**Behind the Blog:**

The Connection Between Online Social Media Personas and Reader Perspectives

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Abstract

Our means of online communication have shifted over the decades—from email to instant messaging to social media networks, particularly weblogs (commonly known as blogs). There are various reasons why people are motivated to blog, including life documentation, personal commentary and the desire for human connectivity. This research project explores how individuals living in Western countries who follow unique – or “unconventional” – lifestyles use online blogs to develop their social media personas and share their lifestyles with other people (their followers/readers), and the perceptions that their readers have of these blogs and lifestyles. Using the concepts of co-orientation and grounded theory, I conducted a blog analysis of three different blogs and examined the relationships between bloggers and their readers, and how influential the blogs were in changing the readers’ perceptions of the bloggers’ lifestyles. The bloggers include a traveler-entrepreneur, a writer who quit his day job to be a full-time blogger and professional speaker, and an individual with a physical disability, respectively. Reader comments were mostly positive; overall, the bloggers had a positive effect on the readers’ perceptions of them and even influenced some readers to explore the same lifestyles. Future research should focus more on relationships between individual bloggers and readers rather than overall trends and interaction patterns.

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I would also like to thank the online blogging community for teaching me about the merits of social media and the beauty of human connectivity in a digital age. As an avid blogger since 2010, I’ve always been fascinated by the relationships that are formed over the Internet between strangers who discover that they have a lot in common. It has been both a challenge and a pleasure to study a topic that I’m incredibly passionate about and that has helped shape my identity as a journalist and as an individual for the last several years.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

By nature, people are social creatures. We are constantly inventing new technology – particularly the Internet – that makes us feel more connected to others. In today’s digital age, social media has rapidly become the “go-to” communication tool. We constantly use social networks including Facebook, online journaling platforms such as Blogger and microblogs like Twitter to update and share our day-to-day lives with the click of a “share” button. Photos, videos and text posts become instantly published for the world to see and judge.

There are many motives why people – especially adolescents and young adults, who have been at the forefront of social media use – choose to collaborate via blogs, including but not limited to: life documentation, personal commentary on a variety of topics, development of a community forum, and occupation of an online space in which to muse (Smith & O’Neill, 2012). Additionally, incentives like increased connectivity to other people as well as belonging to social groups may encourage online users to keep blogging and posting comments under posts (Brady, 2005; Ahn & Shin, 2013). Individuals who use social media networks to reduce feelings social isolation tend to exacerbate that isolation, however, because they spend more time online and less time engaging in face-to-face communication with others (Kim Larose, & Peng, 2009). Research has shown that people with positive collective self-esteem often use social networks like Facebook to interact with peers, while people with negative collective self-esteem and felt disconnected from their peer groups may use such websites for social compensation and social identity gratifications (Barker, 2009). In other words, they go to social media websites in search for peer groups they do feel a part of – to feel a sense of “belonging.”

The extent to which social media affects people’s lives is significant, at least compared to when it was first being utilized as a communication tool. Many people have made blogging a regular hobby and even a career, writing posts and generating so much feedback from readers that the blog soon becomes more of a business as they incorporate advertisements to their personal websites and begin to offer side products like e-books.

Inevitably, the use of social media will lead to the establishment of online personas, depending on what type of networks or platforms are being used. Carl Jung, father of analytical psychology, called the false side of ourselves that we show to others “the persona,” or mask; in other words, “the persona is that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is” (Jung & Hull, 1980). Thus, the development of this persona may be totally subconscious – people may develop their personas without even realizing it due to underlying social pressures or personal expectations. Carl Jung’s definition of persona is applicable both to face-to-face reality and to the Internet, where people often create an image of their identity for others to observe and judge for themselves. Through their social media personas, online users develop a mental image of who they are or perceived to be by other online users that may be different and more desired by peers than the personas they portray in off-line environments, like at work or school (Gotta, 2007). As social media becomes more popular and widely accepted within society, its use – at the workplace, at home on a lazy Sunday, over lunch with a friend – will also become a type of social norm. There are not only individual motivations for using social media to connect with others, but social media use will also be expected in our daily lives. It already is.

Without even realizing it, social media users must decide what content to share – what they want others to see – and not to share, depending on the kind of image they want to project. In general, we want to feel good about ourselves and the lives we are pursuing; our online profiles seek to portray exactly that, even if it’s a warped view of reality. As we rack up the number of Facebook Likes, retweets and positive comments on our blog posts, it feels like we’re meeting the arbitrary socially acceptable standards of what it means to be entertaining or happy. Our online popularity and rate of human connectivity increase, and so do our egos.

The more we post about ourselves online, the more we come to develop online personas for ourselves that may or may not be reflective of our self-perceived identities or lifestyles. In particular, people who are perceived as unique or “deviant” – possessing a characteristic or habit that is out of societal norm – may likely be misunderstood online if their reader populations do not follow or aren’t familiar with their lifestyles. This holds true for people who practice unconventional lifestyles that others may not understand or accept easily (e.g. traveling on foot for a living and relying on the kindness of strangers for necessary provisions like food, shelter and Internet access). However, the way that online readers perceive original posters depends on several factors, including: online personal brand, quality and frequency of both content and comments posted, and makeup of the readership.

The purpose of this research study is to find out how online bloggers and their readers/followers perceive each other when they use social media networks as the primary tool for communication. This study serves as an exploratory analysis of the relationships between social media producers and consumers using the theory of co-orientation, which looks at how two or more individuals – or social groups – interact as well as perceive and orient toward one another’s thoughts about a mutual interest. In particular, the study focuses on individuals who follow unique lifestyles and use online blogs (excluding micro-blogs like Twitter) specifically to share or document their lifestyles with other people who may not necessarily follow the same lifestyles. Rather than testing theories, the analysis was based off of the concept of grounded theory: social media data was collected first, and then theories and observations were made depending on the patterns found embedded within the data. This isn’t just a study about social media, but how a certain group of people use social media to construct their own identities online and how their online audiences interpret those identities through the development of perceptions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

*Online social media personas*

Our means of online communication have shifted over the decades—from email to instant messaging to social media networks, such as Facebook and weblogs (commonly known as blogs). Blogs in particular primarily serve as online publishing platforms, with newer posts typically shown at the top of the web page and then older posts displayed in a reverse chronological order (Brady, 2005). As one of the fastest growing communication tools, blogging allows people to share ideas and build upon each other’s knowledge through online journaling (Drexler, Dawson & Ferdig, 2007). This social communication tool often incorporates commenting systems in which blog followers can leave responses to a blog post, possibly facilitating a dialogue with the original poster (OP). Obviously, commenting systems help to maximize the communication aspect of blogs because a dialogue can be facilitated between the blogger and his or her readers. But even without the commenting systems, blogs are a powerful tool of communication because the blog content almost always gets disseminated among the public blogosphere.

Research suggests that blog readers will often take the information they learn from online blogs and incorporate it into their current lives, either practically or by mentally changing their perceptions of the world. A study by Drexler, Dawson and Ferdig (2007) showed that when third-graders used collaborative blogs with their teachers and college reader-partners to complete an essay and online history presentation for class, the students showed a more positive attitude toward writing. Receiving each new comment from their college partner produced and sustained the students’ motivation throughout the project. This suggests that it was the collaboration, rather than the blogging technology itself, that led to the positive change in attitude (Drexler, Dawson & Ferdig, 2007). Additionally, the study also showed that the third-graders applied the historical knowledge they learned from peers’ blogs to other aspects of classroom learning. Students learned about different Native American cultures from browsing the different blogs, and then shared the information with each other at recess, building models of villages and comparing facts and drawing new conclusions (Drexler, Dawson & Ferdig, 2007).

*A closer look at “unconventional” lifestyles*

While there is that societal tendency to follow the norms and form social groups, what about people who deliberately take the “other” fork in the road? These are the individuals whom society labels “deviants” and who violate cultural and societal norms (Macionis, 2011). Rather than conforming, or reaching culturally respectable goals through socially acceptable ways, these individuals find new ways of challenging the status quo. Normally when we think of deviance, negative examples may come to mind such as crime, disability or extremist views. But deviation from the crowd can also be associated with positive or neutral attributes, including overzealousness and a particularly gregarious nature (Macionis, 2011). Most deviants are like any other people, however, and naturally seek human connectivity; thus, they may look toward each other for identification within a social group. Additionally, the desire for human connectivity can be fulfilled by either close one-on-one relationships or collective relationships as part of a member within a group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Brewer, 2007; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999). Thus, even though deviants may be excluded from the larger population, the close relationships they have with relatives, long-time friends or similarly deviant individuals may substitute for collective relationships and group identification.

Although deviants, by definition, make up a small percentage of the population, the idea of non-conformity is nothing new. According to French sociologist Emile Durkheim, deviance is – unlike the normative view – a normal component of civilization that plays a key role in moving toward a more progressive society: the encouragement of social change (Durkheim, 1982). Rock-and-roll and hip hop, both of which were once considered immoral and unacceptable genres of music, have since become mainstream (Macionis, 2011). The advocacy of the LGBTQ movement has led to a gradual acceptance of homosexuality and an open discussion about gender identity. Today, movements like “The Anti 9-to-5 Guide” (Goodman, 2007) push for new ways of defining personal success and reaching goals that are independent of social expectations. Without deviant groups of people constantly challenging the status quo, society would always remain in a stagnant position. Innovation wouldn’t exist, and new potential ideas of how to improve the quality of life would be lost or never found (Macionis, 2011).

