

Moms behind screens

Internet commenting and its effect on content creation

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>Computer-mediated communication and the fast development of the Internet and technology have encouraged people to start to create online content available for the general public. Personal blogs and "internet-diaries" have been filling the Internet for quite some time already. However, the possibility of online anonymity also enables miscommunication and online harassment. Thus, blog authors and journalists often encounter negativity through online comment sections.</p> <p>The aim of the study was to examine whether blog authors were affected by the online comments that they received from their readers and other internet users. It was also examined whether the comments affected the blog authors' content creation process as well as whether they were personally influenced by the online comments.</p> <p>Studying online communication and blogging, as well as conducting a small qualitative study constructed the thesis. The study was conducted using a qualitative research approach and a semi-structured survey method. A total of 6 open-ended questions were asked from three blog authors. The authors were also given an opportunity to express their thoughts about blogging in general.</p> <p>The study showed that the nature of comments that the blogs received was very dependent on the blog-post subject and the style of writing. The participating authors were not particularly affected by the comments but agreed that sometimes they limited the subject selection process.</p>		
Keywords/tags Blog, blogging, communication, computer-mediated, commenting, internet		
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Tiivistelmä <p>Tietokoneilla käytävä viestintä sekä teknologian ja internetin nopea kehitys ovat antaneet kaikille mahdollisuuden tuottaa kaikille helposti tavoitettavissa olevaa sisältöä internettiin. Henkilökohtaiset blogit ja ”internet-päiväkirjat” ovat täyttäneet internetiä jo jonkin aikaa. Internetin luoma mahdollisuus toimia anonyymisti on kuitenkin mahdollistanut myös negatiivisen ja jopa vihamielisen käytöksen netissä, joille blogistit ja toimittajat altistuvat päivittäin.</p> <p>Opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena oli selvittää, vaikuttaako internetkommentointi blogistien toimintaan kun he tuottavat sisältöä blogeihinsa, sekä vaikuttaako negatiiviset kommentit heihin henkilökohtaisesti.</p> <p>Opinnäytetyössä tutkittiin tietokoneilla käytävää kommunikaatiota sekä blogeja ja bloggausta. Opinnäytetyöhön sisältyi myös suppea kvalitatiivinen tutkimus, joka suoritettiin puoli-strukturoidulla kyselyllä. Tutkimukseen valittiin kolme blogistia, jotka vastasivat kuuteen kysymykseen, sekä saivat mahdollisuuden kertoa bloggaamiseen liittyvistä ajatuksistaan yleisesti.</p> <p>Tutkimus osoitti, että blogikommenttien sävy riippuu paljon blogikirjoituksen aiheesta sekä kirjoitustyylistä. Osallistuvilla blogistiteillä kommentit eivät pääsääntöisesti olleet sisältöön vaikuttavassa asemassa, mutta joissain tapauksissa sillä oli rajaava vaikutus aiheen valintaan.</p>		
Avainsanat Blogi, bloggaaminen, kommunikaatio, kommentointi, internet		
Muut tiedot		

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1 Introduction

Computer-mediated communication, such as online commenting and conducting anonymous conversations on the internet have become an ordinary part of our lives. Most online magazines have a comment section under their articles, which allows the readers to participate and converse on the subject. Online conversation, however, is not always just neutral or positive, or even constructive. It has become a global phenomenon that the possibility of commenting anonymously enables people to become aggressive and hateful towards each other without ever being held responsible.

Journalists, however, are hardly the only online author group that continues to be exposed to online hatred and even cyber bullying. Personal blog authors, who often engage their readers vastly with subjects such as family life and kids, are often up against a number of blog comments that many would consider hateful.

The main objective of this thesis was to study whether the internet and blog commenting affected the content creation process of the blog authors and how the authors experienced the comments made on their blog submissions. It was essential to study whether the feedback that the bloggers received had an effect on the bloggers' emotions and how they experienced being observed by people whom they did not know personally.

The theoretical framework for this thesis was written as a literature review on computer-mediated communication and its effect on the internet users' online behavior as well as communication and online blogging in general. The literature was collected from both libraries and from the internet. Furthermore, the study was conducted in order to obtain in-depth information on the feelings of the people behind the blog entries.

The study was conducted using a qualitative research method, a semi-structured survey. There are thousands of blogs online, and the thesis subject itself is extensive, so it was decided to limit the participating blogs to one main theme – mothers who mainly write about their personal life and children. Three blog authors were interviewed via email, which enabled the thesis author to interview the participants from a distance.

The research questions were: 1. Do anonymous comments from blog readers affect the content creation process of a blog author? And 2. How do the blog authors experience being observed and judged by what they write online?

2 Theoretical Background

The theoretical background describes the key concepts of communication as well as computer-mediated communication in general. The section also introduces the art of blogging as a way of online communication.

2.1 Communication

"When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but creatures of emotion." – Dale Carnegie

Communication between human beings is an essential part of our lives and an ever-growing number of daily activities could not be done without communication. Despite the fact that most of us are born with the ability to talk, we certainly sometimes forget how complex the process of effective communication really is.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2015) defines communication as *"the act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc to someone else"*. (2015) The core idea of communication can be defined as a chain of a sender, a message and a receiver, usually represented as in Figure 1 below. The message is the most essential part of communication, and in order to travel, it needs a sender to first encode the message and to send it forward – and then a receiver to receive and decode it.



