

The Performativity of Naming: Adolescent Weblog Names as Metaphor

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Introduction

A name is a marker of significance; a name creates a symbolic relationship between the named and the characteristics culturally inscribed by the name. In very few places are adolescents allowed to name themselves, or to create names that are directly associated with them. Parents have chosen their legal names, while friends and family assign nicknames, their family names were linked to them through preceding generations; they themselves may accept and acknowledge these naming but they are rarely an active part of the process. Likewise the things associated with them are rarely under their purview to name - a bike may be “their bike” but it is still a bike. Unlike these terrestrial venues, in their online activities adolescents may choose to create their identities partially through the act of naming themselves and their spaces.

In adolescent weblogs the writer, also known as a weblogger or blogger, creates their online performance by first naming their weblog space. The performative speech acts found (Searle, 1969; 1979) in name of the space then acts as a metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) for their ideas, inspirations, and attitudes about themselves, their surroundings, and their lives.

This exploratory paper looks at the performative metaphors created in the names given to weblogs by their adolescent webloggers and how these metaphors are carried out throughout the posts and sidebars of the weblogs.

Background

Weblogs

Weblogs are a new communication media the use of which has been growing exponentially over the last several years, from 1.3 million estimated weblogs (2003) to over 100 million weblogs in October of this year (Riley, 2005). In my book chapter “Adolescent Diary Weblogs and the Unseen Audience” I modified the classic definition of weblogs as “frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence” (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004) to be more inclusive and the following definition will be used in this work.

A weblog is a frequently modified website that allows updating with items that are grouped primarily by the time and/or date of posting. Entries usually appear in reverse chronological order. Contents of the weblog may be available publicly or through restricted access. Weblogs may also utilize special software designed for this implementation. (Scheidt, in press)

Previous research has found that a significant proportion, 40% (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004), of the weblogs available online were created by adolescents.

With others going further and claiming that most bloggers are adolescent girls (Orlowski, 2003).

Within the field of possible genres of weblogs, adolescents produce 52.8% (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright, 2004) of the diary/personal journal weblogs. Herring, Kouper et al. define “personal journal” as writings that include the “blogger’s thoughts and internal workings” (2004). Historically the terms “journal” and “diary” have been used interchangeably (Bunkers & Huff, 1996; Fothergill, 1974), I have chosen to use the term “diary” for sites of my research in that I find considerable linkage between paper diaries and their online counterparts (see Scheidt (in press) for a more complete discussion).

Adolescence

Mass media has certainly reported that teens are flocking to weblogging as an online communication venue (Armstrong, 2003; Bauer & Blobaum, 2005; Gibson, 2005; Grimes, 2003) while academic study of adolescents use of weblogs are only beginning (Bortree, 2005; Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright, 2004; Huffaker, 2004; Scheidt, in press; van Dijck, 2004).

In this work I am using the Steinberg definition of adolescence as the second decade of life, roughly 10 – 19 (2002).

Metaphor

Metaphor has been seen as an indispensable part of communication. A “‘simplistic’ definition of metaphor would be a comparison between two seemingly unrelated objects without necessarily using words such as ‘like’ or ‘as’” (Ghassemzadeh, 2005, p. 290). Metaphor “works by positing a logic of shared categories and analogies of meaning among terms” (Barbatsis & Fegan, 1999). Metaphors not only convey the hidden aspects of communication but at the same time provide a program for our behavior, our thinking and the exercise of imagination (Ghassemzadeh, 2005, p. 290).

The concept of metaphor as shared logic has been transported to online environments where the use of metaphor permeates human-computer interfaces (Erickson, 1990). Metaphors provide an operational framework in which users can identify the functional meaning of what they are viewing. A well known framing metaphor is the “desktop” used by all the major operating systems with graphical interfaces. The metaphor of the desktop plays through in the subordinate structures of the system, we have “files” in which to store electronic “documents” and we use graphical icons of scissors to “cut” out text to be moved to another location on the screen.