Like most people, individuals who fall within the “deviant label” can easily construct personas for themselves – both online and offline. Since they possess, by definition, one or more characteristics that are out of the norm, deviants easily draw attention from the rest of the population, and especially the media, to themselves. Sometimes, they become a part of the media. In October 2013, *The Huffington Post* published an article that featured three friends who quit their jobs, traveled across the country for two months, and uploaded a video to Vimeo.com chronicling their trip in photographs (Goodman, 2013). While taking a gap year between college and graduate school to travel the world is a bit more common, quitting a steady job to travel with your friends is not. Still, *The Huffington Post* called it turning a “dream into a reality,” and one commenter of the article admitted to being jealous of their freedom to explore nature; specifically, the comment stated: “I am so jealous. Growing up with summer travels every single year, has left me knowing enough to want to know more of our nation’s hills, mountains…” (Goodman, 2013).

By contrast, *Jezebel* posted the article, “Quitting Your Job to Be a Full-Time Mom Is Probably a Bad Idea,” arguing that mothers who choose the “true June Cleaver stay-at-home-mom smiling-serenely-while-scrubbing-the-grout-in-pearls vocation” will inevitably become bored with their lives or feel resentment toward their husbands; then, when re-entering the workforce, they are faced with lower status and less income (Ryan, 2013). Clearly, it’s not just the deviant act or characteristic itself —it’s also about how these individuals and the media interpret different kinds of deviance and project the personas of such deviance to the world.

Deviation varies depends on geographic region and culture, and is defined by invisible parameters that society has established within its structure (Macionis, 2011). Traditionally speaking, the conventional way of life in many cultures, including Western culture, is to obtain a degree in higher education at a four-year university with the hope that this degree will lead to a stable, well-paying job that follows the typical 9 AM to 5 PM work schedule. During non-work hours, time may be spent on other leisure activities like enjoying happy hour, shopping at the mall, decorating the home, dining at fancy restaurants and surfing the Internet on multiple digital devices. Money – and thus consumerism of tangible goods and services such as a nice car and vacation homes – is the root of what people believe to be the end goal toward the pursuit of happiness and personal success (Assadourian, 2010).

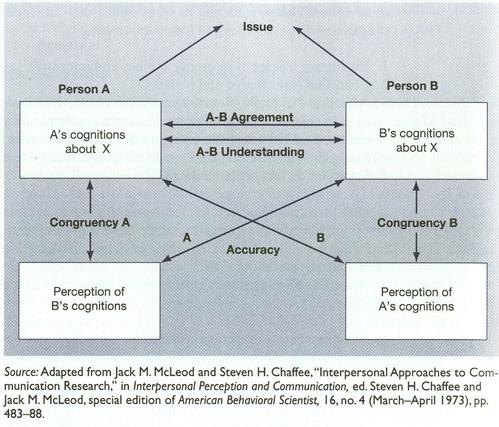
Increasing, however, is the notion that people don’t necessarily have to follow a conventional lifestyle to find meaning in their lives. Some may not buy the idea that they need a diploma to feel successful. Others don’t want to sit behind a desk at the mercy of a higher-level employer for eight hours a day, seven days a week, counting down until it’s finally Friday. This particular study focuses on individuals termed ‘no-9-to-5ers,” or people who live on their own terms rather than others’ such that they don’t follow the typical 9-to-5 work schedule. Instead, they work at their own pace and choose what to do with their 24 hours each day. This group of people is one out of many deviant groups who strive to challenge and experiment with ideas of what it means to be in the pursuit of a happy life.

*Co-orientation theory*

An important concept that was heavily relied on throughout the course of this study was the theory of co-orientation, which looks at how accurately people perceive one another and how congruent their beliefs are on a topic. This theory focuses on the parallelism of different individuals’ or groups’ perceptions of any given topic or “object of mutual interest.” Several factors can influence perceptions or opinions, including pertinence of the topic, salience – which is determined by the person’s previous encounters with said topic – and relevance to the person (Cutlip, Center, & Bromm, 1985).

If orientation involves a person’s perceptions or opinions about a particular topic or situation as well as others’ perceptions about the same “object of mutual interest,” then co-orientation is a state in which two or more people are focused on, or oriented to, that object (Cutlip, Center, & Bromm, 1985). Co-orientation is often assessed by looking at the levels of agreement and understanding between two or more parties on their perceptions of the object or issue at hand, the amount of accuracy with which one party perceives the other’s opinions, and the degree of congruency between the two parties’ estimates of the other’s views; see Fig. 1 (Cutlip, Center, & Bromm, 1985).

**Figure 1: Co-orientation Model**



Source: Taken from *Effective Public Relations* by Cutlip, Scott M., Allen H. Center, and Glen M. Broom. 8th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985.

A person’s attitude takes a person’s opinion a step further by incorporating reaction as well. According to Crespi (1997), having a certain attitude based on previous experiences and pre-knowledge compels a person to act a certain way toward the object. Such acts may be expressed on the basis of personal interests or beliefs, thoughts (cognition), feelings (affection), personal interests or beliefs. Inevitably, the way people perceive others’ opinions about a particular topic will influence the way they act toward one another.

In this study, the comments of multiple blog readers of each respective blog were analyzed in order to understand the relationship between these readers and the blogger. Blog readers’ attitudes toward the blog topic were revealed through the comments they posted on the blogs; bloggers’ attitudes toward their blog topics were revealed through the content of their blogs. The level of perceived agreement between the two parties was determined based on the readers’ comments and perceived attitude toward the content of the blog. Ideally, the degree of co-orientation can be assessed by looking at both parties’ perceptions of each other’s opinions on a topic as well as their reactions to each other. Because the bloggers didn’t always reply or react to the readers’ comments, perceived agreement couldn’t be confirmed and co-orientation couldn’t be thoroughly analyzed. Readers already familiar with the blogger’s unique lifestyle were thought to have a higher degree of co-orientation with the blogger as opposed to readers who have little knowledge of the topic.

*Grounded Theory*

This study is based on grounded theory, a methodology in which “theory evolves during actual research” rather than before the study begins (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Introduced in 1967 by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded theory emerges from the idea of engaging in inductive reasoning, or gleaning theories, concepts and ideas from thorough analysis of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The principle behind grounded theory lies in open-mindedness and flexibility – that is, the world is constantly changing; consequentially, data can be volatile and affect research design (Bailey, White, & Pain, 1999; McCallin, 2003). Most research using grounded theory has focused on sociology, though other fields that have used this methodology include psychology, business, education, public health and anthropology; thus, grounded theory is flexible and applicable to multiple disciplines. It is important to note that study rooted in grounded theory should analyze relationships between different theories that are generated from the data, and should answer the questions, “What is going on there and how?” with the emphasis on “how” (Becker, 1993). Two things should be happening during data collection: both analyses and theories – either original or preexisting– are constantly developed, modified and refined throughout the process (Becker, 1993). Data collection may come in the form of interviews, field observations and primary source documents (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Additionally, other procedures and methodologies may be paired with grounded theory to ensure that the backbone of the study is sharp and effective, including concept-related questions, coding procedures, and “suggested guidelines for attaining conceptual ‘density,’ variation, and conceptual integration” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). For the purpose of this study, data included blog content, including text posts on blogs and blog reader comments. Although this study relied primarily on data collections to create theories and analyses, basic knowledge about the structure and function of social media networks (posting schedules, commenting systems, etc.) was required to create initial expectations and an understanding of what to look for during data collection. Thus, broad coding schemes – such as a Likert scale for reader comments and measures of various blog statistics including number of followers – were created and used as tentative guidelines for data collection procedures.

Grounded theory was chosen as the best methodology for this study because it is difficult to test theories when the data – in this case, blog content and reader comments – can be unpredictable. This study was conducted based on the assumption that the results may be unexpected, and that new theories about the relationship between bloggers and blog readers may emerge or evolve as more data is collected and analyzed.

*Justification*

The relevance of this study to modern day society cannot be emphasized enough. Europe and the Americas are the two most Internet-active countries in the world, and more than 2.7 billion people in the world – that’s 39% of the world’s population – are using the Internet as of 2013 (International Telecommunications Union). Additionally, United States has the most bloggers in the entire world at 30 percent, which is more than four times as many bloggers as there are in the second most blog-active country, the United Kingdom (Sysomos.com, June 2010). With blogging becoming more and more popular every year, it’s important to understand how this tool of communication and expression plays a role in the way individuals share their lifestyles and form relationships with other people whom they don’t get to meet in ‘real life.’ This study in particular will help to fill gaps in our understanding of the role of social media in creating connections between online users. No prior research has been done on how people with unconventional lifestyles use social media to create their online personas.

*Research questions/hypotheses*

The following research question has been proposed for this study: What is the connection between people's online social media personas and the way readers perceive them to be? This study focuses particularly on people who practice unconventional lifestyles, or ‘no-9-to-5ers,’ or people who are always on-the-go or work from home and don’t follow the traditional 9-to-5 work schedule. Case studies include a traveler-entrepreneur who blogs about traveling to every country in the world; a full-time writer who quit his day job to write, blog and speak professionally for a career; and an individual who lives with a physical disability.

This study aims to find out how they use blogs to create an online identity, or persona, for themselves and share their unusual lifestyles with others. This study also examines the reactions of their respective blog readers, particularly those who aren’t as familiar with the lifestyles – do they reject these unique lifestyles, or are they open to them? What sort of blog posts lead to certain positive or negative reactions? What is the relationship between these online personas and readers’ perceptions of these personas? The results of this project could potentially bring to light the limitations of social media, people’s motivations for using social media, the role of social media in promoting the ‘no-9-to-5’ lifestyle and the evolving societal expectations or standards of how we live as individuals.

Chapter 3: Method

This project focuses on the case studies of three individuals who fall into the “unconventional lifestyles,” or “no-9-to-5er,” category and meet certain criteria (see below).

By looking at select few individual situations, I was able to track changes and patterns in their social media personas and readers’ reactions over time; additionally, the individuals’ respective unique lifestyles and online blogs were studied in-depth. Clearly, the behaviors of just a few individuals can’t be generalized to the entire group of ‘no-9-to-5ers,’ much less the entire population; however, these case studies serve as an excellent precursor to further research on the impact of social media on people’s lives.