Figure 1 - Communication Model

Thurlow and colleagues, however, remind us about the dynamics of communication; "the meaning of a message does not reside in words but is much more dependant on the context" that may shift constantly from person to person or moment to moment (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic 2004). Moreover, Anolli and colleagues agree with this, underlining that in communication it is one thing what is said and another what is meant. (Anolli, Ciceri & Riva 2002)

Unlike seen in Figure 1 above, communication, of course, does not end when the receiver receives the message. The process usually continues with the receiver decoding the messages and sending feedback to the original sender. That is how communication repeatedly is prolonged and leads on to new information and discoveries. The message is successfully communicated when it is perceived and understood in the same way by both parties, the sender and the receiver. (Ludlow & Panto 1992)

In their book "The Essence of Effective Communication", Ludlow and Panton clearly point out that communication is something done by people and does not exist without people taking some action. The interpersonal relationships between the sender and receiver also play a major role in effective communication. Thus, if the parties have a strong connection a mutual trust with each other, they will not need to hold back but can be honest and speak openly. This encourages open discussion and communication. (Ludlow & Panton 1992, 2-5)

In Pergamon Flexible Learning's Management Extra series "Effective Communication" it is stated that communication in a face-to-face situation is not only words and speech. To send a message successfully so that the receiver understands it in the way it was meant, social cues, such as posture and facial expressions are often used by the sender in order to emphasize the message wanted to be sent. It is essential for the receiver to know how to code these cues in order to understand the message as it was meant to be understood. (Pergamon Flexible Learning, 2007)

The message, while being transmitted by the chosen channel – speech or phone call for example, can be affected by so called "noise". The message can be lost completely or distorted due to external factors. An easy-to-understand example of this could be problems on a telephone network, which would cause the person on the other end of the line to not hear what was said by the other party. Alternatively, the message may have been distorted by the way it was spoken; the communication parties might not share the same quality of vocabulary, for example. (Pergamon Flexible Learning, 2007, 4-6)

Despite the much of the communicational noise that we are bothered by everyday, people have definitely found a way to communicate easily with each other. When it comes to communication, the human kind has developed and will develop more and more in the future. Who knows, perhaps in the next hundred thousand years the term 'communication' means something completely different from what it means today.

2.2 Computer-mediated communication

Computer-mediated communication, or CMC in short, can be defined as easily as "communication that takes places between humans via the instrumentality of computers" (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic 2004). The message is transmitted from a person to another by a computer – this is CMC at its simplest. CMC can be used to orchestrate a variety of communication situations because of its flexibility and and convenience. In addition, it provides a channel of communication on an international level since people around the world have access to computers and the internet (Norris 2012).

Computer-mediated communication was once confined to technical users and was considered somewhat arcane. This no longer holds true. Computer-mediated communication is a key component of the emerging technology of computer networks. (Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire 1984)

The social scientists in the quotation above knew this already in the 1980's, and it still is a fact. Therefore, CMC has had an enormous part in the state of globalization today, as messages can travel around the world in a matter of minutes, at a low cost and at ease. According to Anolli and colleagues (2002), CMC has created new opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous discussions among geographically scattered internet users.

As mentioned, there are two types of computer-mediated communication: synchronous or asynchronous. "The most important feature of synchronous CMC is that it provides a real-time link between users' computers". (Anolli, et al. 2002) Synchronous CMC happens in internet chatrooms and instant messengers, as in the Facebook Messenger, for example. When both the sender and receiver are "online" on the same instant messenger and when the message is sent, the receiver receives the message instantly and can reply in a matter of seconds.

In contrast, a common example of asynchronous CMC is email, or electronic mail, which allows the message to be sent in an instant but the receiver will first have to log onto the email box provider and open the message in order to read it and reply. There are no real-time links between the users in asynchronous CMC.

In comparison to F2F (=face to face) communication, CMC lacks social cues, which enable the interactors to identify the interpersonal situations they take part in. CMC often occurs in a "social vacuum" where personal identities tend to vanish and fade. Communication with a computer takes longer, and the absence of these meta-communicative features, such as facial expressions, tone of voice and posture forces people to find other ways of making their message as easy to understand as possible (Anolli et al. 2002, 197 - 199). This might be one of the reasons why it is very usual in computer-mediated communication that the texts include characteristics of both written and spoken language. Especially when writing emails, features such as 'smilies' are used to give a spoken feel to the messages. (Pemberton & Shurville, 2000)

Miscommunication in CMC

" [---] The lack of social feedback and unpredictable style of messages might make it difficult to coordinate and comprehend messages." (Kiesler et al. 1984) Miscommunication on the internet often seems to be a result of pure misunderstanding. Because of the lack of proper, instant and physical cues, such as facial expressions or tone of voice from the sender, it is easy for the receiver to misunderstand a message.

According to Annoli and colleagues (2000, 200), many areas of CMC are characterized by hostile communication and intense negative language, and many users of IRC as well as the users of different discussion forums around the internet have experi-

enced being a part in a heated discussion. Terms, such as "flaming", "trolling" and "spamming" are known to every other internet user.