Like Cheseboro’s discussion of rhetorical strategy found in definition (as cited in Chesebro, 1998) where definitions “are ‘designed to create a socially shared universe of understanding, perspective, or worldview’ that creates the ‘foundation’ for ‘concerted action,’” online metaphors both visual and textual create a shared performance space where authors create an identity both for themselves and for their weblogs.

Performance of self

Jon McKenzie commented that while the distinction between human and technological performance has become blurred both concepts are necessary for “experience design” (1994, p. 88). The immediacy of the personal narratives (Carlin, 1998) found in weblogs accentuates the experience design where both human and technology are combined to provide the reader with an experience of the writer’s self.

Goffman posited that “when an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers” to take his performance serious (1959, p. 15). Further he lays out that a performance may be present along a continuum bounded two extremes, one end of which is the performer who is seduced into believing his own performance and the other where the performer is cynical of it.

In her work on internet relay chat (IRC), Brenda Danet, extended both Goffman’s discussion of performance (1959) and framing (1974) to illustrate her participants presence within five frames during their interaction during a virtual party – including, real life, the IRC game, party, pretend play, and performance (Danet, 2001, p. 102). Each of these frames is controlled by a meta-message, for example the party frame is credited with “Let’s have a party; let’s have fun...” (Danet, 2001, p. 103.) While the researchers exact titling of the frame and its meaning may be invisible to the participants the existence of the frame, and the words associated with it, inherently define the space of performance. Within the frame there is an expectation that, in most cases, performer’s actions will be consistent with the expectations of outlined in that frame, though as Goffman points out there may be contrary performances as well.

Methodology

Participants

Participating weblogs were randomly selected from the domain of recently updated English language weblogs using a targeted search through PubSub (2004). PubSub is a matching service that compares the search query against the 17.7 million weblogs they currently track (2005). PubSub differs from traditional search engines in that the user creates a subscription query which is stored and continuously matched against newly updated weblog posts as their text passes through PubSub’s portal.

The search query used in this study looked for the use of the word “teen” and passed by any entries using that word in conjunction with “porn” or “sex.” The data was gathered on October 1, 2005.

Researcher

It is wise to note that the performative and metaphorical analysis of adolescent weblogs, as a domain, is both hampered and highlighted when viewed as a cross-cultural activity. In this case the middle-aged Midwestern female analyst is both assisted and mired by her previous status as a native within the domain, and is now limited to the role of knowledgeable observer. In fact the knowledge gained as a native may often be a hindrance because the domain of the subjects is constantly evolving, it is clear that the

life of a teenager during 1970's, when the author was a native, is no longer the life of current teenagers.

Procedure

The collected URLs were reviewed to eliminate commercial and adult produced sites, and sites that had more than one author/writer leaving a corpus of sites that appear to be created by adolescents.

The judgment of the author's age is made through triangulation. First, a thorough examination of any direct references to the participant's age is conducted, e.g., in the post text or in the profile. Then a careful reading of the weblog posts is done with special emphasis on topics, e.g., school, after-school jobs, sports, and dating. Consideration is also made of language structure and use, e.g., is it consistent with the stated or apparent age of the author? Finally, where there are no strong reasons to doubt the author's veracity, age is accepted on face value. Through these means a final corpus of eight weblogs produced by adolescents was established, two of which were randomly selected for detailed analysis in this paper.

In analyzing the weblogs, first general characteristics of the weblog were recorded, including the collection of complete title(s) and author's name/nickname/username, when available. Visual descriptions of the weblog main page were noted. Individual posts available on the main page were counted. Additionally word counts were done, using Microsoft Words word count facilities, for each post available on the main page and averages were computed using Microsoft Excel. Posts for 2005 were read for discussion of and themes related to the weblog title.

All of the eight weblogs in this corpus appear to have been written by girls. The gender breakdown is not surprising given that adolescent girls seem to outnumber boys in weblog use, particularly in the diary category (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004) and given the small sample size utilized.