These individuals to be studied met the following criteria:

(1) They don’t have a job that follows the typical 9-to-5 workday schedule OR they possess an unusual characteristic or practice a unique lifestyle that 80 percent of the U.S. or U.K. populations don’t follow

(2) They regularly use an online blog to share the day-to-day details of practicing their

unique lifestyle with other people. Examples of people who do not count include vegetarians and people who practice unique lifestyles but do not use a blog to share their lifestyles with others.

Choosing case studies also depended on the nature of their blogs as well as the makeup of their readership. In order to qualify as a potential case study, individuals must currently practice a unique lifestyle or have practiced such a lifestyle within the past six months. If it’d been longer than six months since they practiced the unconventional lifestyles, it was possible that readers may have forgotten what they originally thought about the bloggers at the time of lifestyle practice – thereby skewing the interview data.

After extensively searching a wide array of online blogs and taking into consideration all of the criteria above, three online bloggers who fall into the ‘no-9-to-5’ category were ultimately chosen as subjects for this study. All blogs were found and identified on the Internet through various sources, such as blog aggregators, popular news websites and other blogs that were already known to me. Other factors that helped determine which blogs will be chosen to be of interest include average number of posts per month, average number of comments and basic blog post content. This was to ensure that bloggers that fit the above criteria but don't keep up with their blog or don't allow for comments to be posted on their blog are filtered out.

For the purpose of convenience and consistency, all bloggers are referred to throughout the rest of the paper as Blogger #1, Blogger #2 and Blogger #3. Specific readers are also vaguely referred to by first names if they’re provided in the online, public comments. Even though disclosure of the identities of these individuals would be inconsequential since the blog posts and comments quoted throughout the paper are publicly available and easily accessible online, I have chosen not to refer to them by their personal names in order to preserve the scientific professionalism of the paper’s content and to minimize bias on the reader's end.

The first blogger that was chosen as a subject of interest is a traveler-entrepreneur from America who blogs regularly about his personal mission to travel to every country in the world at least once. Blogger #1 was chosen for his dedication to “the art of non-conformity,” the title of his blog and the core of what ‘no-9-to-5’ is all about. Additionally, the concept of traveling as part of a career instead of settling down in one place has become increasingly popular, and I believed that an analysis on this blog and its readers contributes to our knowledge and understanding of how Americans today view the “traveling for a living” style.

Blogger #2 was chosen because of the decision he made to quit his day job in order to pursue his ultimate passion: writing. Now, he is a full-time writer, blogger and professional inspirational speaker in America. He is a testament to the idea that an individual can merge work and play, and have a job that is both sustainable and creative. His blog also peaked interest because of his tendency to write in the second voice and address the readers in a sermon-like manner in order to remind them of their worth and talent as human beings – which has strong implications about blogger motivations and the psychology behind blogger-reader relationships.

Finally, the third blogger was chosen for the nature of her unique lifestyle: disability. Unlike the other two bloggers, Blogger #3 did not voluntarily choose her circumstances – they cannot be helped; additionally, her disability is an individual characteristic rather than an unconventional career path. She uses her blog both as an outlet of expression and as a way to spread disability awareness with her readers. Blogger #3 serves as an interesting subject because her blog is less rooted in business and making money, but more focused on opinions and experiences related to physical disability simply for the sake of sharing and participating in the online marketplace of ideas.

Factors that influence and shape the relationships between the readers and online bloggers were the primary focal point of this study; for instance, how long the readers have followed the blog determined their familiarity with the blogger and his or her unique lifestyle. The connection between the blogger’s online persona and the reader’s perspective is presumably stronger if the readers have followed the blog for a long period of time, say, for more than a year. I looked for blogs that, ideally, amass several comments a day and have a relatively large follower base (at least 50 blog readers); this ensured a wide and varied pool of readers.

Data was collected by conducting an initial analysis of each online blog based on grounded theory. The following served as initial measurements to take into account: number of followers, average number of comments, and average number of posts per month. The posts of each blog were first skimmed, since all the blogs covered a variety of topics on different days, personal anecdotes and blog events that didn’t necessarily have to do with the main theme or the bloggers’ lifestyles. Then the blog posts that focused more on the blogger’s lifestyle were read more thoroughly for content. Reader comments were then gleaned from the most note-worthy blog posts that best demonstrated the overall themes of the blog and the blogger’s writing style. Reader comments were rated on a positive/negative Likert scale of 1-5 (1 = “Get a real job!” and 5 = “What you’re doing is so cool! Best of luck!”). Comments exhibiting particularly strong opinions – either positive or negative – were of greater interest and more likely to be included in the analysis. These judgments were made only by me, and were helpful in developing the analysis of the three bloggers and their audiences.

Chapter 4: Results & Discussion

This study looked at three different online blogs that are authored by three individual people living in America and the United Kingdom who follow unique lifestyles – a traveler-entrepreneur, a writer who quit his day job to become a full-time blogger and professional speaker, and a person who lives with a physical disability that requires her to use an electric wheelchair (see Table 1 for specific background facts and statistics).

**Table 1: Blogger Backgrounds**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Blogger** | **Mission/Lifestyle** | **Themes** | **Blogging Since…** | **# Readers** | **Blog Habits** |
| **#1** | Traveler-entrepreneur, “fighter of status quo”; mission is to visit every country in the world | Business, travel, start-ups, “non-conformity” | 2009 | 100,000+ readers (according to blogger) | Doesn’t respond to readers |
| **#2** | Quit day-job to be a full-time writer, blogger and professional inspirational speaker | Christianity, humanistic writing style | 2006 | 200,000+ readers (according to blogger) | Occasionally responds to readers |
| **#3** | Individual who lives with a physical disability; must use an electric wheelchair | Stream-of-consciousness writing style, disabilities | 2005 | 73 readers (according to Feedly.com) | Occasional swearing; hosts/participates in “blog hops,” often centered around disability awareness |

The first two bloggers use their online platforms to share not only their day-to-day lifestyles, but also to give advice to their readers about how to pursue similar lifestyles. Blogger #3, however, typically uses her blog to share her personal opinions about various social issues – such as health care in the United Kingdom and disability awareness – as well as document her life experiences.

Interestingly, Blogger #3 has only 73 readers according to Feedly.com (as of April 18, 2014), whereas Bloggers #1 and #2 both have significantly larger follower bases of more than 100,000 readers each (Blogger #2 specifically has more than 200,000 readers). It should be noted that the number of followers for the latter were self-reported on their blogs, while Blogger #3’s number of followers is based solely on Feedly.com, a customizable blog aggregator, and doesn’t take into account people who are not subscribed to Blogger #3 via Feedly.com or Google Friend Connect but still read Blogger #3’s blog. Differences in the number of followers as well as writing styles have significant implications about blogger motivations. Blogger #1 and #2 use a more professional writing style as well as marketing tactics to maximize their readership and site activity, while Blogger #3 has little to no monetary incentive to write posts.

*Blogger #1*

The first blogger is an American traveler-entrepreneur who makes money off of his blog, which chronicles his mission to visit every country in the world and teach others how to live without having to follow social norms or expectations of what it means to live meaningfully. Over the years, his blog has expanded to include multiple successful books that have made the *New York Times* Bestseller List and what he calls “Unconventional Guides” for readers to make the most of their travel, work and life passions. Blogger #1 calls himself “fighter of the status quo,” and his blog posts often detail his experiences of visiting at least 25 countries a year, going on book tours and working with start-up companies (see Appendix A, pg. 43-46).

On his blog, Blogger #1 discusses various aspects within the “art of non-conformity,” such as living the simple life with just enough income to meet one’s needs, rather than earning as much as possible – a concept he calls “sufficiency.” In his blog post where he talks about sufficiency, Blogger #1 writes, “Some people assume that choosing to be content with a limited income naturally limits my choices as well. The perception seems to be that I have given up more income to obtain a more simple life. In some cases, this is true – I’ve made more money in the past than I do now, and I regularly choose to pass on opportunities to increase my income so that I can focus on building my writing career. However, as true as that is, it’s not really the whole story. To get the whole story, I have to say honestly that I don’t feel limited at all. Most of the time, I do what I want with very few limits.” He goes on to say, “Would I accept more money if it fell down from the sky? Yes, of course. Free money is good. However, would I walk very far to pick it up? No, probably not. I haven’t taken any vows of poverty, and I believe that making money is generally a good thing. It’s just that I’m more interested in thinking about what happens with the money.” Blogger #1 admits he is neither rich nor poor, but that’s the way he prefers it – he says he “couldn’t go out and buy a castle,” but at the same time, he’s “not limited in the life experiences I value.”

This particular blog post generated 106 responses from thoughtful readers, many of whom shared their own perspectives on sufficiency in detailed comments. One reader who identified as Brandon W. commented, “This is an excellent post and I believe it will help clarify the concept of ‘enough’ for quite a few people. Americans spent the past 10-15 years forgetting when to say ‘enough’; and started measuring their self-worth by how much (newer, faster, sexier, better) stuff they could accumulate. We fell into the trap of equating ‘’quality of life’ with ‘quantity in life.’” Such a comment shows that Brandon W. is willing to interpret and challenge the status quo of American consumerism. Another reader named Nathan H. shared his thoughts: “Sure, I’d love to make a billion dollars, but not if it requires 60 hour workweeks and time away from my wife and my children. We can’t take it with us and there are more important things to be worried about. If I could live the life of a monk and still do what I enjoyed, that would be enough for me…now there’s an idea!” This comment shows that Nathan is open to the idea of embracing an unconventional lifestyle himself – living the life of a monk – and that there are more important things than a 9-to-5 job. It is interesting to note that several other readers went on to describe their personal living situations, their careers and their experiences with sufficiency – even personal struggles with finance. This shows just how comfortable these many readers are with sharing their stories with Blogger #1, often using his first name in comments and writing to him as if he were a wise friend and confidante, despite the fact that Blogger #1 never replies to their comments.

