CAIS Paper: Mothers of invention: A pilot study of commercial content on mother blogs and perceptions of credibility

Caitlin Horrall (University of Ottawa), and Mary Cavanagh (University of Ottawa)

Abstract

This study examines how mother bloggers write sponsored content and how writers and readers interpret the credibility of these posts. Content analysis and interviews were conducted. Results suggest determining the credibility of these posts is a social process, informed by participants' existing knowledge and framed within the mother blogger community.

Résumé

Increased globalization brings with it increased information sharing. This can have positive effects, such as encouraging cultural exchange and growth, but it can also result in commercialization, as media adapt content to satisfy advertisers (Vineet, 2011). While the Internet may be viewed as a space that stands apart from the effects of commercialization, enabling and encouraging free speech and independent publishing, the reality is that commercial forces are making their way online as well.

This paper reports on a case study of the commercialization of online space by looking at corporate involvement on mother blogs. The goal of the study was to explore how mother bloggers write about commercial products for which they have been paid in cash or in kind and to see how writers and readers interpret these posts using credibility theory as the framework.

Mother bloggers are blogging in high numbers and can have a high degree of influence on their readers. As a result, mother bloggers are 21% more likely than the general blogging population to be approached by brands to include sponsored content on their site (Sobel, 2010). When mother bloggers write about products for which they have been paid in cash or in kind, readers are called on to distinguish between informational content and commercial activity.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How is commercial activity represented in the content of mother blogs?

2. How do readers perceive and interpret these posts?

3. How do bloggers perceive and interpret these posts?

The findings expand on the social nature of online credibility assessment when advertising and information intersect in the particular context of mother blogs.

A range of literature from three primary disciplines informed this study. Marketing literature focused on the relationship between online reviews and corporate outcomes (sales, brand awareness). Literature on mother blogs approached the subject through the lenses of feminism and autobiography to argue these types of blogs challenge traditional cultural representations of motherhood (Chen, 2013; Friedman, 2010; Friedman and Calixte, 2009; Lopez, 2009; Lövheim, 2011) and result in inclusive communities (Chen, 2013; Lövheim, 2011, Yonker, 2012) that connect both writer and reader (Fleming, 2008; Yonker, 2012). Existing models of credibility assessment characterized credibility as multi-dimensional (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008) and served to situate this study in the informational domain. Research into online credibility assessment had not yet looked directly at mother blogging.

A two-dimensional framework of credibility was employed based on the research of Flanagin and Metzger (2007). Where they adopted a communications orientation however, this study adapted the original framework to see credibility through an informational lens placing the emphasis on the user's evaluation of the information and viewing credibility more as a criterion for relevance judgement (Rieh & Danielson, 2007, 308) rather than a characteristic of the source or message itself.

The study took a qualitative approach framed within a constructivist paradigm. This approach enabled perspectives of participants to be studied in depth and used their words to convey meanings. It also provided greater opportunity for exploring and generating ideas. The research unfolded in two phases. The first phase involved an in-depth qualitative content analysis of randomly selected commercially sponsored posts to see how commercial and informational content were represented. Forty Canadian posts written in English from October 1, 2012 to November 27, 2012 that mentioned in-kind or cash payments in exchange for reviews were identified for inclusion. These posts were sponsored by Sears, Lego and Butterball, among other known brands. The second phase of the study involved semi-structured long-form interviews with mother bloggers and readers to explore the concept in greater depth and to collect data in the participant's own words (Kolb, 2012). Participants were selected by the researcher using purposive sampling, identified through snowball methods, to find regular readers and writers of mother blogs.

In total three readers and three bloggers of Canadian English-language blogs were interviewed, all from one geographical area. The samples were small due to the exploratory nature of the project. The three readers were mothers of children ranging in age from approximately 12 months to 10 years, who were regular mother blog readers. The bloggers were all active bloggers who had been writing for at least 4years and who were all mothers. None depended on their blogs for their entire income. The three

bloggers had varied experience with sponsored posts, working with such brands as Fischer-Price, Lego and Colgate.

Findings suggest that mother bloggers use a range of techniques when integrating commercial content on their blogs with a focus on narrative techniques and positive sentiment. Readers assign a variety of concepts to the idea of credibility, emphasizing in particular the ideas of trustworthiness and authenticity. They assess the credibility of sponsored posts in informational and interactional ways, responding more to relatable and experiential modes of delivery. Their information evaluation is influenced by their previous knowledge and experiences of the blogger in particular and of media in general and as such their behavior depends more on "rules of thumb" than systematic evaluations of the information. Readers show a high level of knowledge around sponsor involvement and they depend on this perceived media proficiency to help them in their credibility assessments. They bring an expectation of disclosure to the information exchange but appear to use these disclosure statements to help make transparency judgements rather than to critically evaluate the information held therein. For their part, bloggers are most likely to conceptualize credibility as authenticity. They are responsive to their readers, most commonly adopting storytelling and experiential styles. They exercise choice over the sponsors and products with which they choose to work and they see this choice as evidence of their credibility.