Because of the extensive use, by the adolescents, of titles originating in other media the intertextuality between the weblog and the titles original source was minimally explored.

All quotations from the weblogs are presented with original spelling, punctuation, and formatting intact.

Results

I have measured out my life with coffee spoons... (2004) is a LiveJournal weblog produced by holli, a diminutive of her first name, a 17 year old female from North Carolina. LiveJournal users often have both names and usernames and in this case holli has adopted the username of pensando. The weblog does not include specific personal information or secondary titles on the site's *User Info* page.

The site uses a minimally altered standard LiveJournal template with a single column and a header that includes the title; authors name; links to the archives, friends, and user info; and a statement that says the main page displays the 20 most recent posts. Three shades of purple are used for the sidebars that visually separate text and frame the

main pages entries. The header information is given in the lightest shade of purple and black text on white. A photograph of two bright pink flowers against greenery is found in the upper right hand corner of the page.

Individual entry text is presented in the lightest shade of purple on a white background, with post titles appearing above the text in the darkest shade of purple. Each entry has a date and time, with the date at the top of the entry in black text on medium purple. The time of the entry is displayed on the left of the actual text in black on the lightest shade of purple. Some entries include LiveJournal supplied Current Mode animated graphical icons including a smiling and bouncing blue kitten for cheerful and a signing blue kitten – represented by only its head – for bored.

While the header does state that the last 20 posts are displayed on the main page, there are actually only 18 posts available. The dates of the available posts range from May 4, 2005 to October 1, 2005. Total word count for all posts on the main page is 10,045 words with an average per post count of 558 words.

The first entry in the weblog is dated March 22, 2004. In this first post she notes that she had a previous weblog in which she had not posted recently and had forgotten the password to access the site.

The weblog's title is taken from line 51 of T. S. Eliot's poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1917). The performative quality of the phrase revolves around the author's appearance to be strictly measuring out their life force in small calculated quantities. While this stinginess may have been appropriate for Prufrock it is not easily aligned with holli's performance in her weblog.

First, holli's performance through the design of her page can hardly be termed stingy. Her use of color, though monochromatic, creates a bright and lively space. Her posts are long exceeding the 250 word count that Crawford refers to as an "essayist" in his study of library weblogs (2005).

In looking at the structure of the weblog's main page the only item that could be called "measured" is her regularity in posting with the average post occurring once every 9.22 days. While holli may not be measuring out the living of her life with coffee spoons she is measuring out the reader's access to information about her life through very irregular glimpses.

Textually holli's posts are effusive. They are written in a conversational tone often without paragraphing. Her writing style rather than being measured bear the hallmarks of a breathless monologue, along with the limited paragraphing she sprinkles her text liberally with capitalized words to accentuate the emotion behind the words. Holli shows a casual and informal style by using lowercase throughout her posts including in names and proper nouns. Likewise her sentence endings, where marked at all, are marked most commonly by ellipses which connect one thought to the next. Her use of quotation marks is equally casual; often her comments about the quotation are included in the quotation itself thereby attributing her emotions and perspective to the original author as well. For example:

I was like HELL yeah. and so we chilled there, and mike came and hung with me and leah and stacie for a bit...where the topic of the conversation became: "so you should definately come down to the career center sometime in the morning..." and he was like "well, you know, i might do

that after fall break and la di da" and i was just like shaking my head like "no baby, that's really early in the morning, and you'll run into a bunch of people that you don't wanna see and blah blah blah..." and then him and Leah and Stacie just talked about it...sooo...whatever. but yeah. and then S + L + Me went outside and chilled and had a long long loooooong convo about life and love and things of that nature. and Stacie really surprised me with some of the things that she said. it was funny. but um yeah and then Mike and I went to go see Corpse Bride which was FANTASTIC, (it's also the first time I've like ever let some boy buy my movie ticket and a coke...I was like dude, I HATE LETTING PEOPLE PAY FOR ME, and he was like, well, too bad.) and then we went home, where Jarvis was passed out. and then Valerie showed up and she woke up Jarvis and they were all loud and obnoxious together like usual...but they finally left later and went to Valerie's and they wanted us to come, cuz they had beer and stuff, but we were like naaah, we're good. (2005)

This lengthy quotation, 261 words, is necessary just to capture the weblog author's idea completely given the writer's infrequent use of final punctuation at places where ideas have been completed.