Even if Blogger #1 may not see all of the comments, readers know that *other* readers who are commenting after them may end up reading what they wrote – an interesting dynamic (the relationship between readers and other readers) that wasn’t originally considered before. In fact, there are several instances where readers state at the beginning of their comments, “I agree with all the other comments that people have made” (which very clearly suggests agreement between perceptions, a key facet of co-orientation theory) or “It’s great to see so many people commenting and tweeting about this.” Thus, readers are paying attention to not only blogger behavior, but the behavior of readers and how other people are reacting to the blogger. These reader-reader relationships – an observation that I did not expect to find or originally even considered to be a part of the analysis – create a new type of community on a single blog in which the blogger doesn’t reply to comments, so readers look to each other for validation, responsiveness and even belonging.

It is unclear whether the absence of Blogger #1 in his own comment section is meant to be a part of his online social media persona as a professional, aloof traveler-entrepreneur or is a result of a busy schedule and a lack of time to respond to comments. Either way, his absence doesn’t seem to upset or disappoint readers; indeed, the comments keep coming every time he posts. So why do the readers return to the blog and continue to provide feedback even if it’s not reciprocated? There are several potential reasons that could be further analyzed in a separate study. One, it’s possible that his readers continue to write long and deeply insightful comments because the simple act of sharing their own thoughts provides them with a space to engage in self-awareness. Two, perhaps Blogger #1 comes across as a genuine enough person in his blog posts that people feel like they can identify with him and keep up a blogger-reader relationship even if he doesn’t respond individually to each of them. Three, Blogger #1 might be using specific blogging tactics, such as asking questions or providing prompts at the end of his blog posts, to attract readers’ attention and make them believe he cares about their comments. For example, in a mid-2008 blog post titled, “Ever Feel Like Giving Up?,” Blogger #1 talks about his personal struggles with making little money, feeling lonely during his travels, and dealing with critics. He then provides a “4-step encouragement mantra for the journey,” and then ends with some discussion questions for the readers: “Speaking of that [not giving up], how about you over there on the other side of the screen? How do you keep going when you feel like giving up?” This blog post – the 8th most popular article on the blog – received more than 230 comments, most of which directly answer these questions. One reader named Cheng wrote, “Truth be told, when things get rough, I usually give up. Not forever though.” Another reader named Ari K. said, “The thought crosses my mind daily. But then, I remind myself that when it comes to my lifework, the ONLY thing I can do is wrong, is to quit.” By addressing the reader as the person who is “on the other side of the screen,” Blogger #1 is acknowledging not necessarily a limit, but an unavoidable feature of internet relationships; his discussion question, “How do you keep going when you feel like giving up?” seems to imply that he cares about the readers’ experiences and feelings, and wants to hear about them despite not being able to have an offline connection.

*Blogger #2*

The second blogger is an American writer who quit his day job to become a full-time writer, blogger and professional inspirational speaker. In several blog posts about passion and writing, he refers to his accomplishment of obtaining more than 100,000 blog followers in two years. According to himself, Blogger #2 began blogging in 2006, so it is assumed that he reached 100,000 followers by 2008 and has gained another 100,000 followers since then.

Blogger #2 adopts a humanistic writing style – he writes directly to the readers, uplifting them with stories of personal transformation, lessons of the day and sermons written in the second-person narrative voice, all of which are aimed at giving hope for readers who need the extra boost of motivation to follow their own dreams as well (see Appendix B, pg. 47-50). His posts are both anecdotal and educational, and often incorporate a how-to list or even a life lesson. Blogger #2 also tries to come across as a humble, selfless and empathetic human being; one of his more recent blog posts, which generated 86 comments, was titled, “The Gift of Giving: Why I Do Favors and Don’t Expect Anything in Return.” In the blog post, he writes: “What I do know is that when you help enough people, when you put your work out there in the world and try not to be stingy with it, the world has a way of rewarding such generosity” – indicating that he knows there is some personal gain that comes after giving something away. Still, he makes sure to revert back to that selfless persona and says, “In order to help people, I have to say no sometimes. A lot, actually. It’s hard, and I hate it, but I remind myself that when I say no to someone, it means I can say yes to someone else.” He ends with two rules in particular that solidify this persona: “Help as many people as you can,” and “Expect nothing in return. Help them just because you care and don’t obsess over the results.”

Naturally, these two rules of generosity supposedly reflect the personality of Blogger #2; after all, people usually give advice that they endorse and apply to their own lives, or at least would like to. It’s possible that Blogger #2 might be strategically writing these posts and giving this advice so readers see him as the type of generous person he coaches them to be, contributing to the development of his overall social media persona as a giving, caring and humble individual. However, it cannot be said for sure whether Blogger #2 is truly this selfless-minded as a person.

Reader comments for Blogger #2 are overwhelmingly positive. On the very first blog post Blogger #2 ever published, one reader commented: “Good introductory post, [Blogger #2]. Seems that I'm just addicted to your blog. Thus decided to read it from the beginning...1 post every day.” This suggests that fans of the blog may be curious to learn more about how Blogger #2 has changed over the years as well as to find out what he was like when he started blogging for the first time and had yet to become as successful with his blog as he is now.

There is evidence from Blogger #2’s blog analysis that readers who are long-time followers demonstrated deep familiarity and previous knowledge about the bloggers and their lifestyles, suggesting that these readers have invested copious amounts of time and energy keeping up with the blogs over time. In a recent blog post to promote his newest podcast, “The Portfolio Life,” Blogger #2 started out with the following hook: “You are not just what you do. You were made for more than just one thing. Your life is a portfolio of activities, all of which make you who you are.” Through addressing readers directly using second-person narrative, Blogger #2 tries to play toward the readers’ self-interests. He tells his readers how to think about themselves, influencing their ideas of self-identity and self-worth. However, statements like “Your life is a portfolio of activities…” can also be considered a publicity tactic since he uses buzzwords like “portfolio,” which allude to the podcast – a digital product that he is ultimately advertising to his readers. On the outside, Blogger #2’s online social media persona seemingly seeks to fill the role of “writer, blogger and life coach” for his readers. But his careful use of words and constant pop-ups on his blog that encourage the reader to subscribe to the blog indicate business-related interests as well.

The responses to this particular blog post were all positive and encouraging – one reader who identified as Arlen M. wrote, “Best I can tell, Mr. Jeff, ‘The Portfolio Life’ podcast concept goes hand-in-hand with your 'calling' book that's in the works. Message and life congruentis. :) Thanks so much, [Blogger #2]. I appreciate your podcast…” This suggests that Arlen has been following Blogger #2 for more than six months, since the ‘calling’ book that he refers to was published in August, 2013. In his response to Arlen’s comment, which reads, “Indeed it does, Arlen. Thank you for paying attention,” Blogger #2 acknowledges and shows appreciation for the reader’s continued loyalty toward the blog. This response to the reader’s comment also suggests agreement – and, thus, co-orientation – between the two individuals on the topic of “the portfolio life,” at least during this brief interaction.

Unlike Blogger #1, who never replies to his readers’ comments, Blogger #2 occasionally writes back to his readers – but only with very brief responses such as “Love that, Paula,” “That’s good, Sandy,” or “That’s the hardest part, Aileen.” Every once in a while, he’ll even ask the reader a question back. On the blog post called, “The Gift of Giving: Why I Do Favors and Don’t Expect Anything in Return” (mentioned above), a reader named Joe L. commented, “My response [to the question, ‘How do you respond when people ask you what they can do for you?’] depends on where I'm at. Sometimes it's like you said, helping you was enough and what I wanted to do. Other times, if something big is going on, I give my request. It all depends on the situation.” Blogger #2’s response was, “Interesting, Joe. Ever get any push back?” One reader named Fong H. shared a quote in her comment: “Here's an awesome quote that summarizes my feelings about this blog. ‘We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.’ ― Winston Churchill.” Blogger #2 responded to her comment, “I am totally tweeting that! :),” to which Fong replied again, “Go tweet away. :).” Blogger #2’s response to Fong H. shows that he is actually willing to take suggestions from his readers, even if it’s a simple quote. Saying that he will tweet the quote suggests he not only endorses the quote, but will take action to share it with his 44,700 Twitter followers. Giving readers that kind of power makes them feel both influential and valuable.

The fact that Blogger #2 takes the time and energy to read most of the comments on his blog and makes occasional appearances in the comment section shows he is more willing than Blogger #1 to connect individually with his readers, making him more sociable and approachable. It’s easier for his readers to build a relationship with him.

*Blogger #3*

The third blog is maintained by a 33-year-old UK writer who uses an electrical wheelchair. Blogger #3 comes across is incredibly honest, raw and open in her posts. Unlike the other two bloggers, Blogger #3 seems to write whatever comes to mind – a stream-of-consciousness style that implies she doesn’t seem to worry about what readers think of her, and her blog posts even includes occasional swearing. Blogger #3 doesn’t seem to blog solely for an audience, but also for herself – her motivation for blogging seems to stem from a desire to both express herself creatively and to spread disability awareness (see Appendix C, pg. 51-55)

While she pours all of her thoughts, emotions, memories, health experiences and personal beliefs about life onto her blog, Blogger #3 shies away from telling readers why she must use a wheelchair. It is clear from several blog posts that she lives with a disability, but it is very difficult for readers to find out exactly what the root of her physical problem is. Readers can only gather bits and pieces of information about the consequences of her disability, such as cognitive dysfunction that sometimes leads her to forget her address, telephone number and even her own name. In one of her blog posts, (see Appendix C: “Why I Don’t Answer the Question,” pg. 51-55), she states several reasons why she purposely doesn’t tell other people what her disability is. Blogger #3 writes, “It's a personal question, it may not have an answer and it tells you very little about me.” She goes on to say that this question asks people who are disabled to justify their differences to others, and that she only answers children when they ask why she’s in a wheelchair by saying, “Because my legs don’t work very well.”