It seems, however, to be an opinion of many that the internet "just is like that" and that there is nothing that can be done to the fact that internet allows people to say whatever, whenever and however they want – no questions asked. The discussion culture on the internet is normalizing overreactions, and when a discussion culture such as this is involved with our society, the end result is a chaos. (Pullinen 2015)

Spamming, at its simplest, can be defined as the act of using electronic messaging tools to send meaningless messages to those who otherwise wish not to receive them. The definition differs from country to country and as well as based on how it is used in the local legislation. Mostly, however, it can be agreed that spam is considered electronic communication not anticipated or wanted by the receiver. (Email Metrics Report, 2014) Spamming can happen in the internet chat rooms, instant messengers, forums or discussion boards as well as via email. The latter is probably the most well-known style of spamming – often including commercial content and sent to a large group of people. A person sending out unwanted email is called a *spammer*.

Flaming is aggressive and inimical confrontation and discussion between internet users, and it is often the result of intense online discussion about concrete real-life issues such as politics, economics and religion. Flaming happens exclusively online on the internet in discussion forums and on IRC and, for example, in video-sharing platforms, such as Youtube's comment sections. Since computer-mediated communication lacks individuality, it might be seen as impersonal. When computer users have to imagine their audience, they might forget that the audience is not the computer itself but other users behind computer screens. (Kiesler et al. 1984) This is one of the reasons why flaming often occurs as a result of intense online discussions when the parties all forget the social norms and when they do not see the opposing party per-

sonally. A good example of a common flaming discussion is the debate of computer operating systems such as Microsoft's Windows and Apple's iOS. An internet user often taking part in these flaming discussions is called a *flamer*.

Trolling stands for the act of starting inflammatory arguments and intentionally upsetting people online by posting upsetting comments, pictures or other digital material in discussion forums and other online platforms that enable anonymous participation. Wikipedia even suggests that the attention that trolling has gained from the media has caused the term 'trolling' to be equated with online harassment. According to Mat Honan (2012), trolling is often just self-righteousness. "*It is something people do because they are convinced that everyone who disagrees with them is wrong [---].*" He also states that trolling could be defined as "inability to filter". This means that as the person is so certain about being right and truthful, he just "has to" remind everyone else just how wrong they are. In the internet slang, a person who does this is called a *troll*.

However, despite the miscommunication online, anonymous conversation has an enormous amount of value that people should remember. It protects the minorities, people that are being harassed or just scared, and it works as an indispensable support and assistance for those who do not want to speak about their problems in public: the depressed, lonely or just otherwise shy, for example. (Pullinen 2015)

2.3 Blogging

'Blog' is an abbreviation of the word 'weblog', which is an informational website that consists of separate entries, or 'posts'. The entries often appear on the site in a reverse chronological order the latest first and so on. A vast majority of blogs includes a possibility for visitors and readers to comment on a particular blog post. This feature differentiates blogs from other websites and allows blogs to become interactive.

Gumbrecht, Narni and Schiano (2003) propose that the birth year of blogs should be 1997 when Dave Winer began writing "Scripting News" in April. "Scripting News, a record of Winer's reflections on a wide range of topics, is currently the longest-running blog on the Internet." (Gumbrecht et al. 2003) Blogs started slowly but steadily to grow in number.

In 1998 there were only a handful of blogs on the internet (Blood 2000). The following year the blog community grew as the first blog platform was published on the internet that could be used without a good knowledge of HTML or "Hyper Text Markup Language" commonly used to create websites. Today there are several websites like this online; websites that make it easy for people to set up their own blogs. Some use them as personal diaries, and some use them as advertising tools for their companies.

Blogs as advertising tools for companies

Heidi Cohen from the Content Marketing Institution has said that blogs "are the heart of social media because they supply the content that drives to social media conversation". Companies have been increasingly active in starting blogs for their businesses in the past years. As seen in Figure 2 below, in 2015, 80% of B2B marketers in North America used blogs as tools for content marketing. (B2B Content Marketing Report, 2015) This makes blogging the fourth most popular content marketing tool.



Figure 2 - B2B Content Marketing Trends 2015 (Adapted from Pulizzi, J. & Richie, A. 2015)

This figure is not surprising as there are multiple reasons why everyone building their own business and brand should at least consider launching a blog. According to Pulizzi and Ritchie (2012), a blog is not only an inexpensive marketing tool but can also work as a magnet for customers. By actively updating a company's blog, the company provides content for their customers to converse and discuss on other social media platforms. This easily forms bonds between the customer and the business because blogs work as 24/7 communication platforms as well as support numerous different content formats such as audio, video and PDF's. Furthermore, blogs provide direct and factual metrics for companies to monitor their marketing activities, which is naturally an important factor with any marketing effort.

Personal blogging

However, as mentioned earlier, business blogs are not the only style of blogs. Personal blogs are growing in number day by day. In 2003, Gumbrecht and colleagues from the University of Stanford conducted a small qualitative study in which they

investigated the motivation behind one's personal blog. They interviewed a few bloggers and asked about their blogging motivation and habits. They found five major motivators for personal blogging. They were:

- 1 To document one's life
- 2 To providing commentary
- 3 To express emotions
- 4 To articulate ideas and
- 5 To form and maintain community forums.

