Personal and Popular
The Case of Young Swedish Female Top-bloggers

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Abstract

While early blogging research focused on top-ranked blogs commenting on public events, recent research confirms that most blogs today concern the personal life of the blogger. The present article focuses on a particular case of blogs that falls in between these categories. In Sweden, personal blogs written by young women have dominated the ranking lists of the most popular blogs during recent years. This new phenomenon is approached through an analysis of the characteristics and content of 20 top-ranked blogs authored by young women. Through their popularity, these bloggers have come to introduce commercial and professional aspects of blogging that challenge the conventions of personal blogs. The article analyses how the bloggers negotiate these conventions in self-presentations, postings and relations to readers and how they seek to perform a self through the blog that integrates different aspects of blogging. A crucial part of this process is identification with the gender conventions of "ordinary girls".

Keywords: blog, top-blogger, personal blogs, women, gender, youth

Introduction

Blogs[1] first appeared in the late 1990s and have been a topic of public debate and research ever since. A distinct feature of the Swedish blogosphere[2] is that young women run some of the most popular and well-known blogs. The popularity of young female bloggers is frequently commented on in the media discourse and blogging community, often through the use of stereotypical representations of "girl blogs" that write about private life, fashion and gossip (Schulmann 2009). Thus, these blogs have become symbols in a public discussion of young women's blogging as well as points of reference for other bloggers. Recent surveys also show that young women are the most frequent users of blogs in the population: While eight percent of all Internet users read blogs on an average day, at least 24 percent of young women between 15-24 years of age read blogs and 20 percent claim to write a blog of their own (Nordicom 2009; Findahl 2009). International studies confirm that young women seem to be the most active readers and writers of blogs. In this sense, young women are "…key actors in the history and present use of weblogs" (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright 2004). Nevertheless, research on their blogs and blogging practices is still scarce. In focusing on blogs authored by Swedish young women, the present article addresses this apparent paradox in blogging research. Furthermore, by being personal and highly popular, these blogs represent a

category not previously covered in blogging research. Young female "top-bloggers" thus represent a new blogging phenomenon that also evokes new questions for blogging research. By analysing the characteristics and content of 20 top-ranked blogs written by young Swedish women, the article will discuss what is new about this type of blog in relation to previous research and what issues this case raises for further research on the development of personal blogging.

Personal Blogs: Previous Research

A basic definition of blogging reads "the reverse-chronological posting of individually authored entries which includes the capacity to provide hypertext links and often allow comment-based responses from readers…" (Bruns & Jacobs 2006a, p. 2). This definition shows how blogs as a genre combine individual self-expression and interactive forms of computer-based communication through links and comments (cf. Herring, Scheidt, Wright & Bonus 2005). A common categorization of blogs differentiates between "personal blogs" focused on the everyday life and thoughts of the blogger, "filter blogs" organized as logs of links, comments and evaluations of external, typically public events, or "topic blogs" focused on particular topics and products (cf. Blood 2000; Herring et al. 2005; Rettberg 2008, p. 9f). While early research tended to focus on established "A-list" blogs of the filter type (Bruns & Jacobs 2006a, pp. 2-4), recent studies show that most blogs can be found among the category personal blogs. A majority of these seem to be written by youth and women (Herring et al. 2004; Lenhart & Fox 2006; Findahl 2009). Recent publications (Bruns & Jacobs 2006b; Russell & Echchaibi 2009) show how the initial focus on the political and journalistic significance of blogs is giving way to a more sophisticated discussion on different uses of blogs and their various individual and social implications. Despite this, studies of personal blogs and blogging practices are still few. It is difficult to find a commonly agreed upon definition of what constitutes a "personal blog" except for the focus on the daily life and inner thoughts and feelings of the blogger (Brake 2009 p. 205). If the prime characteristic of personal blogs is their focus on the personal and the intimate, this also implies that the criteria of personal selection and presentation of information and non-fictional or "true" content, pointed out in previous research as crucial to the authenticity of blogs, are highly significant (Miller & Shepherd 2004; see also Rettberg 2008, p. 111; Lüders 2007). Other common traits identified in previous research are a higher frequency of updates and fewer links than are found in other types of blogs (Herring et al. 2005).

