

## **Enriching the Participation of Undergraduate Women in Higher Education: A Qualitative Exploration of the Experiences of Female Bloggers**

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*This study sought to understand the relationship between blogging and higher education, specifically asking if blogging enriches academic experiences and empowers undergraduate female students in the United States. Through semi-structured interviews, blog content, and blog observations, I explored female bloggers' experiences as bloggers and participants in higher education. Using a qualitative approach to data analysis, the data indicated that for study participants there was a positive relationship between blogging and perceptions of academic performance and participation in higher education. In addition, blogging was empowering because blogs represent a space where participants are accepted as authorities and valid constructors of knowledge and because it provided an opportunity for women to have a voice in the classroom.*

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This study explores the relationship between participation in blogging communities, or the blogworld, and higher education with the goal of understanding how blogging could enrich and empower female undergraduate's experiences in academia. Although participation in academic blogs is growing, the blogworld is still perceived to be a less valuable form of writing in the proverbial hierarchy of writing mediums; far behind peer-reviewed literature as a source of knowledge and less valuable in terms of authorship and ownership (Little, 2010).

Blogs are a “specific genre that often relies on personal narratives, opinion, hypertext, [and] rants” (Roth, 2008, p. 81) that do not require the rigor associated with scholarly work. Many female bloggers not only write research-based posts about political and social issues such as Feministing ([feministing.com](http://feministing.com)), but they also blog about their lives. In many cases their blogs function as personal journals or food logs; writing within different genres such as cooking and weight loss, Healthy Tipping Point ([healthytippingpoint.com](http://healthytippingpoint.com)), and Kath Eats Real Food ([katheats.com](http://katheats.com)). These “lifestyle blogs” are more likely to be written by women than men (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012).

Similar to forms of knowledge viewed as feminine, such as raising a child or performing household tasks, the alternate forms of knowledge represented in lifestyle blogs are viewed as valuable to those within the blogworld, but not viewed as valid within higher education (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). This is indicative of the disparity between the traditional definitions of valid knowledge in higher education, perceived as masculine, and the alternate ways of knowing that women hold and blog about, but are taught to disregard in higher education (Belenky et al., 1997). It can be concluded that the diminished academic position of blogging as a valid medium and lifestyle blog content is related to the disempowerment of women in higher education as well as a loss of their voice and identity.

Despite enrollment and graduation advantages over males in higher education, as a group, women are not seeing similar growth as indicated by the salary gap between men and women, and gender imbalance favoring men in higher-paid fields such as math and science (Corbet, 2014; Sander, 2012). Research indicates that higher education is a male-oriented climate and is more beneficial to men as “they have more substantive engagements with their professors, are more likely to do undergraduate research, and tend to major in fields that steer them into better-paying jobs” (Sander, 2012, p. B14). Specifically in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) fields, men still enroll and graduate at a higher rate than women (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006; Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park & Umbach, 2011). Women are the invisible majority in higher education (Yakaboski, 2011), and this is reflected by the wage gap that persists in America; women earn, on average, \$.77 for every dollar that a man makes (Corbet, 2014).

Does blogging empower women in higher education while enhancing their academic participation and performance? As a forum for women and validating their forms of knowledge, prior research found that blogging is empowering (Chen, 2011; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012; Taylor, 2011). As a written medium that encourages reflection, synthesis, and critical thinking, blogging has been found to enhance academic performance in higher education (Heo & Lee, 2013; Estes, 2012; McMahon, 2009; Tang, Tang, & Chiang, 2014). With the explosive availability of tools through learning management systems and free services on the Internet, blogging has been incorporated into many higher education courses.

Supported by the larger body of motivation research and self-regulated learning, I explored the experiences of undergraduate female bloggers to understand if and how blogging enriches the participation of women in higher education. I explored three research questions:

1. How does the experience of blogging relate to perceptions of academic skills such as writing, self-regulated learning characteristics, and critical thinking for undergraduate female bloggers?
2. How does authoring a blog relate to perceptions of participation in higher education for female undergraduate bloggers?
3. How does blogging empower female undergraduate bloggers? Is blogging an avenue for women to assert their knowledge as valid and to authenticate themselves as knowers?

### **Literature Review**

Current literature suggests that blogging has the capacity to personally empower women and bolster academic skills such as critical thinking, discussion, and the development of self-regulated learning behaviors. Moreover, literature on self-regulated learning provides a foundation for understanding how blogging can be related to academic success and the link between some of the more introspective aspects of blogging and academic success.