In response, one reader named Gill commented, “Thanks for writing this. I've always felt that asking ‘The Question’ was terribly rude and inappropriate (I'm not disabled myself), but whenever I've challenged anyone about it I haven't been able to articulate why. Now I can.” Comments from readers who do not follow or aren’t familiar with the same lifestyle as the blogger, such as Gill, are particularly interesting because the effect that the blogger has on a reader can sometimes be even greater than if the reader is already familiar with the lifestyle. Gill in particular says that, in the past, she wasn’t able to explain why she asked people ‘The Question’ – but now she can. This suggests that Blogger #3’s post has changed how Gill views people living with disabilities.

Regarding the online social media persona that she’s created for herself, either consciously or subconsciously, it can be concluded that Blogger #3 has taken on an “activist” role in the blogging community. Even though Blogger #3 never really focuses on her own disability history, she does dedicate several blog posts to disability awareness, hosting “blog hops” (online blog contests in which multiple bloggers publish posts based on a prompt or predetermined theme and then link to each other’s blogs) and other events for people with disabilities. These posts often generate a huge response from readers – usually other people with disabilities or an interest in disabilities – and gain more than 100 comments. In this way, Blogger #3 uses her blog specifically to create a community for the rest of the ‘disability blogosphere’ to come together and share their thoughts on and personal experiences with disabilities.

For instance, Blogger #3 recently announced “Blogging Against Disablism Day” and has scheduled a new blog event for early May. According to her blog, “this is the day where all around the world, disabled and non-disabled people blog about their experiences, observations and thoughts about disability discrimination (known as disablism or ableism). In this way, we hope to raise awareness of inequality, promote equality and celebrate the progress we've made.” In her blog announcement about this event, Blogger #3 also included a guide to “The Language of Disability” in which she created and wrote for her blog in 2013 in order to educate others about the history of disability-related terms (e.g. “handicap,” “special,” “physically/intellectually challenged”). She referred to this guide in the hopes that it will help blog contributors for “Blogging Against Disablism Day” to share tactfully written posts about disablism.

In addition to writing about disabilities, she occasionally takes it a step further by writing about other “political and deeply personal” issues that people with disabilities may face, as she calls them. In one blog post, she opens up to her readers about the verbal abuse and physical assault she experienced in her relationship with her former husband, referring to past memories with explicit detail and conversation verbatim. At one point, Blogger #3 wrote: “Disabled people don't get abused because we inspire abusive behaviour in others. It's not even a matter of physical vulnerability and social isolation – although these can play a role. Marginalised people of all variety get abused because we are marginalised, and with marginalisation comes vulnerability, even attractiveness to those people who feel more comfortable with power and control rather than love and respect.” In the rest of her blog post, she discusses the social implications of the relationship between people who are able and people who are disabled and the way people with disabilities are treated and viewed at work and in schools. She confesses that she is still searching for answers within herself about this failed relationship and that “disability is a big part of what made me vulnerable.” She writes: “The society in which I live does not condone what happened to me. However, disability contributed to my vulnerability because of how society treats disabled people.”

Toward the end of her blog post, Blogger #3 concludes: “The good news is that I got away and now I have recovered enough to be able to open up about some of this. The bad news is that many disabled women and men remain vulnerable to these kinds of relationships.” This is further evidence of Blogger #3’s role as an activist in the blogging community and her goal of bringing to light the kinds of issues that people with disabilities face, even at the expense of her own emotional vulnerability in recalling these darker parts of her past.

Unlike Bloggers #1 and #2, Blogger #3 doesn’t seem to be interested in pleasing her readers – her goal seems to be to educate them and create a dialogue around a topic she’s passionate about, even if it means blatantly disagreeing with what they have to say. In “The Language of Disability” blog post, she discusses the Social Model of Disability, which posits that “there is a difference between those limitations we experience because of medical conditions, injuries and impairments and those limitations we experience because of the artificial social and physical barriers we experience in society. Only this latter group of limitations may be called *disability*…” One reader named Matthew S. commented, “the so-called social model is a theory which is only valid for people with uncomplicated physical impairments […] the social model as an absolute doesn’t apply to most disabled people.” Blogger #3 responded to Matthew’s comment: “I disagree with you about the Social Model, although this is a common misunderstanding…” This very plainly shows disagreement between the blogger and reader, which wasn’t very common in any of the three blog analyses. Blogger #3’s perceptions of Matthew’s opinions on the social model do not agree with her own opinions, and vice versa; thus, their brief interaction demonstrated very low co-orientation.

It is apparent to the blog readers that Blogger #3 isn’t quick to censor herself. For instance, in a memoir-style blog post titled “The History of My Adult Life in About 100 Objects,” she refers to her possessions as “my sh\*t” three times in the same paragraph. Other blog posts use the same derogatory word several times in different ways: “Giving a sh\*t,” “Sh\*t happens,” etc. The language that Blogger #3 uses in her posts actually may be affecting the way readers respond to her as well. In the blog post about “The Language of Disability,” a reader named Matthew S. shared an anecdote: “They called me a ‘special needs kid at mainstream school (though they arranged a minder to follow me around and make a nuisance of herself). At the ‘special school’ they called me a little sh\*t. So, it’s not a term I’m that fond of.” This suggests that the tone of a blog and appropriateness of language is determined solely by the blogger; readers end up mimicking the way the blogger writes, and their comments may reflect the type of language they read on the blog. Similarly, the absence of swearing on the blogs of Bloggers #1 and #2 is reflected in their readers’ comments. No swearing was observed on either blogs, in content or comments. Additionally, Blogger #2’s readers often write uplifting, encouraging comments much like the way he writes his blog posts.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

These findings serve as an exploratory beginning to a relatively new but rapidly growing area of journalism research, and suggest that there is a lot of potential for future research on social media and blogging. It is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of this study and proposed changes for more extensive research in the future, as well as the value of the two theories – co-orientation and grounded theory – in conducting this study.

Evidence of the benefits of grounded theory arose many times throughout the study. Grounded theory was helpful because the content of the blog and reader comments were both volatile and variable. Blogging patterns and readers’ reactions toward the blog could not have been predicted beforehand. Gradually collecting data over time and looking at the data all together allowed me to consider other factors that might have led to certain results (e.g. the bloggers’ writing tone was reflected in reader comments; see pg. 35). There were also unforeseen results, such as a community built by the readers in lieu of Blogger #1’s absence in the comment section of his blog (see pg. 26-27). Though this study primarily focuses on blogger-reader relationships, this finding in particular introduced a new aspect of the blogosphere that hadn’t been considered before: reader-reader relationships. These unexpected results could not have been explored if the study hadn’t been based on grounded theory, which allows for so much flexibility and investigation.

Similarly, the analyses of the three blogs demonstrated that co-orientation theory was a useful model for interpreting the relationship between the bloggers and their readers. In several instances, the perceived agreement between the bloggers and their readers was very clear – at least the level of agreement with which the readers received blog content – because the readers simply commented, “I agree!” Overall, reader comments were very positive across all three blogs, though co-orientation was easier to determine if comments were elaborate with personal insight rather than filled with empty praise and encouragement. Co-orientation was more thoroughly examined when reader comments – i.e. their reactions to specific blog posts – were followed by replies from the blogger that shared his or her opinions on the reader’s reactions. It is important to note that the “objects of mutual interest” that the bloggers and readers are oriented toward are the perceived persona of the blogger (how the blogger views his or her own online identity versus the readers’ perceptions of that identity) and the bloggers’ lifestyles as perceived by the bloggers and readers based on blog content. It is near impossible to objectively know or define the bloggers’ identities or lifestyles solely by reading the blogs, which are written through a filter in the bloggers’ minds since they determine what to share – or not to share – with the online world. The next section goes into detail about some of the limitations of different aspects of the study, including the content of the reader comments and inability to determine complete co-orientation.

*Limitations*

Limitations of this study include the small sample size – only three blogs were analyzed – and the variability in blog content. Coding the blog posts and reader comments would have made analysis a bit easier and more structured, but the actual process of coding would have been very difficult since the bloggers don’t tend to show consistency in their blog posts or any blogging patterns – only recurring themes and topics. The relationships between bloggers and their readers was also unclear, as it remains unknown whether they are only “Internet buddies” or whether they also know each other in an offline context as well. Such information would create a conflict of interest and drastically skew the data, particularly the readers’ comments; for instance, if the readers happened to be related to the bloggers or close offline friends, then their comments might’ve painted the blog and the blogger’s lifestyle in an overly positive light.

Additionally, the blog posts and comments analyzed in this study were used to look at how the bloggers and readers were co-oriented toward the blog and the bloggers’ lifestyles. During the process, it is possible that certain generalizations were made about these individuals that may be faulty or may not explain the entire picture. Reader comments in particular are often brief and limited in content; there was no way for the readers to expand on the comments they left on the blogs for the purpose of this study, so the underlying meanings behind their statements may be latent and misinterpretation is more likely.

Finally, the degree of co-orientation between bloggers and readers could only be partially established. While the blog readers are able to share their thoughts on the blog and the bloggers’ lifestyles in comments, the bloggers almost never respond due to the overwhelming number of comments they receive. Thus, I wasn’t able to get the bloggers’ opinions on most of the readers or their comments. However, research on Blogger #1 showed that reader-reader relationships gave rise to their own community on a single blog in which readers respond to each other when the blogger isn’t available or doesn’t reply to comments. It would be interesting to look at how reader observations of other readers influence their own perceptions.

*Future Research*

This blog analysis looked at overall trends and interaction patterns between bloggers and their readers, but it would be even more interesting to take a closer look at specific relationships. A future study could look at individual interaction patterns between each blogger and, say, four or five readers per blog. Looking at the reader comments over time, researchers would be able to see how a single reader’s perceptions of the blog and the blogger’s lifestyle have changed over time and how the degree of co-orientation changes as the reader becomes more and more familiar with the blog.