Naturally, these motivations were noticed to be in play simultaneously and they were not excluding the others by any means. (Gumbrecht et al. 2003)

These motivators can be seen later in the survey answers and research results. It seems that for mothers especially the motivators number one and three were the most important ones. Documenting one's life was exactly what they did with their blogs, not only for themselves and their own family and friends, but also for the public. Expressing emotions was also a very common feature when reading the answers and examining the participating blogs.

Online blogging platforms

In 2010, Michael Fitzpatrick, a journalist in Lifehacker.com listed the most popular blogging platforms online. Blogger.com, Tumblr.com and Wordpress.com were the top three.

Blogger.com

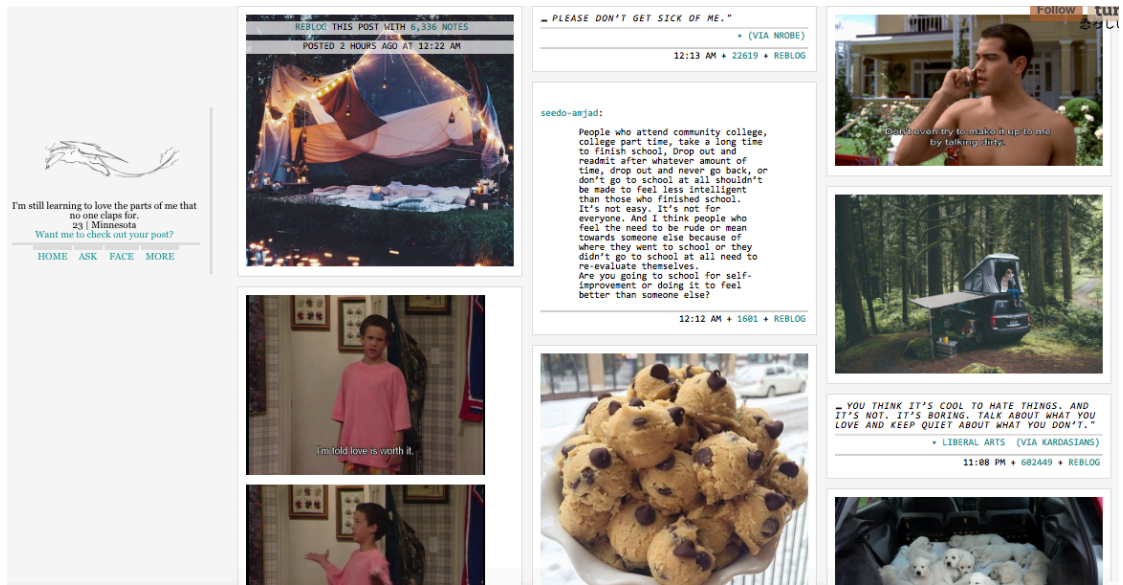
Blogger is a free and easy-to-use blogging platform owned by Google. It has a clean design and a variety of ready-made templates for users to choose from. Many users value the fact that they do not have to be experts in HTML-coding in order to set up a nice blog. One of the participating blogs was published under blogger.com. (See picture 1)



Picture 1 Example of a Blogger.com -based blog

Tumblr.com

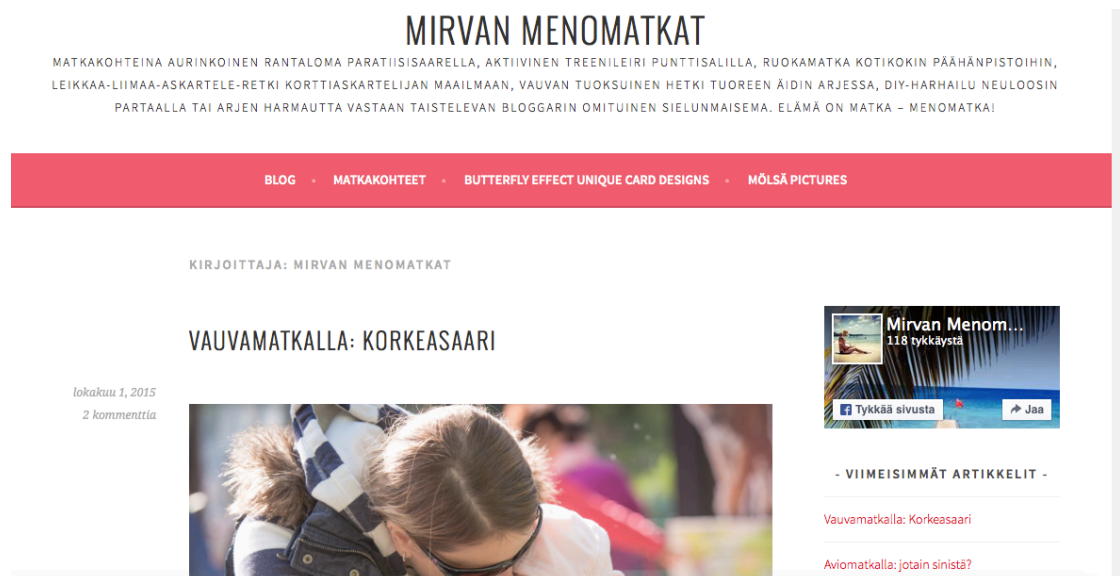
Tumblr was founded in 2007 and it is now home to over 244 million blogs and 115 billion blog posts. (Tumblr.com/About). Tumblr (see Picture 2) is a mixture of a web-log and a microblogging site. It is more common for a Tumblr –user to post pictures, audio and video than it is for a Blogger –user, who would usually write a piece of a text.