From these findings three themes related to credibility in this commercial-informational context emerge: 1) information, interaction and credibility are tightly bounded; 2) credibility and disclosure of material connections are linked; and 3) "mommy blogs" as a genre are related to credibility predisposition. Firstly, the results expand on the social nature of online information credibility assessment supporting the idea that information interaction is a component of credibility perception. Secondly, although disclosures of material connections were expected by readers and that expectation was acknowledged and met by bloggers, the efficacy of these statements in providing a gauge for credibility assessment was questioned, which has public policy implications for how or if this area needs regulation. Lastly, the term "mommy blog" was identified as a credibility issue given that writers see the term as diminutive and pejorative and bloggers felt the term could predispose readers to discredit the information.

This study identifies several online information credibility assessment behaviours that could be examined in greater detail including the roles played by previous experiences and knowledge, topic involvement and personal relevance. These results also provide an opportunity to look at the boundaries of credibility assessments in times of significant life change and suggest that situations involving major life events (like childbirth, illness, financial instability) may require a new basis for exploring credibility assessments online. Lastly, the results could be transferred to other communities that rely on social networks to meet their information needs such as teenagers. This study had some limitations. The framework of credibility assessment applied focused solely on information and source credibility and did not include medium. A larger study could

integrate medium to see how it affects the information interaction. Within the qualitative paradigm adopted, other approaches could have helped strengthen the results such as immersion of the researcher into the mother blog setting either as reader or as blogger. A mixed-method design using different techniques could probe further to help capture both qualitative and quantitative data and help offset the weaknesses of the single strategy approach adopted in this study. Lastly, although the sample of interview participants provided rich data, selecting a more heterogeneous sample of readers and bloggers could serve to produce more generalizable results.

Although there has been some recent discussion suggesting that blogs have lost their allure, it may just show that "frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence" (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004, 11) have become synonymous with the web. In many cases, blog content is indistinguishable from regular content as sites adopt blog technology as proxy content management systems. If this is the case, then the concept of mother blogs as a distinct form may be becoming less relevant. Rather than suggest however that the findings of this study are similarly less relevant, it means the opposite. As these forms of personal writing proliferate and as sponsored text increasingly pervades this personal space, it is time to consider this type of writing from an economic perspective and these women as online entrepreneurs. In this context, this study becomes more relevant as these types of online information exchanges involve continuous information seeking and evaluation and the need for conversation around credibility is an essential part of this evolving digital environment.

References

Chen, G. M. (2013). Don't call me that: A techno-feminist critique of the term mommy blogger. Mass Communication and Society, 16(4), 510-532. doi:10.1080/15205436.2012.737888

Flanagin, A. J., and Metzger, M. J. (2007). The role of site features, user attributes, and information verification behaviors on the perceived credibility of web-based information. New Media & Society, 9(2), 319-342.

Fleming, H. L. (2008). "Works-in-progress: An analysis of Canadian mommyblogs." (Master's dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Full Text. (MR58632)

---. (2010). "Hybrid, cyborg, queer: What mommyblogs teach us about mothers and motherhood." (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Full Text. (NR75696)

Friedman, M., and Calixte, S.L. (2009). Mothering and blogging: The radical act of the mommyblog. Toronto: Demeter Press.

Herring, S. C., Scheidt, L. A., Bonus, S., and Wright, E. (2004, January). "Bridging the gap: A genre analysis of weblogs." Proceedings of the 37th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, 2004. (11).

Hilligoss, B., and Rieh, S. Y. (2008). "Developing a unifying framework of credibility assessment: Construct, heuristics, and interaction in context. Information Processing & Management, 44(4), 1467-1484.

Kolb, S. M. (2012). Grounded theory and the constant comparative method: Valid research strategies for educators. Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies, 3(1), 83-86.

Lankes, R.D. (2008). Credibility on the internet: shifting from authority to reliability. Journal of Documentation, 64(5), 667-6861.

Lopez, L. K. (2009). The radical act of 'mommy blogging': redefining motherhood through the blogosphere. New Media & Society, 11(5), 729-747.

Lövheim, M. (2011). Young women's blogs as ethical spaces. Information, Communication & Society, 14(3), 338-354.

Rieh, S. Y., and Danielson, D. R. (2007). Credibility: A multidisciplinary framework. Annual review of information science and technology, 41(1), 307-364.

Sobol, J. (2010, November 4). "Topics and Trends: Day 2 SOTB 2010?" Retrieved from http://technorati.com/social-media/article/what-topics-and-trends-day-2/page-4/

Vineet, K. (2011). Globalisation and Media. Journal of Mass Communication and Journalism, 1(105).doi:10.4172/2165-7912.1000105

Williamson, K. (2006). Research in constructivist frameworks using ethnographic techniques. Library Trends, 55(1), 83-101.

Yonker, M. D. (2012). The rhetoric of mom blogs: A study of mothering made public. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Full Text. (3550394)