add graphics, in addition to demonstrating innovation and sophistication in design and content. She found that those who expressed creativity on their web pages tended to provide more links on those pages. That was not necessarily the case here.

All of the blog designs included a sidebar that was used as a place for self-expression. In addition to providing links to friends, as discussed above, the teens on Blogspot provided links to their favorite bands and favorite web sites. In the same study Papacharissi (2002) found that both page design and links were indirect expressions of self. Through the use of color and graphics, the user indirectly communicated a manner or personality. This appeared to be the case with the blogs in this study as well. The Xanga service only allowed users to link to other Xanga blogs in their sidebar, but Blogspot allowed users to include any link they wished. Most of the blogs on this service included links to bands and entertainment sites. A link to a band might express the user's music preference in an attempt to confirm the user's taste.

The content of the posts primarily included talk about what happened during the day, who the teens had hung out with, what they had done over the weekend, what they were planning to do over the weekend, what their family members were doing and what they were worried or upset about. The female bloggers were more likely than the male bloggers to share intimate details about themselves, including feelings of vulnerability and affection. This supports previous findings that females tend to self-disclose more than males (Dolgin & Minowa, 1997). Besides reporting about their experiences, the teens also posted other information such as instant message (IM) conversations or the results of Internet quizzes. The IM conversations they chose to post appeared to be those they deemed unusual or particularly interesting or funny. Sites like <http://www.quizilla.com> allow teens to explore their unique identities by taking a quiz, something similar to those found in teen magazines. A few examples of Internet quizzes that the teens took and posted results for were: (1) Why will you go to hell? (2) Which personality disorder do you have? (3) What colour eyes should you have? (4) What kind of virgin are you? (5) Which Harry Potter candy are you? Results typically included a graphic or picture that was posted to the blog. Again, both the IM conversations and the Internet quizzes were, I believe, a way of communicating the values and characteristics of the user in an indirect and, at times, nonverbal fashion. Likely, these were posted to express self in some predetermined way.

### **A Closer Look**

After reading through the blogs, I realized that value would come from focusing on a few subgroups of this friend group, rather than attempting a cursory analysis of all 40 blogs. I decided to take a closer look at the six blogs from which all 40 blogs were linked. I specifically chose to look only at the blogs of teenage girls because I suspect that their experiences and uses for the medium are different from those of teenage boys. And, as stated earlier, teenage girls make up the majority of the population of bloggers.

Originally, I had located this subgroup by following a link from the main page of Blogger.com. Stephanie<sup>3</sup>, one of the girls from the subgroup, had recently posted to her blog, so it appeared in the 'recently updated' section. I focused on Stephanie's blog and five other blogs that were linked from her site. It appeared that

she was close with at least three of the other girls (Jennifer, Anna and Stasia), as indicated by the high frequency with which each was mentioned in the other's blog. Two of the five girls (Megan and Amber) were not mentioned in Stephanie's blog, so I assume they were not close friends of hers. However, these same two girls tended to mention each other often in their blogs and did not mention Stephanie or Jennifer. By this, I've concluded that these were two separate friend subgroups. However, Anna had been mentioned in all of the blogs, so she may have maintained a relationship with all of the girls.

After scanning through all six blogs, two on Xanga and four on Blogspot, I began an ethnographic study by reading the earliest three months of posts for each girl<sup>4</sup>. Then, I read the postings from the most current month (which was September 2003 for all of the girls except for one, Amber, who had abandoned her blog before September). Her July postings were reviewed instead. Anna's blog only allowed me to retrieve September postings because the archives did not work properly. However, from the content of the other blogs, I believe she was writing in her blog much earlier than that.

Approximately 250 blog postings were included in this phase of the study. For each posting I identified the time and date of posting, number of lines and any references to friends, family, teachers or other teens in the study. As I read through the posts I looked for trends in types of content posted, strategies for communicating self and strategies for negotiating the interpersonal vs. mass communication nature of blogs. I employed a grounded theory approach to the study as the topic of teen girls and blogging is still relatively exploratory.

After the ethnographic study was completed, a series of in-depth interviews was conducted with female teenage bloggers. The girls from the ethnographic study were not interviewed because they did not provide an e-mail address in their blog, and therefore, they could not be contacted directly. To locate interview participants for the interview phase of the study, I searched through lists of weblogs on two blog services and e-mailed invitations to 50 girls who identified themselves in their blogs as 18 years-old. Of the 50, 16 girls responded and volunteered to participate in the online interview process. They were each sent an e-mail containing 10 questions. When they responded, the girls were sent another e-mail with eight to ten follow-up questions. Of the 16, 13 responded to the e-mail questions.