Studies published thus far have primarily focused on what is alternately referred to as online journals or diary blogs (Serfaty 2004; Huffaker & Calvert 2006; Hodkinson & Lincoln 2008), which typically have a limited audience consisting of close friends. Previous studies of young women's blogging show that, as diaries, blogs can provide a safe space for self-expression as well as a possibility to keep a record of experiences and of the process of self-construction (Cadle 2005; Bell 2007). Also the possibility to communicate with friends, manage relationships, and build communities makes blogs attractive to young women (Bell 2007, p. 103). At the same time, it introduces a dilemma concerning how to communicate in a way that build intimacy with friends as well as ensures social acceptance in a larger group of potential readers (Bortree 2005, p. 25; Scheidt 2006).

These findings illustrate how later research has come to question the tendency to see blogging as an unconstrained and individual form of self-expression. Blogging software allows the individual a great deal of freedom to express herself, which opens up for multiple uses. However, blogging is also a communicative act situated in a technological as well as social context (Brake 2009; Schmidt 2007). This context implies limitations and conventions for the individual blogger as well as possibilities for change. These technological and social frames for blogging are formed through ongoing interactions in the community of bloggers and readers, but also by software developments and commercial interests outside of this context. Research to date thus shows that personal blogging, in contrast to other forms of blogging, is characterized by a certain purpose, conventions and experiences. However, it also shows that these characteristics are transforming as blogs come to be used by different groups of people. In their study of blogging genres, Susan Herring and colleagues (2005) identified blogs that incorporated elements from different types of blogs, making up "…a hybrid of public and private, personal and professional" (Herring et al. 2005 p. 160). Bloggers who become highly popular for writing about their personal life form a category that falls in between previous studies of top-ranked blogs and personal blogs. Thus we can assume that the blogs focused on here will introduce new aspects and issues in the practice of personal blogging.

The Study: Selection of the Case and Method for Analysis

The current article presents findings from a study of 20 of the most popular blogs written by young women in Sweden. The study combines a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the characteristics of these blogs in terms of content, purpose of blogging and structural features. The 20 blogs where selected from a quantitative content analysis of 185 of the most recognized blogs in January 2009[3] at the two largest blog ranking sites: knuff.se, which ranks blogs on the basis of the number of links from other blogs during the latest six months, and bloggportalen.se, which ranks blogs by links but also by figures on weekly number of visits[4] (Lövheim 2009). A basic descriptive analysis[5] of the 185 top-ranked blogs showed that most of the bloggers were below 40 years of age[6] and female[7].

The age span for the selection of blogs for the qualitative analysis was set to 18-28 years. Out of 42 possible blogs, 20 were selected that would mirror the similarities as well as varieties among female top-bloggers in terms of genres and topics, private or professional purpose, and ranking by links and visits. In accordance with previous research (cf. Herring et al. 2004), personal blogs or blogs that mixed a personal and topic-oriented content were in the majority, and most of these were authored by women[8]. Female bloggers primarily focused on "everyday life reflections", "fashion and design", "parenting and children" and male bloggers on "politics and society" and "sports and leisure". Almost 65 percent of both female and male blogs had a private rather than professional purpose. Female bloggers linked less frequently to other blogs and also received fewer links than did male bloggers[9]. However, regarding the number of visitors and comments, the result shows a reversed pattern in which more than 70 percent of the blogs receiving over 50 comments a day[10] were written by women.

As pointed out above, popularity introduces aspects that may challenge the meaning and practices of personal blogs described in previous research. The analysis in the fol-

lowing sections will explore what potential tensions between different aspects of blogging arise in the selected blogs, and how the bloggers handle these in their blogging. The analysis will focus on three themes that emerge from previous research. The first concerns the purpose of the blog as a personal expression of the blogger's life, thoughts and feelings. The second theme concerns the significance of frequent updates in personal blogs. The third theme concerns the blog as an intimate form of communication or as situated in a larger social community of other bloggers and readers.