### **Blogging and Empowerment**

Feminist explorations of blogging suggest that blogging can be empowering, as defined as “connectedness, mastery and control over aspects of one's life, and ability to effect change” (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012, p. 370). According to Antunovic and Hardin (2013), empowerment occurs regardless of blogging type or level of engagement for women and men, but is especially empowering for women, “when women blog, irrespective of the topic - they are sharing their life

experiences and perspectives, documenting and passing on knowledge, reaching out to other women (and men), and giving women a voice" (p.1374). Regardless of participation type or intensity, empowerment from blogging is largely social in nature. As Chiang, Chiang and Lin (2013) found, "participants received obvious social reward and information reward by constantly doing basic journaling and advanced publishing on their own blogs" (p. 316). Blogging has the potential to empower women through self-disclosure, a sense of agency, and a sense of community (Chen, 2011; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012).

**Sense of agency and self-disclosure.** Participation in blogging communities not only empowers women by promoting a sense of connectedness, but also builds community as it contributes to the development of the participant's sense of agency and self-disclosure (Ko & Kou, 2009; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). Empowering bloggers as content creators, Stavrositu and Sundar (2012) found blogging promoted empowerment by fostering a sense of agency. Their role as content creator was supported by external validation of readers and commenters (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). While all forms of blogging promote empowerment among women, bloggers who share personal information, or self-disclose about themselves and their lives, experience more substantial benefits. Self-disclosure built through blogging fosters intimate relationships within the blogging community and bolsters skills necessary for offline social development leading to the development of positive social capital (Ko & Kuo, 2009). Through the creation of community, self-disclosure, and the development of a sense of agency, blogging can be empowering and contribute to the academic skills necessary for achievement in higher education.

**Sense of community.** Empowerment through blogging begins with the creation of blog communities that create safe places for self-expression and are characterized by mutual obligation (Morrison, 2011). One example of empowerment through blogging is seen through the "mommyblogging" community in which participating new mothers enjoy improvement in their well-being as they feel more connected to the world outside their home through the Internet (McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes, 2012; Morrison, 2011). As both private and public spaces, blogging communities empower women and foster connectedness, membership, fulfillment of needs, safe expression and a reciprocation of support that may not exist in other areas of their real or virtual lives (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012).

### **Blogging and Higher Education**

In addition to the potential of empowering women, blogging has also been connected to improvement in higher education performance. Research on the direct connections between academics and performance suggests that blogging supports learning through the development of community, reflection, and

metacognitive skills such as organizing, summarizing, communicating, and information-sharing (Baker & Moore, 2011; Tang, Tang, & Chiang, 2014).

Communities that support women's empowerment also support improved academic performance. The blogging community is positively correlated with "knowledge sharing and unofficial activities or environments," and "may play a role in promoting a climate of knowledge sharing" (Hou, Chang, & Sung, 2010, p. 965). Leslie and Murphy (2008) found that blogs serve a social function of knowledge construction through critique and discussion in the classroom even in an unsupported learning environment. The social nature of blogging allows for reflection and critique among peers helping students to formulate their opinions and reflect on how they are seen and challenged (Tang, Tang, & Chiang, 2014). Even when blog content is not explicitly related to the course content, it has a positive effect on academic performance (Chen, 2011; Leslie & Murphy, 2008).

**Classroom use.** Student and instructor support of blogging indicates potential to enrich the learning experience and is facilitated by prevalence of internet use among today's learners (Sjoberg, 2012). Blogging has become a substantial learning platform for the classroom. Through her own experience as a faculty member and blogger, Estes (2012), found that blogging provides a forum for quick feedback and conversation with a more diverse audience than traditional academic publishing venues while enriching and extending academic discourse. Inside and outside the classroom, blogging has the potential to become a valuable learning platform through supporting the development of skills, which enhance academic performance.