Most of the girls were 18-year-old seniors in high school, close in age to the girls in the ethnographic study who were between 16 and 18. The blogging experience of the 13 girls ranged from just over a month to more than two years with most falling in the range of eight months to a year. The frequency of updates to the blogs ranged from once a week to once a day.

### **Shifting Nature of Blogs**

Two of the girls in the ethnographic study, Stephanie and Stasia, reported making the decision to start a blog after reading a friend's blog. Two other girls, Megan and Amber, started a blog on one site, but changed to a different host, basically abandoning the old blog and starting a new one. I couldn't access the first postings of

two of girls, so I don't know why they started blogging or when they first started. One of the girls said she had changed from one blog to the other because of ease of use at the new host<sup>5</sup>. One said it was just time for a change. Amber stopped blogging suddenly after she received a threatening comment from another blogger who was unknown to her. The comment included a threat to 'cyber rape' her friends, who were mentioned by name. A follow-up comment from one of Amber's friends indicated that the author of the threatening comment was a general cyber pest who roamed the Internet posting comments to people's sites in hopes that they would access his own obnoxious blog. After receiving the comment, Amber only wrote one more post, in which she expressed her concern about the comment received. Then, apparently, she abandoned the blog and has not posted since. However, she had abandoned a blog in the past, so she may have, again, moved to a new blog site.

In general, this suggests that the community of bloggers is ever shifting, with people moving from blog to blog, people starting blogs after reading friends' blogs and people abandoning blogs entirely. Perseus (2003) reported that 60% of the blogs surveyed had not been updated in the previous two months, indicating that those blogs may be abandoned. However, no attempt was made to see if the bloggers had simply moved from one service to another or one blog to another. Further study may reveal that the high number of abandoned blogs may not mean that the bloggers have stopped writing but instead have moved to a new location.

### **Interpersonal Communication vs. Mass Communication**

Walker (2000) found that creators of extrinsic web pages (pages intended to maintain relationships with individuals who are known offline) believed that only friends or family would read the pages. They also believed that others would not infer the identity of the creator from the content or presentation of the web pages. However, while the girls in these two phases of the study appeared to be writing for close friends, they also appeared to be aware to some degree that others, beyond their close circle of friends, may be reading their posts, as discussed below. Their challenge was maintaining a presented self to both audiences, friends and a larger group of teenage readers. The teens did not always appear to be aware that this mass audience might include parents, teachers and others outside the world of teenagers.

### ***Weblogs as Interpersonal Communication***

Interpersonal communication theories tell us that for relationships to develop, personal stories and intimate details of one's life must be shared (Salwen & Stacks, 1996). The teenage girls in the ethnographic study accomplished this through their blogs by sharing intimate thoughts, including their frustrations, their disappointments and, at times, their despair. Jennifer, Stephanie and Anna tended to be the most vulnerable in their posts, revealing personal struggles and family interactions that did not position themselves in a positive light. The girls used other measures to express affection and build intimacy between them as well. Stephanie, Jennifer, Stasia and Anna used affectionate nicknames for each other<sup>6</sup>. They used the

nicknames as the link text to each other's blogs listed in the sidebar of the web pages, and they used the names from time to time in their posts as well. Linking to others' blogs expressed a sense of belonging to a group and closeness to other people. The opposite was demonstrated by the removal of some friends from the list of links. After a few months of posting, Stephanie decided to drop Anna from her list of links. This may have been a way of excluding her from her circle of close friends and indicating a lack of desire for intimacy with her.

In the interviews five of the thirteen girls said they blogged as a way of writing down their feelings, and many said they blogged to keep in touch with family or friends. Most said they read their friends' blogs, and 11 of the 13 said their friends read their blogs. However, many of the girls said they have friends who do not blog, so they don't always rely on blogging to keep up with friends. Most felt that blogging doesn't actually take the place of other types of communication with friends, like phone calls or e-mail. Rather, they felt it was a way to get to know another person's thoughts without having to talk about it. One girl said, 'I get to know peoples [sic] opinions and thoughts on things u [sic] usually wouldn't hear.' A number of the girls in the interviews said that they and their friends write about feelings that they would not talk about otherwise. One girl addressed the issue this way:

*A lot of times, people write things in their blogs because they don't have the esteem or courage to talk about it but by writing in their blog, they are hoping someone will understand and be able to comfort them with the 'problem.'*

In this way, weblogs help build intimacy in friendships by allowing the girls to communicate what they don't want to say. One girl said, 'it makes it easier to communicate. We would probably not discuss our problems as much if we didn't blog.'