The qualitative content analysis was based on self-presentations on the main page and postings to the 20 blogs during the spring of 2009[11]. A rich source of information in several of the blogs has also been the bloggers' answers to questions from readers, which are posted in the blog. The self-presentations and postings in the blog were categorized according to the blogger's presentation of the purpose of her blog, and the topics through which the blogger's life were represented (cf. Van Doorn et al. 2007). Also elements such as advertisements or references to cooperation with companies and media were categorized as signalling the purpose of blogging. Finally, the use of informal and personalized or formal and abstract language was categorized (cf. Herring & Paolillo 2006). The theme of updates was categorized with regard to the actual frequency of postings, but also with regard to whether and how bloggers addressed the issue of frequent updates. The final theme was approached through a categorization of the blogger's practices of relating to her audience in terms of linking and responding to questions and comments. In the analysis, common themes as well as varieties between the blogs were identified.

Swedish Female Top-bloggers: Characteristics

To what extent do the characteristics of the chosen blogs match the characteristics of personal blogs described in previous research? An analysis of the content of the postings shows that the largest subject category was the blogger's everyday life, closely followed by fashion and beauty. In accordance with previous research, these blogs were also among the most frequently updated among the top-ranked bloggers: 14 bloggers posted more than twice, and five more than five times a day. The findings also showed some differences between the selected bloggers and findings in previous studies. The first concerns the purpose of blogging. Concurrent with the study, five of them blogged professionally as columnists for web-based magazines and TV. However, also among those blogging as private persons nine partly made their income through advertisements on the blog, and three through agreements with web-based magazines or TV producers. The second difference concerns the number of visits to and comments on these blogs. In January 2009, 17 of them had more than 28,000 visits weekly, and eight more than 64,000 with a maximum of 700,000 reported visits[12]. Thirteen were also among the top-linked blogs. Seventeen of the bloggers received 50-100 comments or more a day, with a maximum of 825 comments. Thus, this group of young female top-bloggers primarily stand out through the extent of their cooperation with web-based media and companies and the high number of visits to and comments on their blogs.

Personal and Professional

The analysis shows that all of the bloggers emphasize the personal character of their blog, although in different ways. The professional purpose of the bloggers' writing for a web magazine was revealed mainly through the header, links and advertisements on the front page. Three of them also address this in their self-presentations, while the others focus more on their personal life and interests. This mix of the personal and the professional also came through in postings where personal experiences and feelings are mixed with images and references to clothes, shoes, accessories and beauty products:

> Right. My morning. A classic 'I'm ugly and fat in everything' morning. A 'pulling out stuff and building a mountain of clothes on the bed' morning. (…) Now I sit at the editorial desk in a weird mishmash of Philip Lim-skirt, bulky T-shirt, black tights, brown boots, dark blue too big guy shirt and feel totally wrong. Oh well. Just that kind of day. But what the hell, the sun is shining! (Blog 3[13] 2009-04-15).

The emphasis on *personal life* is particularly clear among bloggers who do not blog as part of their profession, but where aspects of professionalization are introduced through their cooperation with web-based media and commercial companies. Apart from advertisements, the bloggers display this connection in postings where they review, sell or arrange a competition based on certain products, or write about invitations to events and meetings. These bloggers often emphasized their blogging as an expression of personal choices and values, as in this quote: "I only accept things that I myself feel I am really interested in, that I can stand in for and that I gladly would recommend to you" (Blog 20 2009-04-14).

A salient pattern is also how the bloggers acknowledge their status as a top-blogger, but frame such statements through a strong emphasis on the personal purpose and character of the blog. This becomes clear in the self-presentation of one of the bloggers:

> Here in one of Sweden's largest blogs (…) with appr. 50 000 unique visitors every day I write about my everyday life, fashion, shopping & lots of other things. What I like best is my friends, my family and my little Chihuahua (Blog 11 spring 2009).