Picture 2 Example of a Tumblr.com -based blog

WordPress.com

Wordpress was founded in 2005, and it is said to be the most popular blogging platform with currently powering over a fifth of the web. Wordpress is very easy to use, open source software with which it is possible to start one's own blog within minutes without any previous knowledge of HTML. Almost 410 million people visit nearly 16 billion WordPress –based websites and blogs each month. Almost everything on WordPress is free for users, but additional features can be bought if wanted. (Wordpress.com/About) One of the participating blogs was published under Wordpress.com (see Picture 3).



Picture 3 Example of a WordPress.com -based blog

3 Research Method

In this section, the research method as well as the implementation of the study is explained. The study participants and their blogs as well as the data analysis methods are also introduced.

3.1 Overview of the research method

"Qualitative research method is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as a part of a particular context and interactions there." - Patton, 1985

A qualitative research method was chosen because it offers an opportunity to examine the data by feel rather than in terms of plain numbers and figures. As the main object of this thesis was to study a phenomenon clearly visible in our culture, a qualitative research method was chosen. Qualitative research has deserved its propulsion mainly by comparison to quantitative research. The essence of qualitative research has been determined by what it is not when compared to quantitative research (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 13). Research methods should be chosen based on the specific task at hand (Silverman 2009, 15), and it was clear that a qualitative research method would suit best because of its characteristics.

According to Merriam (2009, 4-5), the two main characteristics of qualitative research are that the researchers pursue to an understanding of the meaning that people have about the world around them, and that in all qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument of both data collection and its analysis. This, and the facts mentioned earlier, were the main reasons why a qualitative research method was chosen for this study.

In qualitative research, the researcher often concentrates on a rather small number of cases and tries to analyze the small sample as thoroughly as possible. Therefore, the criterion of the sample being scientific is not the amount of data but the quality of it (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, 18). As qualitative research intends to make sense of a phenomenon from the participants' point of view (Merriam 2009, 6), it was a clear choice of method for this study.

The point of this study was to find out whether blog commenting had an effect on the content production of the chosen blog author. It was studied whether positive commenting made the authors write more about a particular subject and, in comparison, whether negative commenting blocked the author from writing about a particular subject. Another matter that this thesis focused on was the internet commenting as a phenomenon, in other words, the reason behind all the negativity that people come across online nowadays, and how it affects the feelings of a person writing a personal online blog.

According to Mayring (2014, 10), one of the most important things in qualitative research is to determine clear research questions, which should be expressed in a question form. It makes the whole research relevant and the research analysis possible.

The research questions were:

1. Do anonymous comments from blog readers affect the content creation process of a blog author?
2. How do the blog authors experience being observed and judged by what they write online?

3.2 Semi-structured qualitative survey and its implementation

“The qualitative survey studies the diversity of a topic within a given population; the statistical survey studies the numerical distribution of the characteristics of a topic in a population.” (Jansen. 2010)

Metsämuuronen (2000, 41) has listed the pros of a semi-structured interview or survey. He states that a semi-structured survey is a good choice of a data collection method when the subject is somehow intimate or personal – as well as when the study is trying to make sense of ideals or rationalizations.

Eskola and Suoranta propose that in qualitative research the research plan often transforms and lives with the research itself (1998, 15). This happened as this study was firstly planned to have semi-structured interviews as the main method of data collection. As the participants did not live in the same city as the thesis author, it was proposed whether they would be willing to participate in an online interview via Skype. The participants chosen to answer the research questions, however, felt that they would rather answer the questions at their own pace and by writing them down. It was then decided to send out the questions as a survey via email, instead.

The survey was conducted in July 2015. It included six open-ended questions and a possibility to share thoughts on the subject and contribute with the participants' point of view. The questions were sent to the participants via email, and the possibility of direct contact by phone with the thesis author was made fairly easy if other questions would arise while answering the questions in the survey. The email started with an introduction of the thesis and the thesis author, and it was made clear that the blog authors' participation was essential. The survey questions were added to the end of the email. Full permission was obtained to all possible quotes and images.

The survey questions were divided in three sections, from which the first included questions about the participating blog itself. The second section was about the functional aspects of the blog, and it also included questions about how the blog entries affected the readers and their commenting activity and style. The third section concentrated on the emotional side of blogging and examined more the feelings of the blog authors and how they experienced the comments.