While vulnerability in blogs creates closeness among some friends, an intimate look into someone's thoughts and opinions can cause a strain on others.

*Sometimes it's not so great. A friend of mine that I grew up with in Maryland (we have been friends since we were babies) have grown more distance [sic] b/c of our political views learned through Xanga. She doesn't understand me and therefore judges me on my beliefs and doesn't enjoy talking to me much anymore...It's sad she's drawn that conclusion through the internet, but that's how it works.*

As a result of the intimacy between the girls in the ethnographic study, the girls tended to influence the content of each other's posts. One clear example of this was the adoption of terms used by another of the girls. Stasia began referring to herself as 'pal,' which initially made me think that she was a boy. Eventually, all of the girls began using the term. I imagine Stasia used the term offline as well, so it was not just this online use of the word that caused the others girls to adopt it. The girls also tended to post at similar times, as if one had read the others' posts for the day and, in some way, responded to them. The girls also influenced the content of the others' blogs when they shared Internet surveys. Stephanie frequently named Alice

as the source of the surveys she posted to her blog. And Jennifer indicated that she had received surveys from Stephanie.

### *Weblogs as Mass Communication*

In contrast to interpersonal communication, mass communication occurs when a few people communicate to a large anonymous audience (Salwen & Stacks, 1996). Some of the girls in the ethnographic study clearly were aware that their blogs might be read by a larger audience. One of the girls, Stasia, wrote in her first post that she would not be revealing any secrets in her blog for some ‘punk’ to read, indicating that she was aware that anyone could access her blog. At some point, each of the girls indicated that she stopped writing a post because it was not interesting, or she directed readers (assuming these are not close friends) to skip a post because they may not find it interesting due to the intimate or personal nature of the post. In one post, Stephanie ranted about how two of the other girls (Jennifer and Anna) had mistreated her while they were hanging out at a concert. However, as she began to write about the event and her concerns, she paused and addressed the greater audience, telling them that they might not be interested in this post since it addressed a situation with which they would not be familiar. The girls were aware of this larger group of teenage readers who may not be as interested in their intimate feelings of frustration and anger. At the same time, by directing this larger public away from more personal posts, the girls may have been negotiating the balance of self-presentation to friends and strangers in a public forum.

When the girls in the interview phase of the study were asked about the conflict of presenting self to two audiences—friends and strangers—most girls said that they either felt it in their own writing or had observed this in others’ blogs. One girl said, ‘I am very open on my xanga but am careful about what I say. Mostly though, I found myself writing for my friends.’ Another said, ‘I’m usually writing to the general public since I don’t know who reads my blog for sure.’ These admissions support the finding that writers are aware of the potential dual audiences, and as a result must decide how to present themselves. However, most of the interviewees said that even though they are aware of the potential mass audience, they write what they want whether or not others make judgments about them as a result:

*...teenagers tend to blog because they are trying to put out this image that they are cool. I for one, don’t really care about how people online see me. They are my thoughts, and what I have accomplished the day or weekend prior. If people want to take my thoughts and judge me on them, that’s their decision.*

One girl addressed the temptation to self-present in a way that is not realistic. ‘At times, it’s easy to try to project a certain image b/c all people see is text.’ She went on to say that she views her blog as a journal, so she tries to be as honest as possible. All of the girls claimed that they did not participate in inaccurate self-presentation, but most said their friends or other teens did. This may be a type of third-person effect, with teens assuming others are affected more than themselves.

### **Risks of Interpersonal Communication in Mass Medium**

Conducting interpersonal communication in a mass communication medium has many risks. Some of the girls learned a difficult lesson about this risk. As mentioned earlier, Amber, one of the girls in the ethnographic study, received an online comment from a cyber pest who used information from her blog to threaten her and her friends. Both Jennifer and Stasia had mentioned having a cyber stalker who sent them instant messages. However, perhaps a more realistic or immediate risk for these girls is exposure to someone who could disrupt their safe environment—parents, teachers or others who they have mentioned in their blogs. Jennifer had this experience when a classmate, who she had spoken about in a negative light, found her blog via a Yahoo! search. The incident resulted in hurt feelings and misunderstandings. To prevent this from occurring again, she went back through her old post and edited out people's names, so they would not pull up her site when searching for references to themselves in search engines.