**Self-regulated learning.** The connection between blogging and higher education is aided through an understanding of the academic skills that blogging promotes. Specifically, those academic skills are the behaviors and characteristics demonstrated by the self-regulated learner, which is "competence in monitoring one's learning via the use of a variety of cognitive and metacognitive strategies" (Ning & Downing, 2009, p. 682). These behaviors fall into three main categories: organization, or allocating time appropriately to accomplish tasks over a period of time; elaboration, or behaviors such as summarization and note taking; self-evaluation, which requires a high level of self-awareness; and metacognition, which involves self-reflection and identification of errors (Mega, Ronconi, & De Beni, 2013). Each of these behaviors promotes higher levels of self-regulation, which lead to improved academic performance and success (Mega et al, 2013; Ning & Downing, 2009; Wolters, 2003). Ning and Downing (2009), concluded that "educators should focus on promoting effective learning via the nurturing of students' self-regulatory abilities" to promote academic success (p. 686).

The development of self-regulatory skills in one arena is often reflected in other arenas. Zimmerman & Kitsantas (2005), found, "there is compelling research evidence that self-regulated learning processes are predictive of both

enhanced motivation and superior academic and athletic performance outcomes (p. 514). Research suggests that blogging leads to reflection, organization, self-awareness, critical thinking, and metacognitive skills. These are the very same skills and behaviors seen in the self-regulated learner. The reflexive nature of these skills suggests that blogging outside of the classroom may also be linked to improved academic performance.

Within society and higher education, women are viewed as deficient according to a male power/knowledge paradigm that is privileged in higher education (Elias & Merriam, 2005). Premised on particularly masculine epistemologies and social relations, learning in higher education is a “historically specific mode of coming to know the world around you based on the ideological forms and appearances of capitalist social relations” (Carpenter, 2012, p. 30). Values such as cooperation, passiveness, and informal forms of childhood education are viewed as deficient within adult education (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2008). According to feminist theory, success in higher education settings requires that women reject their knowledge as deficient, to relearn according to knowledge defined by a “capitalist, patriarchal, racist, heterosexist world” (Carpenter, 2012, p. 30). Traditionally, epistemic privilege has been located in academic disciplines, such as physical sciences where,

The disciplinary training of many physical scientists eschews alternative paradigms of knowledge production and produces structural challenges to thinking and researching outside of these frames, thereby potentially limiting opportunity and ability to develop feminist ways of knowing in these disciplines (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 23).

Blogging represents an opportunity to validate women’s ways of knowing by offering “alternative understandings of knowledge that expanded more positivist epistemologies, which... rely on empirically positivist ideals” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 22). The personal is represented in the blogworld as feminine knowledge (Taylor, 2011).

This study explores the potential for female empowerment and extends the research conducted on blogging to explore how it can be used to enhance, challenge, and change the field.

### **Research Methods**

This study utilized a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis with the goal of developing a deeper understanding of the relationship between blogging and higher education for women. In his work outlining the requirements of online qualitative research, Kozinets (2010) defines an in-depth exploration of an online community as one that gathers three types of data: archival data, which

I collected through the analysis of actual blogs content; elicited data, or transcribed interviews and email communications from study participants; and, field note data, which has been recorded through my observation of the blogging community, interviews, and a researcher journal. Through these three methods of data collection and analysis, I was able to gain a rich and varied understanding of the female college blogging community that informs understanding of relationships between blogging, higher education, and empowerment.

## Participants

I collected data through semi-structured interviews with six members of the college blogging community that I identified through online searches for blogs written by students from the states of North Dakota and Minnesota (chosen because of their geographic proximity to me at a local university). Through deep reading, an active and deliberate process with the goal of understanding content of undergraduate female blogs, I identified fifteen bloggers whose blogs showed evidence of both social presence and knowledge construction (Leslie & Murphy, 2008). Social presence was indicated by frequency of posts, at least two per month for at least four months. Evidence of knowledge construction was indicated by blog posts that showed evidence of critical thinking, such as reflection on personal experiences or the application of research to personal lives. From that list, I emailed each blogger through the contact method listed on their blog and requested that they participate in the study; six responded initially. After explaining the study and receiving informed consent, I conducted interviews with each participant during the months of March and April (see Table 1 for demographic information about each participant).