This pattern is even more evident in this blogger's reply to a question about life as a famous blogger:

> I guess my life has changed in the way that I can now support myself through something I think is fun, something that initially was just an interest. As a person I have developed lots, which I certainly would have done without the blog, but with the help of it has gone a bit faster – I'm more forward, I stand up for who I am, I have greater self-respect and larger self-distance (Blog 20 2008-07-15).

This posting also illustrates how the bloggers frame opportunities to make a living from blogging as contributing to a process of self-development rather than making a career.

The emphasis on personal life is also evident in the three blogs in which postings and images focus on the private sphere of the home and family. One of them writes in her self-presentation:

> I enjoy the luxuries of everyday life which for me are coffee in nice cups, daily power walks, playing with our daughter, cosy evenings at home, too much

> candy, shopping sprees and home decoration. I love to laugh and try to see the good in each person (Blog 7 2009-04-06).

As the quote shows, references to personal and everyday life are framed as the main setting of the blogger's identity and outlook on life despite the fact that her blog is run as a company in cooperation with a larger web portal. This quote also illustrates a second theme that emerges as salient in the analysis. This concerns how the bloggers seek to present themselves as *ordinary girls* who, despite their position, share the same concerns, pleasures and problems as their readers. The following quote also illustrates how the bloggers acknowledge the benefits of their position and simultaneously show that they are ordinary girls for whom family, boyfriend and friends are most important in life:

> Now I am the happiest (...) not when I go to a celebrity party and live my top-blogger-life in Stockholm. But now when I'm up in the North in a t-shirt that smells of my boyfriend and get to spend time with the one I love most. Now I am happy! (Blog 2 2009-06-15).

These quotes also illustrate the use of language in these blogs. Bloggers representing their personal life and interest through family, fashion and beauty primarily expressed themselves through informal and personal, but also polite, supportive and emotionally expressive language more than the other bloggers did. This kind of language corresponds with the conventions of a personal blog, but also with conventions of female as opposed to masculine language styles (cf. Herring & Paolillo 2006). Thus the ambition of presenting oneself as an ordinary girl is expressed in topics and language that are closely related to the conventions of young women's interests, situation and ways of communicating.

Seven of the bloggers present their personal life primarily through postings and images of friends, parties and nightlife, of which two were professionally employed by a web magazine. These bloggers emphasize the personal purpose of their blogs in a somewhat different manner. In contrast to the blogs discussed earlier, postings and images in these blogs portray a life "out and about", of having fun and spending money, with several references to alcohol and to casual sexual relations. Also this representation of the self in the blog can be seen as a negotiation of the tension between being a personal and a professional blogger. Here, however, the personal aspects of blogging are expressed more through an emphasis on *personal freedom and independence*. This is expressed, for example, in the cocky and careless attitude towards work found in the postings:

> I still haven't come home from yesterday's festivities. So I sit here in the office on a Sunday in high heels, 24-hour old makeup and eat scones ... More images from the parties are coming soon! (Blog 19 2009-04-18).

On the one hand, this posting gives the impression that parties and social life are more important than work, but on the other hand shows that the blog *is* work, which also has to be attended to on a Sunday morning after partying all night. The quote also indicates how these bloggers present themselves as ordinary girls by showing the "real" or unvarnished rather than edited version of their lives. This is even more pronounced in postings on feelings of failure and sadness that regularly occur in these blogs:

> Sometimes life gives you so-called 'wake-up calls' ... And sometimes you give them to yourself. You swear that you should change your destructive

behaviour, never end up on the old tracks again. Unfortunately, it is easier said than done (Blog 6 2009-02-20).

These postings can also be seen as a way of showing the inner, personal life of the blogger behind the facade, and of connecting to the life and problems of the ordinary girl. This attempt to combine the independent, tough top-blogger and the ordinary girl was also expressed in the language used in these blogs, which, in contrast to the blogs on fashion and family life, consisted of a mixture of intimate and more distanced or provocative styles including use of sarcasm, irony and profanity.