Many of the girls in the interviews indicated that they read not only the blogs of friends but also the blogs of others who they may not have been close to. This had both good and bad consequences:

*It has made me closer to people I wouldn't normally talk to in school...like the quiet ones who don't talk much...if I read their Xanga.... I get to know more about them that I wouldn't have otherwise known...but for instance, one of my friends found out her bf was cheating on her cause he wrote about his feelings for his ex in his...so I guess it depends on each person.*

Another girl said she enjoyed reading blogs of people she had never met. Specifically, she tried to read blogs of teenagers who live in other parts of the world that she wished to visit. This confirms the fact that a broader audience does exist. Teenage girls read not only their friends' blogs but also the blogs of others who they may not have relationships with.

### ***Self-presentation Strategies***

In their efforts to balance the dual nature of blog communication as interpersonal and mass communication, the girls in the ethnographic study engaged in a number of self-presentation strategies, including ingratiation, competence and, at times, supplication. As discussed earlier, Dominick (1999) used Jones's (1990) strategies for self-presentation to analyze personal home pages. The results indicated an overwhelming use of ingratiation, a strategy used to win the affection and approval of others. The same was found in this ethnographic study. As an example of ingratiation, the girls often listed the people with whom they spent time on a given day. They included where they went, and what funny and interesting things they did while they were there. They typically made reference to many people, even if only in a one-liner with no context, a simple 'shout out' or acknowledgement of a friend. By mentioning individuals by name, they were probably attempting to be liked more by those individuals. In a way, this parallels the spirited tone of self-presentation identified by Stern (1999).

Another common expression of ingratiation was the way the girls answered questions to the blog surveys<sup>7</sup>. A blog survey included a long list of questions that the girls posted to their blog along with their personal answers to each question. The surveys tended to be passed from girl to girl, each posting the questions and her answers. Some of the questions were fairly harmless, such as what is your favorite color, do you prefer blue or black ink, or have you ever broken a bone. Others made the girls somewhat vulnerable, such as what is your full name, birthday, location, or have you ever done drugs or lost your virginity. However, many of the questions allowed the girls to share funny and often slightly negative facts about themselves. One of the girls, Stephanie, at times posted surprisingly negative responses to the Internet blogs and results of Internet surveys. The use of self-deprecation to elicit help or sympathy from others is termed supplication (a strategy used to appear helpless so others will support you) by Jones (1990). In this case, Stephanie may have been using that strategy rather than ingratiation. At the same time, this may be a form of what Stern (1999) called the self-conscious tone of self-presentation.

While ingratiation was found most often in home pages in the Dominick (1999) study, the self-presentation strategy termed competence (strategy employed to be seen as skillful) showed up frequently as well, with 33% of home pages by males falling into this category and 28% of home pages by women. In this ethnographic study, the girls employed this strategy by presenting themselves as socially competent. They accomplished this through both indirect and direct methods. Directly, they presented themselves as having many friends. Merchant (2001) found that girls who had more online friends (as indicated by the number of people they tracked through software) were considered more popular by other girls. To some extent, the number of comments one receives is a way of establishing the number of friends and readers one has. For the girls in this study, this may have been a way of establishing social competence. Those who included links to friends in the sidebar of their blog also may have been giving off the impression that they had many friends, and therefore were popular. Because the girls were communicating both to their close friends and to acquaintances who may be part of the larger group of teenage readers, they had to balance between making modest claims that their close friends would accept and making inflated claims to promote themselves as socially competent, to impress the larger groups of teens. By allowing the indirect communication to indicate their popularity (i.e. number of comments), they may have been giving off the impression that they were in fact popular.

The ability to create a unique blog design and to express oneself through advanced HTML may have been a way of establishing a type of competence as well. Intentionally or not, the girls' blogs gave off an impression of innovation and sophistication in design or the lack of it. Most of the girls used templates for their blogs, meaning they did not alter the HTML to change the layout or add graphics, but a few changed the color of the template. Two of the girls, Stephanie and Anna, made significant HTML changes, and Stephanie added graphics. Of all the blogs, Stephanie's was the most sophisticated. It appeared that she had spent more time than the others designing and updating her blog. She also changed something about

her blog every month, either updating the links in the sidebar, changing the way the daily posts presented the date and time, or changing the way one of the sets of links in the sidebar was titled. Papacharissi (2002) found that home pages which were more creative tended to offer more links. This was true for Stephanie's blog; in contrast Alice's blog did not provide any links in the sidebar.