Additionally, in order to clarify the motivations of both groups, to retrieve additional context for the content posted online (both blog posts and comments), and to get an overall better sense of the relationship between the bloggers and readers, a future study should include both a blog analysis and one-on-one informal interviews with the bloggers and readers. While this study showed that a blog analysis is helpful way to obtain objective data, including direct quotes from blog posts and reader comments that can be coded later if desired, interviews can provide a deeper, albeit more subjective understanding of the analyses.

There are many advantages to an informal interview as opposed to a survey or other self-report questionnaire, including: direct and genuine feedback from participants, immediate opportunity to ask follow-up questions, one-on-one interactions, and in-depth insight into their social media personas as well as their actual selves. Interview questions geared toward the bloggers should cover their social media use, their self-perceptions, their respective unique lifestyles, and their perceptions of readers’ reactions. Examples of specific questions for the questionnaire include, “Why did you decide to start a blog?”, “What about this [unconventional lifestyle] appeal to you?” and “How do you think other people perceive you online?” Sample questions for the readers may include, “Why did you start following this blogger?” and “What is your opinion of [name of blog] and [blogger’s unique lifestyle]?” Both question sets could begin with basic background questions about social media use, such as, “How do you use social media in your daily life?” and “How often do you use social media per day?”

Since bloggers and blog readers are usually aware that they are posting content to the public online and enjoy doing so, they often provide their contact information (usually email addresses) on their blog’s “About” page or along with their comments on blog posts, respectively. Thus, it should be relatively easy to contact the bloggers and readers and request interviews with them. These interviews would allow future researchers to explore the degree of co-orientation between the two parties after getting ample data from both parties rather than just one of them like in this study, and to determine the blog’s topical relevance, pertinence and salience with respect to each interviewee.

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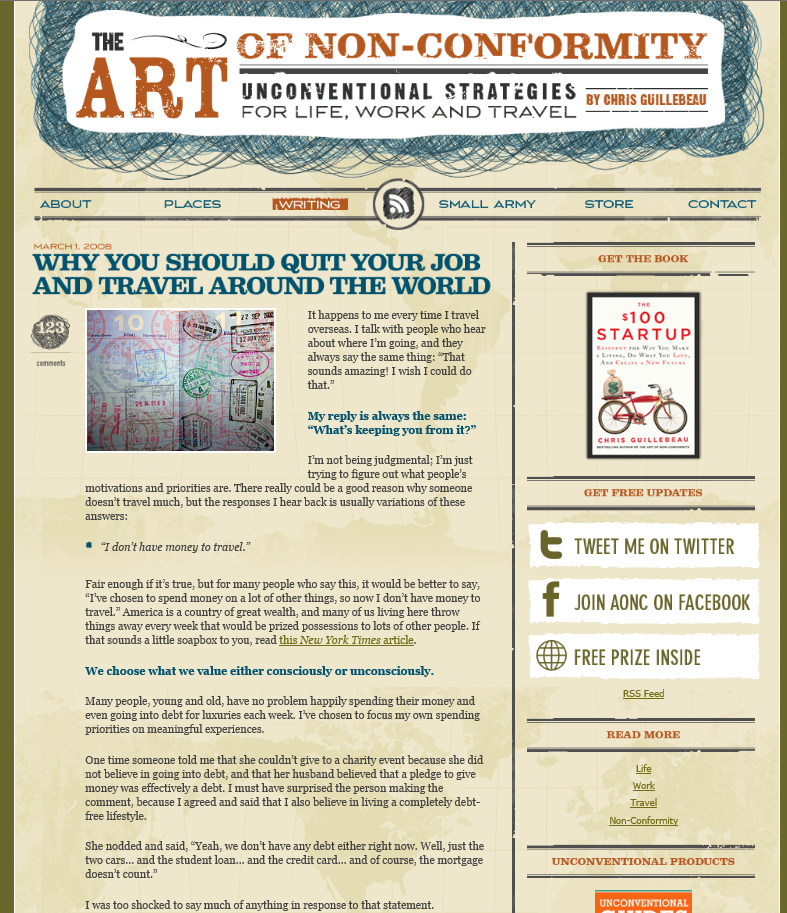
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Appendix

Appendix A: Original blog post, “Why You Should Quit Your Job and Travel Around the World,” by Blogger #1 (posted March 1, 2008), as taken verbatim from chrisguillebeau.com. The following italicized text was written by Blogger #1.



*It happens to me every time I travel overseas. I talk with people who hear about where I’m going, and they always say the same thing: “That sounds amazing! I wish I could do that.”*

***My reply is always the same: “What’s keeping you from it?”***

*I’m not being judgmental; I’m just trying to figure out what people’s motivations and priorities are. There really could be a good reason why someone doesn’t travel much, but the responses I hear back is usually variations of these answers:*

* “I don’t have money to travel.”

*Fair enough if it’s true, but for many people who say this, it would be better to say, “I’ve chosen to spend money on a lot of other things, so now I don’t have money to travel.” America is a country of great wealth, and many of us living here throw things away every week that would be prized possessions to lots of other people. If that sounds a little soapbox to you, read* [*this* New York Times *article*](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/21/garden/21freegan.html?_r=1&oref=slogin)*.*

***We choose what we value either consciously or unconsciously.***

*Many people, young and old, have no problem happily spending their money and even going into debt for luxuries each week. I’ve chosen to focus my own spending priorities on meaningful experiences.*

*One time someone told me that she couldn’t give to a charity event because she did not believe in going into debt, and that her husband believed that a pledge to give money was effectively a debt. I must have surprised the person making the comment, because I agreed and said that I also believe in living a completely debt-free lifestyle.*

*She nodded and said, “Yeah, we don’t have any debt either right now. Well, just the two cars… and the student loan… and the credit card… and of course, the mortgage doesn’t count.”*

*I was too shocked to say much of anything in response to that statement.*

* “The rest of the world is dangerous.”

*Most people don’t come out and say it that way, but that’s what they mean. “If I leave home, something terrible will go wrong.” Aside from the fact that bad things can happen in your own country just as easily as anywhere else, there are very few places in the world that are outright hostile to visitors.*

*The more you travel, the more you realize you are at least as safe in many places around the world as you are at home. Sure, you probably shouldn’t plan a trip to Baghdad or Mogadishu right now, but the list of inhospitable places is really short. The* [*list of amazing places*](http://chrisguillebeau.com/3x5/places-ive-been) *is incredibly long, so get started. Intelligent people usually recognize this fear to be somewhat irrational, so as long as you don’t let it keep you home, it’s not worth fighting.*

* “I like staying at home.”

*This is another way of saying, “I’m afraid of change and different experiences.” Before you write it off, understand that most of us feel this way at one time or another. It’s just something that needs to be overcome. A small group of people will be brave enough to do it, and the rest will stay home, never venturing out beyond their own culture of comfort. It’s their loss; don’t let it be yours.*

* I’ll do this kind of stuff when I retire (or at some other distant point in the future).

*I see nothing wrong with the general concept of delayed gratification. I have an IRA, I look both ways when I cross the street, and it’s reasonable to give up something now in expectation of greater future benefit.*

***What is dangerous, however, is when delayed gratification becomes an excuse for not living the life you want.***

*How many people do you know that actually do the things they say they are going to when they reach arbitrary ages of leaving the jobs they have given their lives to? Far more common is the downsizing of dreams along the way.*

*If you want to play golf all day and take your medication at regular intervals, the 40-year career track plan should work well for you. If you have other ideas or ambitions, though, don’t kill yourself as a slave for the future. Instead, go and figure out where you want to travel and do something about it.*

***4 Important Questions to Ask Yourself:***

1) Am I satisfied with my work? Does it meet my needs and fulfill my desires?

*Your work should not exist merely to provide income for the rest of your life. Ask yourself, what am I working for? Am I working to make a living or to make a life? If your work supports your goals, that’s great. If it doesn’t, maybe it’s time to make a change.*

2) Think back to the times you have left your home country. What did you learn on those trips? Do you think you have more to learn?

*For me, the more I have traveled, the more I learn, and the more I realize how big the world really is. When I was younger and had spent a fair amount of time abroad, I used to say that I had traveled “all over the world.” More than 60 countries later, I laugh at that idea. There are still many, many countries I have yet to visit, and even after I achieve my goal of visiting every country in the world, there will still be many places within those countries that I still won’t have experienced.*

3) If you could go anywhere in the world, where would that be? (Don’t think about reasons why you can’t go there.)

*Brainstorm through the six inhabited continents – Africa, Australia, Asia, Europe, North and South America – and think about cities or countries on each of them that you’ve always wondered about. Chances are there’s* somewhere*, and probably several places, that you’ve always wanted to see.*

*Finally, while I believe that international travel is not nearly as expensive as the lifestyle many people wear themselves out to maintain, it’s true that it does cost money to travel around the world.*

*Therefore, you should also understand the answer to this question:*

4) What are your financial priorities?