3.3 Survey participants

The main theme in the participating blogs was chosen mainly based on the personal interest of the thesis author. However, the participating blog authors, and therefore the research data, were carefully chosen so that they still represented a relatively wide age range as well as varied in terms of the themes they wrote about, which would then affect the quality of the data. The participants wrote about different themes, which enabled a wider approach in contrast to if they had all blogged about the same subjects. The blog themes mainly included pregnancy, children and motherhood, fashion, free time, interior decoration and DIY or "Do It Yourself" decoration tips.

Laura is a 29-year-old mother of two from Turku. Laura mainly blogs about her children and her personal family life, but with a touch of a few other subjects according to her interests.

Mirva is a 32-year-old mother of one from Vantaa. She blogs about post-pregnancy exercise and her daily life with her newborn baby. She does arts and crafts, and DIY tips are often included in her blog posts.

Suvituuli is a 23-year-old stay-at-home-mother from Helsinki. She also blogs about children, but also about much more sensitive issues than just her daily life.

3.4 Analysis of data

The research data was analyzed and conclusions were drawn. It has to be taken into consideration that our conceptions are always drawn from our past experiences (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 19-20) and that in qualitative research the researcher chooses a standpoint in advance (Mayring 2014, 10), and that is why it must be said that the thesis author had her own preconceptions and hypotheses about the survey results. They were, however, not allowed to affect the quality of the data analysis.

A qualitative data analysis starts already when the data itself is collected. The researcher should gather notes and observations already during the data collection phase of the research. Reading the survey or interview answers is a simple but an important part of the analytic process. Qualitative research is quite diverse in nature, and analyzing its data could be described as a hypothesis-generating process. This is because in qualitative research, in opposition to quantitative research, preconceptions are generated by hearing what is said by the research participants, rather than testing an already existing hypothesis. (Auerbach & Silverstein 2003, 7)

Metsämuuronen (2000, 54) encourages researchers to draw concept maps of the qualitative study results before analyzing them. According to him, it might help to understand the bigger picture and clarify the relations between smaller portions of information. A semantic concept map of the results of this study can be found in Appendix 1 at the end of this document.

4 Results

A total of seven questions were asked from the participants. The survey included six open-ended questions as well as a "free word" -possibility to openly talk about the subject and clarify the answers given. The questions were divided in three sections by the thesis author, basic blog framework, as well as functional and personal perspective.

4.1 Basic blog framework

Do readers comment your every blog post? Please, give an estimate of the percentage of positive and negative comments you receive.

The idea of the first question was to learn how the readers of these blogs behave; do they comment on every post and do they act with a positive or negative mindset. All the participants agreed that positive comments overrule the negative ones and that most of the comments are indeed written with a positive tone. Laura said that in her blog even the comments meant to be taken as "constructive criticism" were written with a proper taste, without being rude. Mirva proposed that blogging about neutral subjects may be the reason why readers' comments are also mainly neutral or positive. As a blog author she was quite sure that if she wrote about more sensitive subjects that raise more variable opinions she would get more comments that could be considered negative.

Have you ever considered disabling your readers to comment you blog because of the nature of the comment?

This question was asked to get a better understanding on how the bloggers felt about negative commenting. The bloggers all agreed that they would never disable the commenting possibility – since they see it as a way of creating dialog in the blog.

“I have never gotten such negative comments that I would have even thought about the possibility of disabling the comment section” Laura Reunamo said and Suvituuli agreed. Mirva had a feeling that enabling readers to comment “is the only way of creating dialog when it comes to blogging”. She also suggests that all bloggers who start to write a public blog should remember the saying “if you cannot stand the heat – stay out of the kitchen”. With that she proposes that no one should start writing a public blog if they are not ready to receive comments or read about opinions opposite to their own.

4.2 Functional perspective

Would you agree that the subject of a post affects the nature of the comments it receives?

Suvituuli agrees, and adds “--- but so does the tone of the post. When I write a post filled with personal opinion or about a difficult phase in my life, I feel like I receive a lot more negative comments than when I write about a neutral theme”. Laura concurs and comments, “My style of writing is quite neutral and considerate. I do not include my own prejudices in the text but rather consider all the possible different points of the theme. This might be the biggest reason why I have stayed free from negative commenting all in all”. Mirva says, “Of course I agree. If the post subject is

very current on someone's life or plays a part in a reader's values the reader might be more ready to comment than when the subject is not current in her life at that moment".

Have you ever received so called "internet hatred" or been "cyber-bullied" because of your blog?

Suvituuli is the only blogger from the three participants who has received a fairly rude email considering her blog posts. When asked clarifying questions about what these emails were about, she replied, "The emails were full of hatred. The last time I wrote about racism in Finland, I received an email someone threatening to kill me. Usually I reply with a short and strong message saying that if I get one more message like that I will go to the police. That stopped the emails from coming".

4.3 Personal perspective

Do the comments your blog receive affect the subjects you write about? Have you ever stopped writing about something, or started writing about something particular because of the comments?

Mirva straight away agrees that the comments do have an effect on what she writes about but she clarifies that she is "not an expert of any field, so it would feel uncomfortable to start ranting about something being right or wrong". Mirva says that she does "not want to provoke or bring up disagreements with her blog, but rather bring up smiles and create laughters". Suvituuli tries to create texts that are open to dialog and interaction through the comments but she also feels that writing about sensitive subjects such as hopes to become pregnant or post-pregnancy depression is harder because of the fact that the readers' comments might hurt her personally. When she

writes about something that is clearly a question of opinion, she does not take the negative comments so seriously, but understands that people might have a different opinion to hers. Laura says that while writing her posts she does not think about the upcoming comments at all and therefore does not let the comments affect on what she writes about.