Table 1

*Demographics of interview participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>College major</b>	<b>Year in college</b>	<b>Home State</b>
Haven	Healthcare Administration	Senior	Kansas
Izzy	English	Freshman	Kansas
Katrina	Nursing	Senior	Minnesota
Juliane	Agricultural Communications	Graduated	California
Melissa	History/Education	Graduated	North Dakota
Ashley	Higher Education	Graduate School	Wisconsin

### **Data Collection**

The primary method of data collection for this study was interviews, defined by Kozinets (2010) as an integral part of qualitative research about online communities, “to question the relationship between online community activities and other social activities in the community member’s life” (p. 46). Lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, interviews were conducted via Skype where I was able to observe participant facial expression, behaviors, and their environment as well as transcribe their responses to my questions. Interview questions focused on four main areas: participant experiences in education and higher education; participant motivation and experiences in blogging; potential relationships between blogging and education; and blogging connections linking participants to others in their online and offline communities. Interviews were recorded using Audionote on my personal iPad (all audio files were saved in a local password protected file) where I also took notes regarding salient events, participant body language, as well as any other connections that were not captured by the audio recording. To support and extend the data collected from the interviews, I also conducted observations of participant blogs and comments from the larger college-aged blogging community. Throughout the participant identification and interview process, I kept a researcher’s journal to document any emerging themes, my thoughts, and observations (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

### **Data Analysis**

Through discussion, reading and re-reading, coding, categorizing, and reflection (Maxwell, 2013), I sought to determine if there was a relationship between blogging and women’s participation and performance in higher education and understand it for undergraduate female bloggers. Transcribed interviews, field notes from blog observations, and memos were imported into the qualitative software, Atlas.ti, and I began structural and descriptive coding to separate the data into disparate parts (Saldana, 2013). Through open coding I broke the data into discrete parts allowing me to compare similar concepts between different participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). There were over 100 codes that emerged from initial coding, which I refined into 54 through careful reading and re-reading of the data, removing any redundant or overlapping codes (Saldana, 2013). Using my research questions as a guide, I then reassembled my "split" codes into the categories of academic skills, self-regulatory skills, and empowerment through the process of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This led to the development of the connection between blogging to higher education success for student participants. Integral to each step in the data analysis process was the memo; it supported the initial definition of codes and defined the thought

process that led to categories, themes and the overarching theoretical concept that emerged from the data (Saldana, 2013).

### **Validity**

To ensure the validity of data collection and analysis, I prioritized several strategies necessary to the integrity of qualitative research. First, I sought data, methodological, and theory triangulation. For data and methodological triangulation, I utilized a variety of sources: interview data from participants from different universities and pursuing degrees in varied fields of study; observations of the blog community; and blog content (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Additionally, I utilized theory triangulation by revisiting the literature throughout the data analysis process to explain, clarify and support the selection of those themes (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). For example, as the theme of self-validation of self as a knower emerged, I revisited the literature to see if this aligned with prior findings of connection between blogging and empowerment. As a part of the triangulation process, I also expanded my literature review to include self-regulated learning theories, to develop a deeper understanding of the connections that were emerging between blogging and higher education.

In addition to triangulation, I also relied on “prolonged engagement and persistent observation” (Creswell, 2013, p. 250) by embedding myself as a participant in the food blogging community as a reader, blogger, and commenter. Although research has found that most online representations are accurate (Kozinets, 2010), I relied on external audits and peer debriefing as additional validity checks through participation in a writing group where peers provided feedback on the congruency between data, themes, and conclusions. Finally, after the interviews were transcribed, I emailed follow-up questions I had that arose during the transcription process, additional questions I had about their experiences, or to gain new information that emerged during data collection and analysis.

Kozinets (2010) reinforces the importance of a participative approach to the study of online communities for a complete understanding of cultural meanings. As a blogger, I expected that many of my own experiences as a blogger, such as the creation of agency, a sense of community, and a validation of myself as a valid constructor of knowledge would be reinforced through data collection and analysis. Because I was a researcher-participant, it was important to clarify my researcher bias; I was an active member of this community and careful attention was made to identify my own biases while recognizing that they cannot be separated from my role as researcher. I utilized critical friends and the validation methods above to ensure that my bias did not negatively affect the validity of the results.

## **Ethics**

My study, data collection, research paradigm, and data analysis methods were selected with the goal of an ethical study that gave participants a unique opportunity to be heard and empowered. Before beginning the interview process, I gained the informed consent of each participant. I ensured that each participant fully understood the study, its goals, and how I was collecting data. Using pseudonyms throughout data collection, analysis, and within the researcher's journal, I protected the identity of each study participant as well as referential sources, guaranteeing confidentiality to all individuals who provided data. Finally, participants were informed of their right to discontinue the interviews and participation at any point in the process and constant attention was given to ensure that participants understood their rights as study participants.