*If you don’t know the answer offhand, it’s easy to get it.Just look back at your bank statements, financial software, or credit card statements for the last six months. Whether you like it or not, where you’ve been spending a lot of money is where your priorities are. If you’d like to value experiences more than “stuff,” you may need to make some changes.*

*\*\*\**

*In future essays, I’ll discuss exactly how you should go about pursuing the goal of world travel – or anything else you’ve always wanted to do, but haven’t known how to get started. I’ll also cover the following topics in detail:*

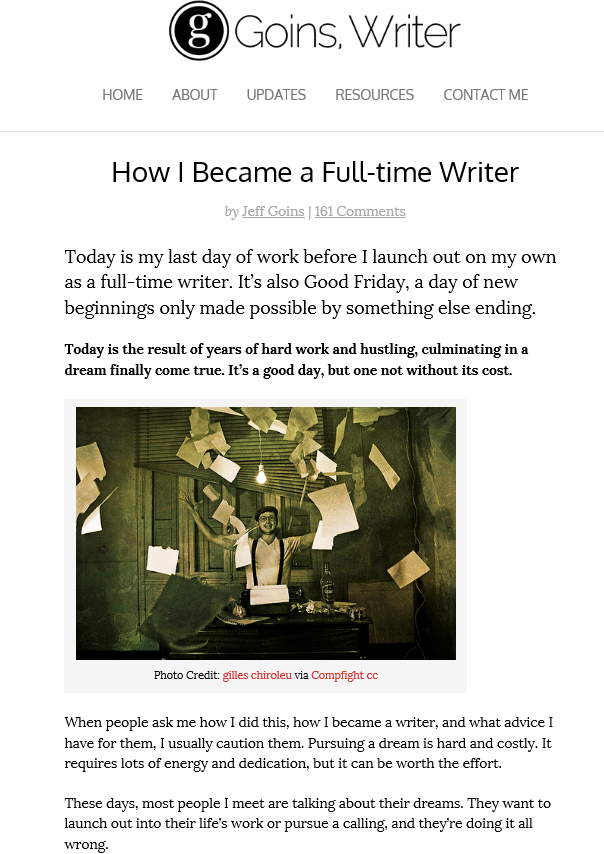
*\*How to earn money without a job  
\*How to achieve great things for yourself while also making a difference in the lives of others  
\*How to align your values with your life, reducing stress and ensuring that you are doing the right things the right way  
\*How to change the world by rising above the norm of mediocrity*

*For now, the rest of the story is up to you. Think about the questions and make a plan. What’s that one place – or ten places – you’ve always wanted to go to?*

*Write it down and stick it to your monitor so you’ll continually be reminded of it.*

***If you don’t take your own dreams seriously, who will?***

Appendix B: Original blog post, “How I Became a Full-time Writer,” by Blogger #2 (posted March 29, 2013), as taken verbatim from goinswriter.com. The following italicized text was written by Blogger #2.



*Today is my last day of work before I launch out on my own as a full-time writer. It’s also Good Friday, a day of new beginnings only made possible by something else ending.*

***Today is the result of years of hard work and hustling, culminating in a dream finally come true. It’s a good day, but one not without its cost.***

*When people ask me how I did this, how I became a writer, and what advice I have for them, I usually caution them. Pursuing a dream is hard and costly. It requires lots of energy and dedication, but it can be worth the effort.*

*These days, most people I meet are talking about their dreams. They want to launch out into their life’s work or pursue a calling, and they’re doing it all wrong.*

*They think they need to take a giant leap out into the unknown when, in fact, the opposite is true. It’s all about small steps over time.*

### *Step 1: Turn pro*

*Most of the work of a dream is committing to it in the first place, deciding to stop acting the amateur and do the work of a pro.*

***For years, I played around with writing. I wrote when I felt like it and told myself little lies about how I’d be a writer…* some *day. I wasn’t taking my craft seriously.***

*Then one day, a friend asked what my dream was. When I said it was to be a writer, he said these words that changed my life:*

You don’t have to want to be a writer. You are a writer; you just need to write.

*So I started* [*calling myself a writer*](http://goinswriter.com/declare/)*. Everywhere I went, I introduced myself as “Jeff Goins, Writer,” even put it in email signatures and on my* [*Facebook page*](http://facebook.com/goinswriter/)*.*

*And you know what? I started acting like it. Eventually, I even began to believe it. Turns out sometimes you do have to fake it before you make it.*

*The lesson here is simple:* ***If you wait for someone to give you permission to start pursuing your dream, you’ll be waiting a long time.*** *You have to begin before you think you’re ready.*

### *Step 2: Practice in the margins*

*After I decided to* [*pursue my dream*](http://goinswriter.com/find-your-dream/)*, I still had to find the time to do it. Working a full-time job and having a wife and other commitments, I didn’t have unlimited free time.*

***I had to find time to practice in the margins of life.***

*For me, that meant getting up early. Like, 5:00 a.m. early. Every morning, I would wake up, get my coffee, and write for two hours.*

*At first, this was difficult; I had to force myself out of bed and downstairs before the sun rose. But eventually, it became habitual. I did it without even thinking about it. And soon, what started as a discipline became a daily joy.*

*By doing this, I learned the excuse I had given myself — “I don’t have enough time” — wasn’t true. I did have enough time; it was just hiding in “inconvenient” places.*

*I learned that* ***the secret of mastery is frequency, not quantity.*** *It’s more about small, regular repetitions than volume of work.*

### *Step 3: Build a bridge*

*When my side gig starting yielding results — getting published, having 10,000 people subscribe to my blog, being asked to speak at conferences — I didn’t jump ship.*

*I stuck it out with my day job, partly because I loved the work and partly because my family was counting on me to not flake out. I didn’t want to dive into a dream prematurely, and I didn’t want to burn any bridges with my employer of six years.*

*So I took my time, building a bridge between my day job and my dream job, finding ways for the two complement each other. This meant applying what I’d learned from my blog to our organization, while practicing my craft at work so I could do it better on the side.*

*Wherever I could — and always with my employer’s permission — I recycled materials, using my time and opportunities efficiently.* ***I refused to believe the lie that pursuing my dream and doing my job well were mutually exclusive.***

*When it came time to tell my boss that I would be moving on (after a lot of deliberation over this), he told me he was proud of me. We both got emotional, said a prayer together, and agreed to stay in touch. I realized then that because I included him in the process, he’d been cheering me on the whole time.*

### *What I learned & what’s next*

*These past two years, I’ve learned a lot about honoring commitments, pursuing a dream, and launching a business. As I look back on this journey, three lessons stick out in my mind that are worth sharing:*

1. ***Don’t wait for permission.****You have to start acting like a pro before others will believe it.*
2. ***Don’t jump too soon.****There may be an opportunity to build momentum on the side so you can minimize risk once it’s time to launch. People are counting on you; don’t take that lightly.*
3. ***Don’t believe the people closest to you want you to fail.****Some of the people you fear the most could be your biggest allies. They were for me.*

*In this next season of life, I’ll be focusing on writing books and*[*speaking*](http://goinswriter.com/speaking/)*more. I’ll also continue to create new*[*courses and eBooks*](http://goinswriter.com/store/)*for all you lovely readers. But today is about reflection and celebration. So that’s what I’m doing, appreciating that it took to get me here (and how grateful I am to everyone who helped).*

### *The secret to launching your own dream*

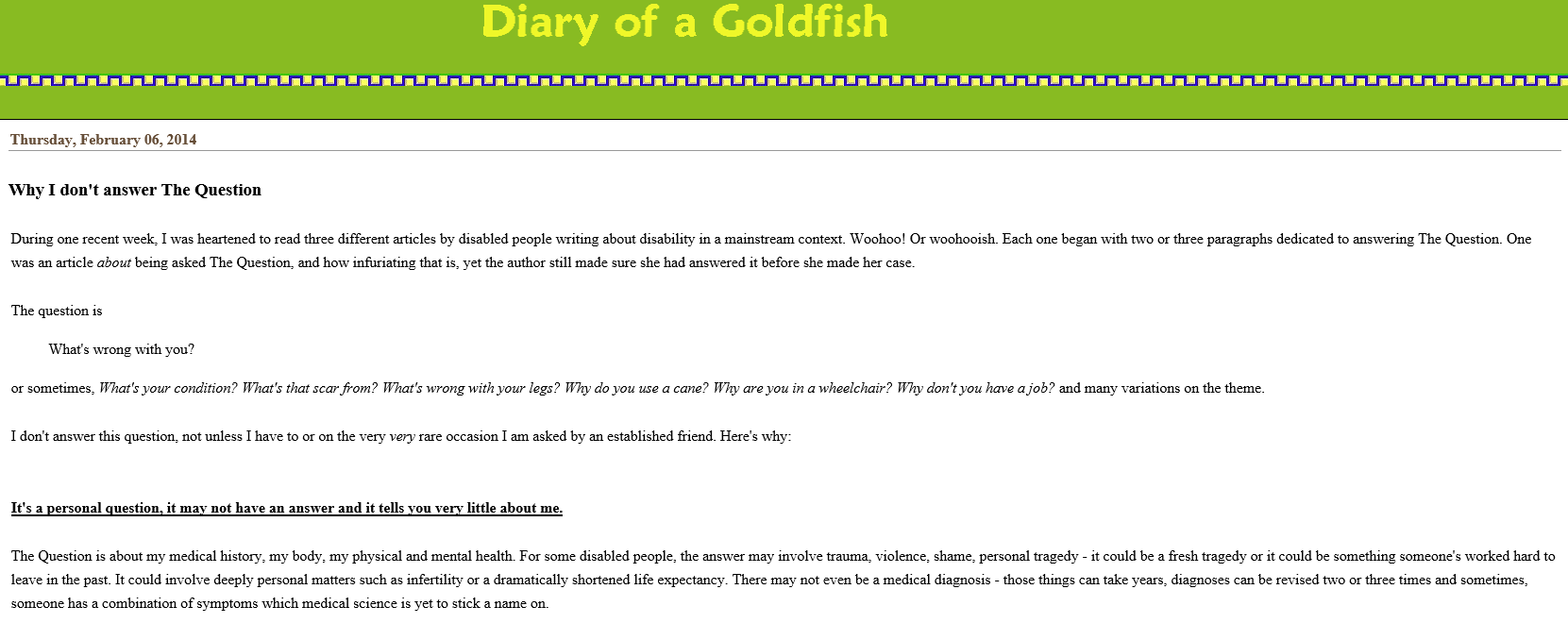
*If this inspires you or makes you think you might want to do this some day, allow me to share something with you…*

***The real secret to launching out as a full-time writer or full-time* anything *is will. It comes down to owning your calling and committing to the work, however hard it is.***

*For me, this meant I had to stop saying “I don’t know how” and start saying, “I’ll figure it out.” It meant learning to be more patient and perseverant at the same time. And you know what? I did figure it.*

*And with God’s help, some faith, and a little luck, you will too.*

***What’s your dream and the story of how you’re pursuing it?*** *Share in the comments.*

Appendix C: Original blog post, “Why I don't answer The Question,” by Blogger #3 (posted February 6, 2014), as taken verbatim from http://blobolobolob.blogspot.com/. The following italicized text was written by Blogger #3.