A final way of handling the tension between the professional and personal aspects of being a top-blogger can be found among four bloggers connected to a daily newspaper. These blogs differ from the others in that they more frequently commented on current media events and social and political issues. In these blogs, self-presentations and postings contained less personal information. Here the framing of the blog as personal rather than professional primarily took place through an emphasis on *personal opinions*. The language in these blogs was more often formal and informative than personalized and emotional, often with a challenging or ironic twist. In these blogs too, a connection to the life of ordinary girls can be found. As illustrated in the following posting, this can take place, for example, by posting on issues of concern to young women, such as beauty ideals, relationships and self-confidence:

> I don't know what to say when anorexia becomes more and more widespread as an accepted behaviour. Indeed. It is ... Damn. Anyone who behaves like I did when I was anorexic is becoming more and more standard, and it fucking scares the shit out of me (Blog 10 2009-04-22).

Here the personal connection to readers is expressed not only through the particular issue, but also in the way the blogger reveals her deep involvement and concern through her language and by sharing personal experiences of anorexia.

Frequent Updates and Private Life

The bloggers' awareness of the importance of frequent updates is obvious in postings such as this:

> Hi friends! (…) Tomorrow there will be more diligent updating WITH images. Sorry for letting you down today! (Blog 13 2009-04-18).

This issue is also addressed in questions from readers about whether the blogger feels a pressure to blog. As illustrated in this posting, the bloggers acknowledge that they are aware of such expectations, but at the same time emphasize that, in order to be "good", blogging must be something they do for their own sake:

> …The times when I let the anxiety of performance take over it simply doesn't turn out very well, as I have written about before in the blog. Sometimes you have lots of inspiration to write and sometimes less but I always try to write because **I** want to nowadays. That is important! (Blog 20 2009-01-27).

In this posting, the tension between being a personal blogger for whom the blogs is also a kind of profession centres on the purpose of blogging. Some bloggers, as this posting

shows, also write about how the expectation of frequent updates interferes with their private life:

> For a long time I have longed for my old life, life without the blog. Don't misunder-
> stand me, I love writing but the pressure has been so great" (Blog 14 2009-03-23).

Later on in the same posting, the blogger writes:

> I have been giving the kids and the blog all the joy while my fiancé just got
> to hear my whining.

This posting clearly illustrates how becoming a top-blogger has to be negotiated with other parts of the blogger's personal and social life. This can be an issue of time, as expressed in this posting, but the analysis also shows how the bloggers negotiate not only expectations of frequent updates, but also of writing spontaneously and openly about their private life. As this example shows, setting boundaries for what to share and what not to share of their private life in the blog has to be negotiated with readers:

> Because of this I have decided to cut down the personal stuff in the blog. Pretty
> much. Sorry, that's how it will be. I promise you I will try to compensate this
> with images, "today's outfit" etc. It is understandable if some people think this
> boring, but actually I'd rather loose readers and have a private life than the other
> way around. (Blog 11 2009-03-16).

Here, the decision to protect one's private life is clearly set against the expectation that popularity requires sharing "personal stuff" with readers, and setting boundaries implies the risk of losing this position. The quote also illustrates how the bloggers seek to find ways of "compensating" for not sharing all of their personal life with readers. In this case, it is through showing *images* of one's personal life and oneself. Another strategy used by some of the bloggers was to develop a *style* that was personal but kept a distance to the "real" person, for example through using prose, humour or, as in this posting, irony:

> This is what it looks like at our place right now. Is it strange that one drinks?
> (Blog 4 2009-03-19).

A theme connected to the conventions of frequent updates is how the bloggers handle the possibility of getting some kind of economical compensation for their blogging. This is an issue frequently raised by readers, and in their answers several of the bloggers acknowledge the validation of themselves and their interests that this status gives, but they also assert their right to some kind of "payback". As one of the bloggers said in an interview:

> I feel that as much time as I spend on the blog I am worthy of getting something
> back, too, in terms of money (Blog 17 2009-11-12).