### **Analysis**

Taken together, these findings from the ethnographic study and the interviews indicate that teens are using direct and indirect expressions of self in their blogs to gain a sort of group acceptance, both in larger and smaller contexts. To gain acceptance in the larger context of acquaintances, they use ingratiation, social competence and supplication, though infrequently. At the same time, they are maintaining acceptance in their smaller circle of close friends. For this, they must share more intimate details of their lives and even adopt each other's ideas and language. As stated earlier, studies have shown that teenagers tend to see themselves in the context of groups, and for this reason, the girls may have adopted the blogs as another means of maintaining the group relationships.

At the same time, the teens appear to have carved out a community for themselves, a community in which they believe they can express their opinions and thoughts freely without fear of adult interference. On the flip side, by sharing as they do, they make themselves vulnerable and even risk exposure to these same people, as some have found. A simple Yahoo! search on the names of the girls yielded a link to their blogs and to friends' blogs who had mentioned them.

Not every teen uses his/her blog as a way of communicating to friends. Some keep their blogs private and use it as a journal only. While weblogs as a genre may not be unique from other types of web tools (Herring *et al.*, 2004), I have concluded that the form of communication that results from weblog use possesses some unique qualities. Unlike other types of communication typically used by teenage girls (home pages, chat rooms, instant messaging, e-mail, telephone, etc.), weblogs allow the girls to maintain a journal about their lives, keep a record of their thoughts and feelings on a daily basis, and at the same time give others access to those thoughts and feelings. While some forms mentioned above encourage an interactive dialogue, the weblogs seem to be primarily a monologue, a commentary of sorts, that others may respond to through other forms (e-mail, face-to-face, own blog). Only the comments section offers some type of interactive dialogue, but not all services offer that option at the time of this study (October 2003). Even when the comment section is used, the blog author rarely responds directly to the comments. The interviews with the girls seem to confirm this, as most girls said blogging does not replace another form of communication.

While these self-presentation strategies (ingratiation, competence and supplication) appear to fit the behavior of the girls in the study, it is possible that teen self-presentation may differ from adult presentation due to the adolescent struggle for self-identity. More research is needed to test any difference in self-presentation strategies between these adolescents and adults.

For the most part, the girls appear to be reporting about their day in a way that constructs their experiences in a pleasing manner. They tend to talk about hanging out with friends, going to parties, having sleepovers, goofing around in class and other 'fun' experiences. In general, blogging about one's life strikes me as narcissistic in the sense that these girls believe others will want to come to their site and read about their lives. However, judging from the number of comments the Xanga users receive, it appears that people are reading them.

## Conclusion

Blogging appears to be a useful creative tool for teens to use in maintaining relationships. By creating this 'safe' space for self-expression, teens are able to read about each other's lives and share their own experiences. Possibly, the bloggers are able to build and maintain an image that will afford them more access to friendship groups. However, the balance they must keep between intimate sharing to maintain close relationships and making inflated claims to impress a larger group of teens may put them at a greater risk of alienating one of the two, or possibly both, groups.

They strike the balance by using intentional and seemingly unintentional expressions of self. Through that, they are able to project ingratiation, social competence and, at times, supplication, while also fostering intimacy with close friends. However, risk of exposure and loss of privacy are threats to the world they have created.

Authors write about their disappointment that blogging is mostly done by teenage girls keeping online journals (Perseus, 2003; Vieta, 2003). Yet, these authors miss the fact that bloggers are using this permanent record of their thoughts to communicate in a somewhat interactive way. Unlike most personal web pages, personal blogs are very dynamic, changing weekly or even daily, which may mean readers log in frequently to read them, more frequently than readers of home pages, thereby building a sense of community.

The findings in this study are based on the content and design of the blogs. Future research should probe further the motivations for blogging as well as the benefits bloggers receive from it. More in-depth interviews with teenage bloggers would give valuable insight into the world of teenage blogging.