*During one recent week, I was heartened to read three different articles by disabled people writing about disability in a mainstream context. Woohoo! Or woohooish. Each one began with two or three paragraphs dedicated to answering The Question. One was an article about being asked The Question, and how infuriating that is, yet the author still made sure she had answered it before she made her case.*

*The question is*

*What's wrong with you?*

*or sometimes, What's your condition? What's that scar from? What's wrong with your legs? Why do you use a cane? Why are you in a wheelchair? Why don't you have a job? and many variations on the theme.*

*I don't answer this question, not unless I have to or on the very very rare occasion I am asked by an established friend. Here's why:*

***It's a personal question, it may not have an answer and it tells you very little about me.***

*The Question is about my medical history, my body, my physical and mental health. For some disabled people, the answer may involve trauma, violence, shame, personal tragedy - it could be a fresh tragedy or it could be something someone's worked hard to leave in the past. It could involve deeply personal matters such as infertility or a dramatically shortened life expectancy. There may not even be a medical diagnosis - those things can take years, diagnoses can be revised two or three times and sometimes, someone has a combination of symptoms which medical science is yet to stick a name on.*

***The Question is not relevant.***

*When disabled people point out that their medical conditions are nobody's business, there are usually three objections from our interrogators:*

*1: "People are just being friendly."*

*No, they're not. Sometimes social interaction is hard, but do unto other as you would be done to is fairly basic. If you wouldn't like to be asked a personal question relating to your appearance, your own or your family's medical history, don't ask one.*

*2: "It is our business! People like me let you park in convenient parking spaces and pay taxes so you can have grab-rails in your bathroom, so we should have the right to interrogate you until we're satisfied you really deserve it."*

*There is a tremendous sense that disabled people are public property - something that's massively increased, along with full-on hate crime, in the last few years. This is such a bizarre reduction of how society works, akin to my demanding of random children I meet that they tell me (a) how they're doing at school, honestly and (b) what they intend to do when they grow up. After all, I let children exist, my taxes go on everything from maternity care to subsidised school dinners. I pay for the little buggers' crayons, for crying out loud!*

*3: "It is our business! If you have access needs, then I want to decide what you need or don't need based on a medical diagnosis I've never heard of before, rather than listening to your requests."*

*There's little my diagnoses - or any diagnosis - could tell a lay person about actual limitation and access needs. With chronic illness especially (though with many other impairments too) there is so much variation between individuals, the different symptoms we have and their severity, to say nothing of how these things shift over time, sometimes from one day to the next. The main reason for demanding such background information is personal curiosity. Or you know, nosiness.*

***Here are some similar Questions.***

*"Where do you come from?"*

*"Have you ever tried having sex with a man?"*

*"So, what gender were you born as?"*

*"When did you decide that you were that way?"*

*All these questions amount to the same thing: "I'm normal. You're different. Justify yourself!"*

*I think disabled people are much more likely to answer this question - not because we are most oppressed, but because of the nature of that oppression. I don't see anyone explaining where they or their antecedents came from before discussing the black experience of university life. I don't see anyone talking about how many girlfriends and boyfriends they've had before discussing queer representation in film.*

*So why do disabled people feel the need to justify our difference before we even begin to speak about anything that affects disabled people?*

***Some people are happy to answer The Question for good reasons.***

*Some disabled people don't find it rude. Some people are very open about their conditions and tell people up-front, before the question is asked. Some people have really interesting conditions. Others have conditions they really want to talk about - I had a phase of this myself in the months following diagnosis. Some conditions are better known, easier to explain and be clear about (although I know at least one person who cheerfully informs strangers of his personality disorder diagnosis - I don't know if that's brave or naive). Some people strongly identify with other people in the same boat and have condition-specific pride; deaf pride, autistic pride, etc..*

*All this is cool. Absolutely cool. But there are less cool reasons people answer The Question:*

***Some people believe the answer to The Question is the most interesting thing about them.***

*Our conditions are often what people talk about when talking about us; we become Bipolar Charlie or Nadia, who has MS \*. Often, it can feel that a medical condition has replaced an education or career in terms of what a person does with their day. I'm fairly sure that, when my mother talks about her daughters, she talks about her eldest who is a teacher and her youngest who can't work because she has the Dreaded Lurgy - although she will then go on to talk about what I actually do with my time. One day I will persuade her to skip the Dreaded Lurgy bit altogether.*

*People join illness-specific support groups which, given enough isolation, can emphasise this idea of a diagnosis as a fundamental difference between ourselves and the rest of the world; something other people don't and won't understand. We spend a lot of time with doctors, in hospitals, filling out forms, administering treatment and then simply being ill (a terrifically time-consuming business). So there are periods - sometimes years - when illness is a huge part of what we think about, as opposed to something we unconsciously work around. Thus, I think there are circumstances where the close psychological identity with a medical diagnosis is inevitable. It's just a shame that happens.*

*\* I took a break from writing this post to read an article someone had recommended. It is in several parts but the first consists of several paragraphs about two disabled people affected by the benefits cuts. It does mention a few facts about their lives and interests, but most of the wordage was taken up with an explanation of their medical conditions and symptoms. The second half of the article opens*

*"Too often, the disabled are referred to as whatever illness they have, rather than as who they are."*

*Well, yeah.*

***Some people answer The Question because they think they need to justify themselves.***

*Disabled people do have to answer The Question on a fairly regular basis. Need medical help, certain kinds of assistance or accommodation, grants, benefits, protection from discrimination within a workplace, then there's often an insistence on answering The Question, whether or not it's entirely pertinent in the circumstances. Not just The Question, but often other questions about what a dreadful complex range of life-limiting impairments we have. And we live in the knowledge that these questions might not be enough - that while we're dealing with things that we're entitled to, rights protected by law, there's still a strong sense that we're begging to be considered deserving enough.*

*Disabled people are often made to feel like we are a burden on others, that we exist only thanks to the kindness and compassion of non-disabled people. So when a stranger asks, it can be easy to slip into answering mode - supplication mode - as if this conversation is just another loop we need to jump through in order to get on with our lives in peace.*

*Related to this:*

***Some people answer The Question in order to differentiate themselves from other, less acceptable kinds of disabled people.***

*Is your impairment heroically, or at least honestly, come by? Are you able to work and play sport? Are you in perfect mental health? Maybe you're often spoken to like an idiot when, in fact, your impairment has no effect on your IQ - perhaps you're actually smarter than average? You must be so proud! You might also want to let others know that you are not short of a good impairment story, are a slim non-smoker, have a respectable diagnosis, are physically fit and independent and, of course, are not some decrepit old biddy.*

*Of course, there's no reason for any disabled person to be looked down upon, treated like an idiot, doubted or dismissed. We don't solve that sort of thing by making sure that bigots know that we, as individuals, don't deserve this. Nobody, anywhere, deserves that.*

***Some people answer The Question because of Awareness***

*We can change the world by telling our stories. Tell your stories! However, we live in a culture where Awareness - a word which is mostly used to increase the profiles of charities, provide cheap and tragic human interest stories for the news media and make ordinary, well-meaning people feel like they are making a difference - is seen as a straightforward, unquestionable good.*

*Information about a person does not equate to respect for them, especially when*

*1.It's the first piece of verbal information a person has about them and*

*2.Our cultural responses to disability tend to range across sympathy, suspicion and fear.*

*The fact that someone who hardly knows me is asking this personal question suggests that their respect for me is already in doubt. I'm not going to increase their awareness by giving a clear and comprehensive answer. I am only going to confirm their privilege.*

*(Another day, if you're good, you'll get an epic rant on Why Awareness Campaigns Do Far More Harm Than Good To Folks Affected By An Issue Whilst Making Other People Feel Better).*

*Related to this, read Sarah's On Not Explaining Yourself or Your Children To Strangers*

***The Question is part of a whole conversation I don't want to have.***

*This can be heart-sinking stuff, the point where you're suddenly being told that your doctors are mistaken, you can't have the condition you've been told you have and what you have could be cured with homeopathy. Or the conversation can descend into an interrogation about your medical history, tests carried out, treatments received and so forth. And here's this person, who hardly knew you a few minutes ago, and now they know all about one small but deeply personal aspect of your life and nothing about who you are.*

*This is not going to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.*

***Most people don't ask The Question.***

*They really don't. It's not normal. It's a power thing\*. Not an evil sadistic power thing, but one that goes,*

*Here is a rare opportunity where I'm allowed to ask a really personal question to a stranger and pretend it's because I care or somehow need to know for their own good. Let's go for it!*

*The more confident I have become, the less I am asked. I am more likely to be asked while in certain company; around people who respect me completely, and don't make any issue of my impairments or access needs, other people won't ask.*

*This is no advice for people who don't want to be asked - I think younger people (like under 25) get it worse than anybody, anyway - but it proves the point; this is a power game, microscopic and unthinking, but it is perfectly okay not to play along.*

*\*Children ask but they have different expectations - what they really want to know tends to be, for example, why anybody might use a wheelchair. They don't want to hear about diseases. They ask "Why are you sitting in that chair?" and consider "Because my legs don't work very well." a sufficient and informative answer. Coincidentally, it's the same answer I give the grown-ups.*