Nevertheless, as this posting shows, this decision too is something that bloggers feel they need to negotiate with their readers:

> Got a call with an offer that I thought I could only dream about. (…) At the same
> time as I feel that there is no reason to doubt, I still do. Blogg.se is the only place
> where I have blogged. Here I take care of everything myself and the blog is mine,

mine, mine. **And then I wonder about one thing:** – Would you come with me if I and the blog moved? (Blog 13 2009-04-19).

The posting illustrates the ambivalence of embracing the commercial possibilities of becoming a top-blogger. Cooperation with a web magazine or company has the advantage of financial rewards as well as increasing visibility and thereby the potential number of visitors. However, it may also restrict the blogger's control over her blog and compromise the connection with readers.

Intimacy and Popularity

As described earlier, an important characteristic of the blogs in this study is that they attract a large audience, visible primarily through the display of numbers of visitors on blog ranking sites. Seventeen of the bloggers linked less then one time per posting to other blogs, mainly to friends' blogs or sites for products and people they recommend in the blog. Thus, the bloggers' use of the blog for building social relationships primarily took place through comments, but also through inviting readers to post questions, followed by a presentation of selected questions and answers in the blog.

In general, the bloggers described the feedback from and community with readers as a positive experience, as illustrated in this postings:

> Reader question: What has changed since you became such a popular blogger?

> Blogger: I have become stronger and gained more self-confidence. And I thank you for that! (Blog 11 2009-03-01).

This second posting also illustrates the challenges of blogging about personal life to a large and diverse audience:

> The blog has strengthened my self-confidence a lot, believe it or not. Each day I become better at handling comments from people who don't like me, comments about my life and my looks. Along with this I have somehow gained insight, started to love myself even more (Blog 20 2008-07-01).

All of the bloggers, regardless of content or style, described experiences of negative commenting. As shown by the posting above, comments primarily seemed to criticize the bloggers' looks, lifestyle and values, such as being a bad role model, betraying their ideals, or boasting about their success. As described earlier, previous research on young female bloggers pointed to the tensions between building intimacy with close friends and ensuring acceptance in a larger social context of readers (Bortree 2005). The bloggers in this study communicate with a larger group than the blogs studied in this research. The negative comments show that popularity and professionalism, as well as the commercial side of blogging, challenge a relation between bloggers and readers built on intimacy and identification between friends. As expressed in this comment, this relation is challenged by suspicions that the blogger is not really a friend, but primarily concerned with attracting large numbers of visitors:

> you are not one of those blogging to be famous, are you? (Blog 13 2009-04-28).

Summarizing Discussion

The analysis in the previous sections has identified some of the characteristics of young female top-bloggers. This shows that they differ from previous studies of personal, primarily young female, bloggers mainly in terms of how their popularity enhances the public nature of their blogging, but also introduces professional and commercial aspects. What, then, is new about the phenomenon of young female top-bloggers? First of all, the popularity of these blogs shows how this phenomenon implies a possibility for at least some young women to express their interests and ideas to a larger public rather than in the private forms of diaries and peer groups. Their popularity, however, implies that their ability to use the blog as a free and safe space for self-expression is challenged. The bloggers' ways of asserting their personal life, interests and freedom of choice in their postings indicate this, as well as their negotiations with readers about boundaries of private life and time. The analysis thus shows how becoming a personal top-blogger entails a constant negotiation of the blog as a personal space.

This negotiation can be seen as a consequence of how personal top-bloggers challenge conventions of the genre of personal blogging. The analysis in the previous sections shows that all of the bloggers have to negotiate tensions between the conventions of personal content, frequent updates and an intimate relation to readers and the professional and commercial aspects of their blogging. This negotiation takes place through how the bloggers represent themselves through choice of topics and language use, and how they relate to their readers. Both of these strategies can be discussed in terms of the concept of blogging as a performance of self (cf. Butler 1990). This concept highlights how the self presented in a blog is a constructed identity that needs to relate to and pass by conventions structuring blogging as a communicative act, but also social and cultural conventions in a larger social context. As the analysis shows, a key aspect of this performance in the blogs is how they seek to integrate different aspects of their blogging by presenting themselves as "ordinary girls".