## **Findings**

Analysis of data gained through interviews, blog content, and observations led to a deeper understanding of the blogging community. Findings support a potential relationship of blogging to female participation in higher education and also indicates that blogging has a positive relationship with academic success in higher education as it promotes the development and practice of academic skills. Likewise, blogging supports empowerment in higher education as participants found blogging to be an empowering act in and of itself, regardless of blog content, topic, or audience, and because blogging provided participants an opportunity to have a voice in academia when used as required coursework or in tandem with course activities.

### **Blogging is Related to Academic Skills**

The clearest link between blogging and higher education performance uncovered in this study was blogging's relationship to the development and practice of writing skills for the participants. Blogging was also related to skills required for academic success such as critical thinking or self-regulatory behaviors such as reflection, self-awareness, and open-mindedness.

**Writing skills.** The most recurrent connection to higher education made by each of the participants was their perception that blogging had a positive impact on the development and maintenance of writing skills. Izzy was unique in that she posted book reviews on her blog, independent of any course requirements, which led her to perceive the connection to her academic performance. Izzy said, "Yeah, I think it [blogging] will because it gives me a lot of practice writing essays as far as the book and stuff so it'll help my essay writing definitely."

Similarly, blogging helped Juliane learn about a different writing platform. “It helped teach me how to write in a way that wasn’t for necessarily a journalistic platform or a research paper... It helped me learn to write short stories quickly.” For each participant, blogging incorporated the academic writing process, as each post requires a blogger to outline and draft a post, step away, and then revise and edit, often with the intended and unintended audience in mind, before publishing the post. The peer review step of the writing process occurs after post publication, where feedback from readers through comments will either change the content in the post, or affect future content. For each woman, regardless of the content of their blog posts, they found that the act of regularly composing posts, the editing process, and hitting “publish” helped them develop their academic writing skills.

**Critical thinking.** The second connection to academic success mentioned by participants was the development of critical thinking skills that were inherent in the post-creation process. Evidence of critical thinking is seen in disciplined thought that is clear, rational, open-minded, and informed by evidence; these are each characteristics or qualities found in the self-regulated learner who is more likely to be successful in higher education than peers who do not reflect those skills (Mega, Ronconi, & De Beni, 2013). The data contained many examples of critical thinking, where participants either described or used the term “critical thinking” to define a part of blogging or blog reading. From their own references as well as inferences made while reviewing the data, it is apparent that the critical thinking skills promoted by blogging include reflection, self-awareness, open-mindedness, and rational, disciplined thought.

Each participant mentioned how blogging helped them to reflect on academic content and how it related to their lives. For Melissa, reflection was inherent throughout the process:

introspection is more prevalent now than it was before because I want to have topics to write about . . . once I see the words on the screen it really makes me stop and reconsider my previously held ideas and maybe challenge those or see if there’s anything wrong with those.

Blogging during her study abroad experience, this sentiment was reinforced by Haven, who said,

it was helpful because it forced me to reflect on something that I wouldn’t have normally put much thought into or, you know, I kinda would read it and let it just pass through my brain I guess. It definitely made me spend more time just thinking.

Generating blog content, crafting posts, and then creating post content forced the bloggers to process their experiences and knowledge to gain a better

understanding of their chosen topic. Their heightened critical thought experience reinforces current literature, as critical reflection is found in both academic and non-academic blogging and is connected to academic success.

Related to and often a result of reflection, blogging also promotes self-awareness or knowledge of one's self and how a person appears to the world and others. The act of writing posts creates opportunities for self-awareness, as Ashley explained, "I think I also process through what it is I want people to know about me. You know, this sort of like, self-awareness of what I am disclosing to people." What Ashley vocalized is the post-creation process that requires each woman to first understand what is happening in their lives, what is important enough to mention to others, and how they feel about it. Through those exercises in content generation, they develop a deeper understanding of themselves, who they are, and what they want. This reflection and self-awareness process is not only an important aspect of critical thinking, but also self-regulation, which incorporates both self-evaluation and advanced metacognitive skills.