While an explanation of or a direct reference to the title of the weblog was not found in the posts reviewed, it did become apparent that Holli often uses titles from songs as weblog post titles, with 15 instances during 2005. These titles are sometimes completely unrelated to the text of the post, they may provide an ironic twist, or they support the text of the post. For example, the weblog post titled *All I ever wanted, All I ever needed, Is here in my arms* discusses both her social activities with her current boyfriend and his desire to have a fight with her previous boyfriend. Establishing her warm relationship with her current boyfriend and creating irony about her relationship with her ex-boyfriend and the relationship between the two males.

Similarly during 2005, she posted two poems in their entirety. First is an original work she posted in January. The second is Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" which was posted in April.

On the whole while Holli's weblog title sets out a metaphor of the author as holding back by restraining her life, her weblog does not carry this through into the text or design of the space. In truth Holli is exuberant, and so full of life that she can't be bothered with the normal conventions of written communication. Her vibrancy explodes off the screen. Even her sometimes irregular posting style does not truly appear to be rationing as much as that she has difficulty finding time in her busy life to sit down and write a post. In whole the emotional metaphor provided in the titling creates an ironic counterpoint to her performance of self as found in the text and visual design of the weblog.

Mooney, the author of *I'm Just A Boring Example of Everybody Else* (2004), is a 15 year old girl, living in New York state both facts are found in the weblog's sidebar. Mooney is her family name, which is noted in the titling of a weblog post, and her feminine first name is also given.

Her LiveJournal site includes both a user name and a secondary title on the *Information* page as well as two graphics. Her user name is listed as

“dan_the_treeman,” this masculine nickname is in direct conflict with the graphic near it on the page and with the feminine given name posted in the weblog text. The hand drawn picture shows a anima-like female character whose mouth is obscured by a large knit scarf that wraps around her neck.

The secondary title for *I'm Just A Boring Example of Everybody Else* weblog is listed as *Now really, how is this important?* It is also of interest that on the main page's sidebar Mooney has added an *Other Junk* category with one entry “If you're bored than you must be boring too.”

The site is two-column design with the short sidebar on the left. A custom graphic that is stored on a third-party site, maintained by Nick Coffey (2003). The relationship between the adolescent weblogger and the graphical site owner is undefined. The main page is presented on a yellow-green background with text primarily in black, save for the day of the week of the post which appears in mid-deep orange. This color scheme creates a clashing (Scheidt & Wright, 2004), though easy to read visual field for the authors posts.

Individual entries often utilize the LiveJournal feature to include current musical listening as part of the entry. The listening notation includes both the artist and the title of the selection and is listed at the top of the entry before the post's text. Example:

[**music** | Cute Is What We Aim For - There Is A Class For This].

There are 20 posts on the main page, the dates of the available posts range from September 13, 2005 to October 1, 2005. Total word count for all posts on the main page is 3,651 words with a per post average of 182.6 words, a number consistent with Crawford's average of 186 words per post (2005).

The first entry in the weblogs is dated February 5, 2004. This post does not appear to be the original weblog entry; rather it appears to be a continuation of a previous thread that discusses her relationship with her father. It is unclear if the current weblog is a continuation of a previous weblog; if LiveJournal has limited access to older archives, as do some free weblogging sites; or if the writer is simply utilizing an unusual communication strategy.

The weblogs title, like holli's, has been taken from another source. In Mooney's case the title is the first line of the refrain from Steve Burns' song *What I Do on Saturday*, a song with one verse and a refrain both of which are repeated three times. The secondary title *Now really, how is this important?* appears to be an original contribution by the author, though the phrase “how is this important” is in fairly common usage.

