

## Anonymity and Self-disclosure in Infertility Blogs / Knoll Maria

### Abstract

This study examines anonymity and self-disclosure of infertility blogs, written by women going through infertility treatments. Infertility blogs constitute a venue of self-expression and self-disclosure for many women struggling to have children. Although 81.5% of reproduction blogs deals with infertility issues, infertility blogs are a subject scarcely touched upon by academic studies, thus requiring exploration.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the perceived self-disclosure patterns of women blogging about infertility through content analysis of their postings, and through an online survey that measured their self-disclosure patterns as they relate to their perceived anonymity.

This study aimed to understand the relationship between anonymity, both visual and discursive, and perceived self-disclosure on infertility blogs. In the first phase a survey was answered by 135 respondents to gather basic demographic and blogging practice data, measure blogger's discursive and visual anonymity and the extent of their selfdisclosure. In the second phase, the research questions were investigated using qualitative content analysis techniques to explore the narrative content of twenty blog's entries posted by the bloggers during two month period of March-April 2012.

The results of our study show that infertility blogs contain high levels of self-disclosure because bloggers reveal intimate details of their lives, relationships, marriages, let their defenses down thus showing their more sensitive side. As part of the self-disclosure patterns, bloggers chronicle the day by day progress of their cycle, the diagnosis regarding their infertility, how many rounds of IVF they have gone through, the cost of specific procedures.

The results suggest that increased anonymity is not associated with greater selfdisclosure.

However, examining the different groups of bloggers and their level of anonymity several conclusions can be drawn. Bloggers who post personal information may be more interested in being identified by their readers and be recognized for their ideas; thus, they are willing to share personal thoughts and stories. Research on blogging shows that one of the main motivations for blogging is sharing and publishing information to help others (Bronstein, 2011). In our study bloggers often share practical medical information about their infertility treatments: like details about their IVF medication simulation protocols, how to use injectables, the count of their follicles, in an attempt to offer information to other infertile bloggers.

Bloggers who prefer to post under a pseudonym, which constitute the majority in our sample, may have a greater need for anonymity and seem to understand that the choice of their names on their blogs is related to the risks of self-disclosure and use their blogs mainly as a venue of self-expression.

Bloggers who use visual anonymity are likely to use also discursive anonymity.

Participants who choose to be anonymous utilized both discursive and visual anonymity, not disclosing personal information or photos. Since bloggers have the option to have visual anonymity, discursive anonymity, or both at the same time, these findings are relevant because we can see that when bloggers want to remain anonymous they will recur to both types of anonymity.



In the qualitative part, the data collected were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach that facilitates identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data. The data analysis revealed six major themes divided into categories:

1. *Effects of infertility.* Data in this theme presents the three main effects of infertility on the participants: emotional effect of infertility, social effect of infertility and the effect of infertility on women's identity
2. *Professional development and infertility.* Data in this theme presented the effects that infertility has on the women's careers and professional development
3. *Marriage and infertility.* Data in this theme presented the effects that infertility has on marriage.
4. *Copying with infertility.* Data in this theme presented different copying strategies with infertility: finding distractions, getting informed about treatments, self-preservation techniques, getting therapy
5. *The aftermath of infertility.* Data in this theme revealed what happened to bloggers after they got pregnant or after they decided to abandon the treatments
6. *Infertile blogging.* Data in this theme revealed the blogger's attitudes and thoughts about the process of blogging: the roles of blogging, the downside of blogging, blogging and anonymity, blogging and IVF advocacy.

Bloggers who write on a very intimate level are also aware of the negative consequences of unlimited self-disclosure and often worry that an unintended audience might read their blog. In our findings also almost half of the survey respondents were concerned that unlimited self-disclosure on their blogs might bring negative consequences in their lives offline. Many expressed their doubts about the possibility of remaining truly anonymous.

Bloggers in this study worried that their families may find out personal or intimate information, or that people within their social circle may discover certain feelings that they harbor.

We found that blogs that contain high levels of self-disclosure are not necessarily more anonymous. Infertile women became more public beings due to the public nature of the internet and found a platform in it to openly discuss their experiences and struggles with infertility, defying the inherent privacy of these treatments. This "public sphere" paradoxically encourages personal disclosure and a more honest representation of the self than bloggers can express offline even to those closest to them.

Further research is needed to explore the two variables of the present study: anonymity and self-disclosure, using different theoretical perspectives like target audience, personality or temperament.

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