Self-awareness is promoted not only through content creation, but also as bloggers decide what information they will and will not allow the online world to see. As Izzy explains, reflection and self-awareness requires the blogger to be aware of what they are presenting to others. "It forms a little bit of a double consciousness, I guess, kind of imagining what people are going to think as they are reading it. It helps you look at yourself through another person's eyes and think about what they might be seeing." This double-consciousness helps the blogger to become conscious of their online profiles and leads them to think carefully about what information is available to others through their blog and other social media. This is most evident on a blogger's "about" page, and from blog observations, many bloggers post limited personal information to prevent readers from personally seeking them out. An example from blog observations, the blogger behind a student cooking blog created an anagram of her name, "Daisy Bun" for her online profile so she could be anonymous. Others, like Juliane, who use their blogs as a part of their professional or academic lives, show evidence of carefully crafted public image. For Juliane, this meant deleting negative comments from posts, posting her resume, and featuring content about her field of agriculture. Each blogger thinks carefully about their online profile and crafts the content accordingly. Bloggers monitor each post and comment to ensure it gives a consistent impression to their audience. The particular selection of information shared is indicative of self-awareness and deliberate thought. This thought process is deliberate and rational, and evident of the critical thinking processes that are unique to blogging world.

The public nature of blogging also means that bloggers and blog readers are exposed to a wide variety of different people with vastly different backgrounds, experiences, and worldviews. This leads them to be more open-minded, which

was coded “in vivo” as “broadens horizons.” Melissa expressed this from her own experience reading blogs:

I think the different vantage point is huge. If you hear about how somebody dealt with something, or ideas someone has on the subject that you might not have considered yourself, whether it’s just simple study tips versus bigger political or religious ideas that you hadn’t considered in your education, there’s just so much information out there and so many ideas and so many perspectives . . . Just the sheer volume of information is just a great source for any educational purpose. I mean, it’s out there, you just gotta go find it, you gotta go after it!

For Haven, these broadened horizons exposed her to the similarities between people with different backgrounds:

It taught me about what type of a person someone is from what they decide to put out there . . . I felt I was more like-minded to somebody whose blog I could identify [with]. For some, it made me feel like I could be in their shoes and sometimes who that was surprised me.

Participating in the blogworld exposes bloggers to alternate forms of knowledge, cultures, and forms of thought, all of which help them to become more open-minded. This “broadening” of horizons is also related to the use of blogging as an informal learning site, as bloggers learn from the experiences of those different from them and is a significant part of how blogging is related to higher education (Heo & Lee, 2013).

Whether it was explicit skills like writing and summarizing or characteristics of a self-regulated learner, blogging helped each woman in this study to develop, refine, and practice many of the skills necessary to be successful in higher education. Each woman agreed that blogging is related to improved academic performance and is connected to higher education. Katrina summarized the relationship when she said, “I’ve written about graduate school and like what I actually would have to do to get there . . . and [I think], I have to go to class now; I have to do well on my stuff now.” Through content creation, the post creation and publication process, and the careful crafting of an online profile, blogging promotes academic success in higher education for each participant.

### **Blogging and Empowerment**

Prior research emphasizes the potential for blogging to be empowering. The women in this study reinforce those findings, as blogging was empowering for each of them in different ways. Juliane expressed this potential:

I think there's a lot of people out there who have things to say and this helps them to say it and feel like they're getting it out to the world . . . I think it helps people feel empowered, feel like they're really doing what they want to do. It is an empowering experience.

Blogs represent a space for each woman where they are accepted as authorities and valid constructors of knowledge, which is empowering. Additionally, blogs facilitate and reinforce the empowerment that comes from being an authority as a place where they can meaningfully teach or inform others based on their own lives. This is reinforced by the sense of community created in the blogworld allowing for self-disclosure and providing positive reinforcement through comments.

As a platform where bloggers can inform and teach through their own experience, blogging provides an opportunity for each woman to be validated as a knower; in that way, they become "authorities," a role that they are often prevented from assuming in higher education. Katrina explicitly mentions this kind of validation as a purpose for her blog, "The purpose of my nursing blog is in some ways, like I said, talking to my younger sisters about like if you're going to go to college, this is what it's like, or this is my experience, this is what you should think about." Haven also strove to make her blog a place where the "real" experiences of studying abroad were shared. "I wanted to be realistic about what was happening with me over there and I didn't want to make it sound like I was romanticizing the whole idea of being abroad." Teaching others through personal experience was apparent throughout my blog observations as well; almost every blog I read was premised on the personal experiences of the bloggers. For example, the blogger behind a blog dedicated to helping students with Celiac's Disease shared her experience as a student struggling with Celiac's Disease to teach others how to survive that experience. As each woman blogged, she may do additional research, but the core of each post was her own experiences, knowledge, and lessons. She was teaching from her own knowledge and blogging about it required her to believe in herself and what she was saying as valid, interesting, and important for others to read. According to Stavrositu and Sundar (2012), this is empowering to the participants and is important in the development of a sense of agency.