The title *I'm Just A Boring Example of Everybody Else* is not played out throughout the weblog, where posts continually show that Mooney is neither boring or similar to others her age. In fact, she is aware of these evaluations in that her secondary titling questions the reader's idea that the title is even important. Similarly the *Other Junk* category comment “If you're bored than you must be boring too,” certainly raises the issue that others may be more boring than she finds herself to be. Finally the weblogs sidebar includes the comment “I have very strange tastes” not a comment one would expect from someone that truly considered themselves to be boring or cut from the same cloth as others.

Certainly her posting regularity does not support the idea that she is boring. The posting average for the main page is 0.9 days between posts. Keeping the regularity of

posting at slightly more than one post per day requires both the commitment of the writer and something about which to write.

Textually Mooney's posts are tightly written and comment on both her own life and the lives of others around her. Her diary is structured as a "chronicle of everything" (Mallon, 1984, p. 1) with entries describing her time in school, her outside interests, her friends, and her family. Her entries are often humorous and show her inquisitive nature. For example,

I think I am going to start expressing myself in a series of stomps and hand claps. It is a much more musical way of communicating than talking. I think this plan is for the better because I talk too much, but you can never stomp too much. Yes, clapping you can do too much of, so I'll keep that to a minimum.

The title of the above post is "*Stomp clap Stomp Stomp*" which shows Mooney's propensity for post titles that are unique contributions and which are tightly interwoven with the text of the entry. A second example is the post title "NEEDED: new insult," the first paragraph of the post follows.

Today I told TJ, this kid in my English class that "I'm never talking to you again" and he replied "You said that yesterday". The thing is that wasn't some "thats what your mama said" kind of retort, I had most likely told him I am never talking to him again yesterday. Which means who else I had I refused to talk to twice? I need retire the "I'm never talking to you again" reply.

The title of the post clearly encapsulates the text and provides clues about the contents to the reader.

Like holli, Mooney does not provide a direct reference to the weblog title within the available text of the posts, so her reason(s) for choosing the lyric is unavailable. Likewise Mooney's titling is in opposition to the actual performance of self in the weblog as a whole. But unlike holli's performance Mooney clearly understands that her titling is in opposition to her self perception as it plays out through the text and design of her weblog.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was the analysis of adolescent weblog titles through their performative metaphors and then the frames set by those metaphors on the structure of the weblog itself. This has been exploratory research looking at one facet of the questions that may be part of my dissertation.

Through this research I have learned that because of the adolescent's extensive use of titling taken from other media it was difficult to isolate the metaphors from the intertextuality present in each title. The intertextual references in this corpus include one title taken from the text of a popular novel, one from a classic American poem, and three from popular songs – two use lines from recent songs and one uses the title of a 1980's

pop song. It became very difficult to look at the titles without looking at the media they referenced, thereby complicating the stated analysis.

It is interesting that the two weblogs analyzed in-depth in this paper both utilize titling that does not create a supportive frame for their performance of self as found in the text and visual design of the weblog. It should be noted here that while one participant uses her titling as a tongue-in-cheek reference, the other seems to have chosen a poem line to which she is drawn as she is drawn to other song lyrics and poems which she utilizes as post titles within the weblog and both the weblog and post titles illustrate her musical and reading tastes rather than being viewed as related to the weblog or post text itself.

Therefore this exploratory paper shows that, at least when looking at this limited sample, performative metaphors created by the adolescent weblog title are not uniformly carried out throughout the posts and sidebars of the weblogs. In fact the two weblogs analyzed here stand like Goffman's posts at one end of the performance continuum (1959).

Future Research

Additional research will be necessary to explore the intertextuality of weblog titling in adolescent produced weblogs that was found in this research. Both qualitative and quantitative methods should be used in this research to provide in-depth understanding of the phenomena.

Finally additional clarification of the research question utilized in this paper will be necessary before additional research can be undertaken. A content analysis with the research question, "Does the research title act as a framing metaphor for weblog?" may be appropriate as a first step.

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