

Texas State University - San Marcos
San Marcos, Texas

PROPOSED THESIS RESEARCH

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Major Department: English

Style of manual to be used: MLA

I submit for approval the following description of my Thesis Project

Tentative Title: Gendered Scholarship: An Examination of Gender Identity in Academic Weblogs

Please attach on a separate page(s): the problem; question to which answers must be found; proposed procedure; and source of your data. Information should be given in sufficient detail to enable the committee to give your proposed thesis intelligent consideration. BE AS SPECIFIC AS YOU INFORMATION WILL PERMIT, PARTICULARLY ABOUT SOURCES OF DATA.

(Committee members should be approved graduate faculty.)

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Thesis Proposal for M.A. in Rhetoric & Composition

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Statement of the Issue: As computer technology has begun to play a larger role in education, many academics, especially those in the field of rhetoric and composition, have begun to publish scholarship in computer-mediated forums. Many scholars have turned to weblogs (blogs) as ways to both disseminate their research as well as build community with other colleagues in the field. However, researchers have yet to focus their attention on academic blogs, a particular subgenre of blogs, or on gendered identity in academic blogs in particular.

Blogs, in general, have proliferated in recent years, with over 112.8 million blogs currently in existence ("About"). One reason blogs are popular is that they offer an opportunity for everyone to have a voice: anyone who wants to publish their thoughts can reach a potentially global audience by starting a blog. Additionally, blogs are more fluid and dynamic than webpages because readers can begin a dialogue with authors by responding to them in their designated comment boxes. In this way, blogs allow knowledge to be presented individually *and* discovered collaboratively in conversation with readers.

The "democratizing" effect of blogs has incited much discussion: debates range from whether or not blogs constitute scholarship to whether or not the online persona of blog authors can be trusted. Nevertheless, academics are utilizing the medium as intellectual diaries, publishing thoughts about their current research and networking with other scholars across the globe. In creating these blogs, academics must craft public personas for themselves online, personas that often depart significantly from traditional institutional representation. Many readers of these blogs have relatively little knowledge of the author other than what they choose to reveal through the blogs themselves.

When the Internet initially gained popularity, it was touted as a level playing field, a place where a person's ideas could be judged on their merit rather than on the person's appearance, race, gender, or social class. On the Internet, no one knows what race, gender, class, religion, age, or astrological sign a given user is, unless s/he chooses to somehow communicate that information. This ability for users to take control over their digital identities leads Sherry Turkle to argue in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* that "computer-mediated communication can serve as a place for construction and reconstruction of identity" (14). Turkle conceives of identity as multiple and flexible. Thus, identity becomes "a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated" (180).

Blogs capitalize on this ability to craft identity, as authors can disseminate their thoughts without providing credentials. Individuals who would never be able to publish in print can do so online.

They can mold their identity to suit their purpose and allow their writing and thinking to be judged on quality alone. If we believe bloggers can and do utilize this ability to construct their identity, then blogs have the potential to be a gender-neutral space because it provides an environment in which people can represent themselves in whatever manner they see fit.

However, researchers have found that users often still manifest their identity in stereotypical ways. Mia Consalvo and Susanna Paasonen note in "On the Internet, Women Matter" that "the Internet has changed from a place where identities were joyfully discarded, experimented with, or reconfigured, to a medium (discussed in spatial terms) where identity seems to be a driving force for involvement, and an aspect of embodiment that few users actually want to leave behind" (4). Despite users' abilities to mask or switch genders, many still choose to craft their online identities in gendered ways.

Paasonen uses Judith Butler's theory of identity construction to explain in "Gender, Identity, and (the Limits of) Play on the Internet" why users are hesitant or simply unable to distance themselves from their "true" identities: "Gender (as well as the category thought of as 'sex') is constituted as the ritualized reiteration of norms that govern cultural intelligibility, as compulsive repetition. This 'doing gender' is far from voluntary activity, it is performativity that concerns the very sense of the self... Since being gendered (raced, classed) is a precondition for thinking, living, and making sense of the world, the individual cannot take up any identity position s/he pleases" (25). In others, our identity is so shaped by cultural factors, such as gender, race, and class, that is impossible for us to ever truly distance ourselves from them. Researchers find users' reluctance (or inability) to misrepresent their identities to be especially true of blog authors. They note that the discussions that occur on blogs are intimately tied to our personal and/or professional selves (Paasonen 30). As individuals' thinking is influenced by how they live their lives and the way they live their lives is affected by cultural factors such as gender, it is difficult for blog authors to accurately represent their thoughts while at the same time inaccurately representing their identities.

In addition to Paasonen's argument that cultural factors influence thinking, it is also important to note that the digital world is not always separate and distinct from the physical world. The blogs of academics are representative of their work in the real world. These authors have preexisting reputations in the field that they cannot completely separate from the digital incarnations of themselves and their work. However, though unable to completely distance themselves from their "true" identity, the authors are able to exert some control over how they are represented online. Blogs offer a unique opportunity for academics to craft public identities that extend beyond their academic credentials and areas of specialization, which is how their identities are normally constructed by academic institutions. In other words, in creating their blog identities, academics have the opportunity to expand their institutionally-sanctioned identities--to resist the institution's efforts to contain identity (or define it exclusively in terms of academic credentials) and to perform multiple identities that might traditionally have been seen as irrelevant or irreverent. Thus, this thesis seeks to determine how gender is negotiated by professional blog authors in the construction of their blog identity.

Research Questions:

- How do academic bloggers perform identity?
 - How is identity revealed through the following:
 - the visual space of their blogs?
 - topic choice?
 - their construction of their profile?
 - the manner in which they discuss their scholarship?
 - their incorporation of hypertext?
 - their demonstration of academic expertise?
 - the ways in which they build community with other academic bloggers?
 - their responses to blog comments?
 - How, if at all, is gender represented in particular?
- How does the audience receive gender (as revealed through blog comments)?

Proposed Procedure: This thesis will be concerned with discovering if and how academics in the field of rhetoric and composition generally and the subfield of computers and writing more specifically display gender on their academic weblogs. I will select male and female blogs from the list of thirty-nine academic blogs maintained by the journal *Kairos* to analyze. I will work from a theory of gender identity advanced by Judith Butler and a theory of online identity discussed by Sherry Turkle. Additionally, the analysis will utilize previous research on gendered communication, such as that conducted by Wood, Gilligan, Flynn, and Belenky, et al, and more recent research on common blogging features to discover ways in which these blogs are gendered. Using a feminist lens, I will examine the page design, resources, links, posts, and comments on the blogs to determine if and how male and female scholars manifest their identities online in different ways.

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