Do the negative comments have an effect on you personally? How do you feel when reading a really negative comment?

Laura explains her style of writing, saying that in her blog she rarely reveals anything that would actually hurt her in the future through the comments she receives. She thinks that people can be really mean and hurtful when they can be unidentified and write anonymously. Suvituuli says that she might get upset because of a comment for a while, but that it does not last long. She strongly believes that the affect that the comments have on her depends on the post subject – the more personal and sensitive the subject is, the more negative comments hurt. Mirva says, "I would lie if I said negative comments do not hurt – especially when they are based on a misunderstanding that I have no chance to clarify". When discussing with Mirva about this question, she mentions that misunderstandings that have arisen in the comment section of her blog often bother and disturb her for a while; she feels at unease when the bothering comment has been written anonymously and she does not have a way of getting to the commenter and clarify the situation. She says that the feeling passes quickly when other things take over her thought process but that the thought of being incapable to clarify her statements is hard.

Participants' thoughts about blogging in general

The participants were encouraged to share their opinions about blogging in general. They were challenged to examine the reasons that drive them to write a blog and reveal such personal thoughts to the whole world online. They all publish the blogs with their own names and even their children's names are visible and known to the readers.

Suvituuli experienced the internet writing and blog commenting as an important factor for women to find peer support in lives many mysterious turn of events:

"For example, when I was pregnant, the questions that I had in mind sounded stupid to me, but it was easy to ask them from other pregnant mothers when I could do it anonymously and no one knew who I was. I think anonymity also makes it easier, for women especially, to raise the courage and just ask for help."

Suvituuli emphasized the meaning of other women's' opinion about women themselves and mentioned that it is one of the reasons why it is much easier to ask about something "stupid" on an online discussion forum than on Facebook etc. where everyone can see your real name.

"Bloggers end up easily as targets of cyber-bullying and there is always someone who does not agree with you or has a totally different opinion than yours." Said Laura when asked about general feelings about blogging. She mentioned knowing many that maybe do not write their blogs with the same neutral tone that she does and therefore get a lot of negative comments.

Mirva encourages readers to comment her blog even more than they do now. She suggest that the dialog could end up "living its own life" if all the comments were written in a tolerant and nice way – even if they represented the opposite opinion. She strongly feels that not all blogs and blog subjects can get only positive attention, and mentions political bloggers as one example: "How could anything ever change if people always agreed on everything?" She asks.

5 Discussion

Table 1 - Summary of the Results

<p>Do readers comment your every blog post?</p>	<p>It was hard to give an estimate, since the bloggers did not count every negative comment. All participants agreed, however, that the number of positive comments exceeded the number of the negative ones.</p>
<p>Have you ever considered disabling your readers to comment you blog because of the nature of the comment?</p>	<p>Commenting enables a dialogue between the blogger and the reader, and the commenting possibility is strongly bound with the nature of blogging. All participants agreed that disabling the possibility to comment would not be a good idea.</p>
<p>Would you agree that the subject of a post affects the nature of the comments it receives?</p>	<p>The subject of the blog post does affect the nature of the comments – as well as the style of writing and the tone in the bloggers’ text. Strong opinions call for strong opposition, and if the writer does not seem tolerant to opposite opinions, it might encourage the readers to comment with a stronger language. Therefore, comments not meant to be negative might seem as such.</p>
<p>Have you ever received so called "internet hatred" or been "cyber-bullied" because of your blog?</p>	<p>One participant had received a threatening email. Others had not experienced internet hatred or perceived the commenter’s actions as cyber-bullying or internet hatred.</p>

<p>Do the comments your blog receives affect the subjects you write about?</p>	<p>All participants said that they did not want to be affected by the comments but that subconsciously they might have left something out in fear of someone saying something negative.</p>
<p>Do the negative comments have an effect on you personally?</p>	<p>Sometimes the readers' comments hurt, but the feeling passed quickly and did not affect the participants' daily lives.</p>
<p>Comments about blogging in general</p>	<p>Bloggers are easy targets to cyber-bullies. Dialogue is important, as are opposite opinions and strong feelings. Internet writing and blog commenting can act as an important factor for some women in search of peer support, for example during pregnancy.</p>

The results are shown as a summary in Table 1 above. The participants were all motivated to reply to the questions and provided their honest opinions and experienced about the matter. All the three participants felt that the reason for their blog posts did not receive a large number of negative comments laid in the way the posts were written. Their texts are nicely written with a tone that mostly brings smiles to the readers' faces, and the subjects that they write about are fairly easy for everyone to read. The blogs rarely include a post about something that could arouse feelings so strong that a reader would feel the need of writing a truly negative comment.

However, one of the participants mentioned that her blog post about racism provoked people so much that she even received a death threat via email. This proves that the post subject absolutely has an effect on the way readers experience the post

and how they feel after reading it. In a way the survey results, however, surprised the thesis author. As an example of this was the second survey question about disabling the comment section of the blogs which was formed with a preconception in mind that the bloggers would receive more negative comments than they did in reality.