This concept should be perceived as an ideal constructed from the gender conventions found in society and culture. The analysis shows how the bloggers, in various ways, seek to present themselves by drawing on these gender conventions. This takes place by performing as an ordinary girl *like* the readers, and by performing as a *friend of* the readers. In the first case, by choosing topics and values conventionally associated with "femininity", such as fashion, beauty, family life and relationships, as well as by using informal, personalized and emotionally expressive language. In this way, the bloggers connect to the everyday life, dreams and ways of talking of "ordinary girls", at the same time as the blogs' character as a personal rather than professional project is strengthened through the connection to domains and discourses traditionally associated with a "private", feminine sphere. However, in contrast to the media stereotype of young women's blogs, the analysis shows that these blogs are not just reproducing conventions of femininity (cf. Doorn et al. 2007, p. 149). The bloggers writing about parties and social issues do not seek to integrate the commercial and professional aspects of blogging by drawing on conventional femininity in the same way. Their performance of self through the blog rather takes place by challenging these conventions and discourses in postings and language. Here, their emphasis on independence and freedom can be seen as a way of asserting their control over the blog, at the same time as the honesty and sensibility expressed in postings and the mix of different language styles can be seen as

a way of connecting to the everyday life and situation of "ordinary girls".

Theresa Senft, in her study of popular web-cam girls, discusses how the Web provides conditions for "micro-celebrity": "…a new style of online performance that involves people 'amping up' their popularity over the web…" (2008 p. 25-26). The micro-celebrity always negotiates "what she means – both as a person and a product – with those who see themselves as her customers, her friends, her detractors and her neighbours on the web" (ibid.). This negotiation is evident in the bloggers' performance of self in the blogs, but also in their ways of relating to their readers. The analysis shows how the position of top-blogger is established and maintained in cooperation with the interests of various audiences. While previous research has largely focused on the practices and patterns of linking (cf. Schmidt 2007; Herring et al. 2005 p.164), the present study thus brings out the importance of visits and comments for bloggers' position in the blogosphere. Based on recent surveys, we can assume that a large group of these readers are young women in the same age range as the bloggers, but their popularity also implies that other groups of readers visit the blogs. The bloggers' practices of inviting questions, answering comments, and sharing decisions with their readers show how they seek to handle this situation by establishing a relation to their readers as a friend; someone who values their opinions and whom they can identify with and trust. However, the analysis clearly shows that the identification and community that the bloggers seek to build with their readers, and that is the foundation of their position in the blogosphere, is brittle and have to be constantly maintained.

Conclusions

Young female "top-bloggers" represent a new phenomenon of blogging that also presents new questions for blogging research. Jill Rettberg Walker (2008, p. 20) defines blogs as a medium in which genres become constructed through how "…a blogger has chosen to work within the set of constraints and affordances offered by blogging software". Previous research has pointed out the popularity of blogs among young women in particular, and declared them "…key actors in the history and present use of weblogs" (Herring et al. 2004). The phenomenon of young female top-bloggers shows how young women can also become key actors in a future development of blogging. By analysing the challenges the popularity of these blogs introduces to the genre of personal blogs and how the bloggers handle these challenges, we can gain more insight into this development.

The present analysis highlights three aspects of these blogs that raise new questions concerning the practices and conventions of blogging. The first concerns the challenge that their popularity introduces in a ranking system of blogs that has thus far privileged filter type blogs and linking, and ignored the importance of personal blogs for understanding the personal as well as social significance of blogs. The second aspect concerns the commercialization of personal blogging that these blogs introduce through their cooperation with web-based companies and media. In 2005, Susan Herring and colleagues (2005, p. 163) discussed how blogs were being increasingly used for commercial purposes, and asked how this might threaten the degree of spontaneity, trust and intimate content. The characteristics of the blogs in focus here confirm this trend in blogging. However, the analysis shows that rather than decreasing this kind of content, young female top-bloggers emphasize intimacy, trust and spontaneity in their postings and contacts with