*Correspondence:* Denise Bortree, Graduate Student, University of Florida, College of Journalism and Communications, Division of Graduate Studies and Research, PO Box 118400, Gainesville, FL 32611-8400, USA; e-mail: dbortree@ufl.edu

## NOTES

1. Blogspot is the hosting site for Blogger.com.
2. However, the teens in this study did not appear to be close friends with everyone they link to. This was determined by whether or not the 'friend' was mentioned in any of the blog postings. In many cases, someone linked from the blog was not necessarily mentioned when the blogger wrote about friends.
3. All names used in this study have been changed.
4. Both Stephanie and Jennifer began blogging in November 2002, but Jennifer's blog would not let me access the November postings. I began by reading her December 2002 posts. Megan and Stasia

abandoned old blogs and began posting in new blogs in April 2003. Stasia first posted in May 2003. Anna's first posting date is unknown. Only her posts from September 2003 and later were available in her archives.

5. To protect the girls' privacy, direct quotes from their blogs will not be used in this paper. A simple search on a direct quote in a search engine would reveal the identities of the girls.
6. The names are not included in this write-up to protect the girls' identities.
7. Blog surveys are different from Internet quizzes. The quizzes were taken on another web site and only the results were published on the blog.

## REFERENCES

- BAUMEISTER, R.F. (1986) *Identity: cultural change and struggle for self* (New York, Oxford University Press).
- BLANCHARD, A. (2004) Blogs as virtual communities: identifying a sense of community in the Julie/Julia project. Into the Blogosphere, online at [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogs\\_as\\_virtual.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogs_as_virtual.html) (accessed 18 September 2004).
- BLOOD, R. (2002) *The Weblog Handbook* (Cambridge, MA, Perseus Publishing).
- DOLGIN, K.G. & MINOWA, N. (1997) Gender differences in self-presentation: a comparison of the roles of flatteringness and intimacy in self-disclosure to friends, *Sex Roles*, 36(5/6), pp. 371–380.
- DOMINICK, J.R. (1999) Who do you think you are? Personal home pages and self-presentation on the World Wide Web, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 76(4), pp. 646–658.
- GARDYN, R. (2003) Born to be wired, *American Demographics*, 25(3), pp. 14–15.
- GOFFMAN, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, Doubleday).
- HERRING, S.C., SCHEIDT, L.A., BONUS, S. & WRIGHT, E. (2004) Bridging the gap: a genre analysis of weblogs, in: *Proceedings of the Thirty-seventh Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-37)* (Los Alamitos, CA, IEEE Press).
- JONES, E.E. (1990) *Interpersonal Perceptions* (New York, W.H. Freeman).
- MERCHANT, G. (2001) Teenagers in cyberspace: an investigation of language use and language change in Internet chatrooms, *Journal of Research in Reading*, 24(3), pp. 293–306.
- MCKENNA, K.Y.A., GREEN, A.S. & GLEASON, M.E.J. (2002) Relationship formation on the Internet: what's the big attraction? *Journal of Social Issues*, 58, pp. 9–31.
- PAPACHARISSI, Z. (2002) The presentation of self in virtual life: characteristics of personal home pages, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79(3), pp. 643–661.
- PERSEUS (2003) The blogging iceberg—of 4.12 million hosted weblogs, most little seen, quickly abandoned, online at <http://www.perseus.com/blogsurvey/thebloggingiceberg.html> (accessed 28 October 2003).
- ROWAN, M. & HUSTON, P. (1997) Qualitative research articles: information for authors and peer reviewers, *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 157(10), pp. 1442–1446.
- SALWEN, M.D. & STACKS, D.W. (1996) *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research* (Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).
- SHIL'SHTEIN, E.S. (2001) Characteristics of the presentation of self during adolescence, *Russian Education and Society*, 43(6), pp. 35–51.
- SPEER, L.P. (2000) The adolescent brain and age-related behavioral manifestations, *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 24, pp. 417–463.
- STERN, S.R. (1999) Adolescent girls' expression on web home pages: spirited, somber, and self-conscious sites, *Convergence*, 5, pp. 22–41.
- TEDESCHI, J.T. (1986) Private and public experiences of the self, in: R. BAUMEISTER (Ed.) *Public Self and Private Self*, pp. 1–17 (New York, Springer-Verlag).
- TICE, D.M., BUTLER, J.L., MURAVEN, M.B. & STILLWELL, A.M. (1995) When modesty prevails: differential favorability of self-presentation to friends and strangers, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(6), pp. 1120–1138.
- VIETA, M. (2003) What's really going on with the blogosphere? *Digest: Innovations in New Media*, 2, online at <http://www.sfu.ca/~mavieta/digest/dec03/Blogger.html> (accessed 18 September 2004).
- WALKER, K. (2000) 'It's difficult to hide it': the presentation of self in Internet home pages, *Qualitative Sociology*, 23(1), pp. 99–120.