**Community.** Within the blogworld are smaller communities of bloggers and readers. For some, the blogging community is an extension of their offline communities. As an example, Ashley and Haven blog to remain connected to their geographically distant families. For others such as Katrina and Melissa, those communities are virtual. Some blogs are created for the purpose of developing a community, as is the blog created for college students with Celiac's Disease, where the purpose is to unite college students with Celiac Disease through suggestions, recipes, stories, and product reviews.

For the participants, receiving comments is one of the most positive aspects of blogging and also the most empowering. These comments demonstrated positive validation received from others in the community. In particular, Melissa finds the comments from her blog community to be empowering:

And then when you just have these random strangers saying ‘oh through reading this I can tell you’re a really strong person’ or ‘you made really good decisions.’ It’s just nice to have that affirmation because, you know, you hear that from your family and friends but they’re your family and friends, they’re supposed to say that. When there are these strangers on the internet saying that, they don’t have anything to gain out of it.

The positive impact of comments is reinforced when it comes from unexpected places as when strangers read their posts. Juliane reinforces the empowering effect of support from the blogging community, in saying that, “people are paying attention to what I have to say.” The positive affirmation that comes from the blogging community reinforces what the blogger is feeling and saying as valid, important, and confidence building. Both of these are critical to the empowering potential of blogging.

For Juliane, blogging helps her to feel like she is a good writer:

This is going to sound very self-absorbed but I didn’t know I was such a good writer. My roommate one day said, “Juliane, you’re a good writer” and yeah, I guess I am. I should probably keep doing that so I don’t lose that talent.

Likewise, she experienced increased confidence when the online blogging community would post comments on her page. Juliane explains, “That’s an endorsement. I think it’s a confidence booster. I never really thought of it that way, but it definitely is.” Both Izzy and Haven also describe experiences where their blog has led to others telling them that they are talented or capable in skills such as writing by complimenting their content. In each case, positive feedback enhances their confidence. As confidence is an important part of empowerment, the affirmation that comes from the community is empowering.

**Self-disclosure.** In the literature, self-disclosure is one of the most important paths to empowerment through blogging (Chen, 2011; Ko & Kuo, 2009) and this study supports those findings. Blogs give each woman a place to express herself. In regards to empowerment, Izzy stated, “I definitely think so because like I said I’m quiet and not liable to speak out a ton like during class and stuff.” For Melissa, blogging gave her a place to express all of the hurt and confusion from her breakup; hurt and confusion she felt uncomfortable expressing to her friends and family:

It crashed and burned, basically, and I was on the receiving end of a lot of it. That's kind of the way it started. It was just a lot of anger at first and then, basically, you can kind of see me going through the stages of grief in those first blog posts.

Writing these personal posts were cathartic for Melissa, but empowering because of the reactions she received from others: "then also to have comments from people, anonymous random strangers, saying 'you know I totally agree with that' or 'I can sympathize with this point.'" The self-disclosure of personal and private information is critical to the creation of a blogging community and empowering because it reinforces that one is heard and what they have to say valuable.

### **Conclusion**

Women use blogs for different reasons: inform or help others, build social community, archive their lives, and gain feedback (Hollenbaugh, 2011). Regardless of the motivation to blog, this is part of the blogger's self, a communication tool, a writing tool, and a favorite hobby. In that way, blogs are a 'protected space' (Bronstein, 2013). As that protected space, blogs have the potential to enrich the academic participation of women, both by enhancing their academic success and by personally empowering them. Taylor (2011) sees blogs as, "the new political background" making blogs an "important site for the construction and circulation of various forms of feminist discourse" (p. 95). As within the literature, blogging is empowering because it gives women a voice and validates who they are and what they know. The possibility of empowerment in higher education lies within that potential. Just as blogs are empowering for women outside of education they can also play an important role within education, validating women as knowers and giving them a voice within academic discourse.

I asked each woman if they felt there was a place for blogging in higher education. They each had different suggestions for its use; they said that blogging could help to foster discussion, serve as a platform for free writes, act as a classroom accommodation, develop writing skills, and even create accountability. The common theme in each of their suggestions was that blogging could be used as an informal tool that allows for different voices and viewpoints to be heard in the classroom. Melissa expressed that thought from her own personal experience:

I always wanted to contribute but I would tend to ramble and get ahead of myself and not make sense – using a tool like blogging where you have a well-thought out response to a prompt or a question or whatever but still post

it in an atmosphere that facilitates discussion or response – I think that can be a really powerful.