readers. The bloggers' use of this strategy as a way of maintaining connection to their readers corresponds to how commercial actors are increasing their interest in the "human voices" and communities of personal blogs (cf. Rettberg 2008, pp. 127f). Thus, on the one hand, this strategy may further the integration of interpersonal and commercial aspects of blogging. On the other hand, with regard to the third and final aspect, the professionalization of these young female bloggers – in terms of how their popularity enables them to more or less make a living out of their blogging – introduces a new possibility for young women to become active subjects by telling the story of their life and present experiences, thoughts and competences, all of which have been seen as private and petty in mainstream culture and society (Nordberg & Edström 2006). Thus, integration of popular, professional, commercial and personal aspects of blogging among the young female top-bloggers identified in the present article can be seen as an attempt to gain back some agency in a society where web-based media and commercialization have become an integrated part of constructing identities and social relations. The popularity of blogs among young women of the same age as these bloggers also indicates that these blogs are becoming a new kind of public space for reflections and negotiations of identities, values and gender (cf. Scott Sørensen 2009; Bell 2007, pp. 96, 108).

The present article has shown how young female top-bloggers challenge the conventions of personal blogs, but also work *within* and negotiate these in order to integrate the new aspects that their popularity introduces. The strategies identified in the analysis illustrate how the position of being a personal top-blogger is gained and maintained in a constant negotiation with commercial interests as well as readers. The bloggers' identification with "ordinary girls" also shows how young female top-bloggers negotiate, and thereby bring out, a connection between the genre and gender conventions in personal blogs. Performing a self through the blog that bridges blogging as well as gender conventions seems to be the key to ensuring authenticity as well as a position as a personal and popular blogger.

Notes

1. "Blog" is a short form of "weblog" (Rettberg 2008, p. 17) and by now the most frequent term used in the literature on blogging.
2. The overall community of blogs and bloggers formed through connections between individual blog entries (cf. Bruns & Jacobs 2006a, p. 5).
3. The sample was chosen on the basis of ranking on 27 January 2009.
4. Bloggportalen indexed more than 42,600 blogs registered at this portal. Knuff.se indexed appr. 120,700 blogs registered at bloggar.se (Dec 2008). The sample is composed of the 50 top blogs of each of the six categories listed by these portals. A control of overlapping and inactive blogs reduced the actual number of 300 to 185 blogs.
5. The blogs were coded according to information given about the blogger: sex, age, occupation, "private" or "professional" purpose of blogging, and the blog: individual or collectively written, blog ranking site, genre, subject category, frequency of posts, comments, visits, inbound and outbound links and inclusion of photos (cf. Doorn, Zoonen, & Wyatt 2007, p. 148; Herring et al. 2005). Analysis of frequencies for each variable and cross-tabulations for the variable "gender" and every other variable were carried out using SPSS statistical software.
6. 33.5 percent of the bloggers reported their age to be between 16-29 years, 15 percent between 30-40 years and 9 percent over 40 years. 40.5 percent of the bloggers did not disclose their age.
7. 50 percent present themselves as female and 37 percent as men. 17 percent could not be categorized, and 1.6 percent were collectively written by men and women.
8. Women wrote 52 percent and men 32 percent of the personal blogs. Six of the eight filter blogs were written by men.

9   65 percent of blogs with less than the median value of 94 links were managed by women and 35 percent by men. Mean value of links registered monthly by bloggar.se 2009-01-27.

10. Comments on all posts 2009-01-27. Median value 20 comments per day.

11. The blogs have been continuously observed since February 2009. Postings and comments during four weeks in February, March, April and May have been collected and complemented with occasional postings that generated several comments or illustrate salient themes.

12. Number of visits reported by bloggportalen.se. Median value 28,000 visits 2009-01-27. These figures, however, do not account for the fact that the same visitor may have been counted several times. Ratings by Dagens Media (2009-04-02, www.dagensmedia.se) estimate the number of visitors to half or a third of these figures.

13. All the bloggers were informed, via e-mail, about the purpose of the project and the use of data. All the bloggers except one reveal their first names in their blog. In order to protect the bloggers anonymity, however, I will refer to the blogs quoted and used as examples using numbers and posting dates.

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