When asked about the possibility of disabling the comment feature from their blog, the bloggers were all strongly against it. They found commenting and the blog being an interactive way of creating a dialogue between the bloggers and their readers. It was mentioned earlier in the theoretical background section of this study that some of the Finnish popular websites had disabled their commenting feature due to the negative and hostile nature of the comments. These websites, however, differ from the blogs of this study to a great extent. The subjects in those websites are more connected to society and politics, which affect us all more than someone's personal life. This raises the question of the blog subjects' effect on the nature of the reader comments.

All the participating bloggers agreed that the subject of the blog post has an effect on the negativity level of the comments they received. They suggested that if a blogger strove to create content that has a large potential in creating strong emotions, he/she should be prepared to face the consequences. Glancing at the current Finnish political online debates, it can be seen that there are many subjects that raise emotions and encourage people to participate in the online conversations. Many online journals have now disabled the commenting possibility from their readers, which makes a strong and valid statement against racism and the online tyranny against the minorities.

Even though the participating bloggers did not feel like objects to online hatred, they all knew or had been in contact with someone who had been cyber-bullied. They seemed to all agree to the fact that cyber-bullying had escalated into a real problem

that often starts already at a very young age for both parties of the situation: the bullied and the bully. This problem should absolutely be intervened with serious means and resources already at school with the growing minors. Perhaps, they would then reach maturity with a better understanding of what the effects of these hostile actions can be.

When moving on to the more personal effects of the blogging process, it became much more challenging to analyze the answers. The participants were asked how much the comments that their blog received had affected their emotions at the precise moment when they read the comment. The intricacy of the answers was apparent. The bloggers proposed that the negative feelings rising from reading the negative comment did not affect the routines in their daily lives but did affect their current state of mind.

One participant emphasized the peer support factor in blogging. Pullinen (2015) also states this fact in his online article about internet commenting and anonymous conversations – he reminds that the possibility of hiding behind anonymity might be an enormous help for those who do not have a strong circle of friends and family around them. Therefore, it can be stated that both negative and positive matters rise from anonymous online conversations. The internet has made sharing emotions, both negative and positive, so easy that nearly everyone has access to either emphasizing their own inner opinions and thoughts, even the negative ones, but also to finding positive understanding and peer support.

6 Conclusion

People have communicated with each other throughout the time and during the transition through industrialization and the fast development of technology we now understand communication differently than we did in the past. Nowadays, communication enables a vast selection of ways to send and receive messages.

The rise of computers and the internet has brought a whole new level to the ways we communicate – most definitely, the internet has brought people around the world closer to each other. The internet seems like an endless warehouse of information that we can “post”, “tweet” or “share”. Personal blogging, for example, enables people to review a blogger’s state of mind and acts as a way of reviewing ones life. The possibility of quick content creation has boosted the blogosphere as bloggers can now post content on the go from their mobiles and tablets.

However, like most things, the internet also comes with a downside. Behind a computer screen and an IP address, it is easy to pretend someone you are not, post content considered negative or even hostile – and share dubious opinions. When communication and participation is encouraged by journalists and internet magazines with comment sections – people often engage in negativity more than problem solving and development.

This thesis studied the content creation process of female personal bloggers and tried to retrace whether the bloggers were personally affected by the comments they received in the internet and if they changed their blogging habits due to this. The results of the qualitative survey were somehow surprising as you could think that women often deal with negative comments much more deeply than men. The negative comments and remarks about their life, family and opinions did not affect their plans of blogging about a certain topic – because they did not let it to. It was mentioned that if they did not concentrate and plan the blogging process then they would probably be more affected by the comments, subconsciously at least. The par-

ticipating bloggers experienced blogging as a way of self-expression and a dear hobby – even if it meant sometimes receiving a rather negative remark. It was a common opinion that blogging is not for everyone, in today's internet conversation culture a blogger will have to adapt and abandon sensitivity to be able to remain calm when negative comments sometimes hurt their emotions.

Limitations

Merriam states that human instrument might have biases that have to be considered when analyzing the results (2009, 5). Furthermore, it is suggested by Mayring (2014, 14) that a total objectivity is considered difficult within qualitative research approaches, as it is defined as the researchers total independence from the research results.

Although the topic was scaled down to three participants, all Finnish mothers with a considerable amount of shared interests, the topic still remained wide. In the future, researchers could consider focusing on journalists and bloggers who write more about social issues, politics and economy – as it was discovered during the research that the previously mentioned topics raise plenty of different feelings and emotions, which are essential when crafting a personal opinion. The internet discussion culture and the nature of the comments online are then derived from these emotions.

Furthermore, the fact that all participating bloggers were from Finland could be an affecting factor for the research results. The internet discussion culture might, and most probably does, differ from country to country. The research could therefore be scaled to a wider geographic range in the future, which would exclude the earlier mentioned limitations.

This research is only a small and early look at blogging as a way of utilizing the internet for personal needs. There is yet much to research in this flourishing phenomenon.

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Appendices

Appendice 1. Semantic Map of the Results