Melissa and Izzy both expressed the sentiment that blogging in the classroom would allow them to speak and participate when they could not or did not want to speak in class. Using blogging in the classroom would allow each student to create and voice their own feelings about the content and contribute to the larger class discussion; receiving comments from others would provide affirmation for what they were saying. Being validated as thinkers could empower them to become independent constructors of knowledge. In those ways, blogging in higher education would give different, marginalized groups a voice and be empowering for them both as individuals and distinct communities of women.

In addition to giving women a voice in the classroom and larger academic discourse, reading other student's blogs or blogs from the larger blog community has the potential to be liberating. Blogs represent an alternative form of content that is not seen in traditional academic texts and using blogs in the classroom exposes students to a wide variety of viewpoints and alternate evaluations of generally accepted facts. Melissa explains how this helped to broaden her own worldview:

I think blogging forced me to consider and maybe challenge some of my previously held beliefs. It is what's helping me kind of be more empathetic as a person; it just kind of broadened my horizons and I consider different ideas that I hadn't given the time of day before or I just didn't know were out there. It also has made me think. Growing up in North Dakota you get a lot of people with the same ideas and the same beliefs and so I think being in the blogosphere and getting so many different viewpoints has just helped me as a person start to see more of the world, understand more of the world, and just kind of break out of this smaller bubble than I grew up in.

Many academics have looked to blogs to provide an alternate framework to speak about their research or even course content. The non-peer-reviewed nature of the blogworld allows for many more viewpoints to be heard. Using blogs in the classroom opens up those different perspectives to students and expands their notion of what is true and possible. Accepting new forms of content into the classroom allows for the traditional male hierarchy and epistemologies of higher education to be challenged and this can be empowering for women and other marginalized populations.

Challenges to implementing blogging in the classroom go beyond accepting new voices and viewpoints into the academic world. Haven highlighted some of the perceptual issues that accompany the blogging:

I haven't always perceived blogging in that way because it kind of gets relegated to being like a thing that stay-at-home moms do, like it's not formal

enough, like it doesn't have enough structure . . . it's much more of a creative medium than what people realize and I really think that it could be utilized in a great way.

The label of "informal" and the idea that blogging is a less important form of writing is part of the reason that it is empowering for women, but that may also constitute one of the greater barriers to the use of blogs in higher education. The use of blogs in the classroom represents a recognition and acknowledgement that learners can also be knowers and that recognition alone is a step towards the empowerment of women in higher education.

The use of blogs as an informal tool in the classroom can help to empower women by validating them as knowers. In addition, the use of blogs as course content might also provide evidence for different ways of knowing which can make higher education a place where different forms of knowledge are accepted while establishing an environment that is both empowering and safe for women.

### **Limitations**

The greatest limitation for this study was that the women who participated were already a part of higher education and so reflected the views of women who were already, to varying degrees, academically successful. It is true that this study's participants may have reflected characteristics of self-regulated learners due to circumstances in their lives unrelated to blogging, or, conversely, that blogging was a consequence of their academic success. While that may be the case, the data collected did not lead to those conclusions. While the connections I made to self-regulated learning seemed clear, they were not, for the most part, connections made by the bloggers themselves.

To explore this further, future research should include female bloggers who are disadvantaged from entering higher education, or those who have tried and failed. This will assist in developing a wider understanding of blogging and how it relates to higher education. Finally, the blogworld can also work to reinforce existing power structures and disempower women. For example, different segments of the blogworld focus on fashion, advocate disordered eating (e.g., "Pro-Ana" blogs), or promote values that are often marginalizing for women by creating mothering standards or advocating that wifely duties include subservience. Those blogs have the potential to be inherently disempowering to women even though participants in this study did not make those connections for themselves.

**Future Research**

From this study, findings indicate that the blogworld is not just a site for individual female empowerment, but it has the potential to significantly impact both performance and participation in higher education. Future research should explore the potential connections between blogging, empowerment, and higher education on a larger scale. This will lead to a deeper understanding of how blogging can result in improved academic performance and the empowering role that blogging plays. Additional research replicating this method could support and extend the theorized connections made here to empowerment in higher education.

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