University of the Sunshine Coast

Alayna Cole

Moving beyond the self: how blog posts can inspire narratives of representation

Abstract:

'Narratives of representation' allow readers to see their own identities reflected within texts they access and can increase empathy by exposing readers to varied experiences (Smolkin & Young 2011: 217). Researching personal topics has traditionally relied on approaches that require direct contact between a researcher (writer) and a participant (Wilkinson & Thelwall 2011: 387), which can be time-consuming and expensive. The expression of personal experiences through self-reflective research methods has also been adopted in the creation of these narratives as an alternative approach, but can limit the conclusions presented due to the restricted scope of experiences that can be explored (Méndez 2013). Critical analysis of blog posts offers new possibilities, allowing writers to explore how members of a social group candidly discuss their identities and the issues they face with each other and external parties. Accessing blog posts written by members of the queer community has allowed me to create specific narratives of representation, underpinned by accurate and authentic depictions, ensuring readers are exposed to diverse perspectives that reflect reality. This paper explores the ways blog posts written by the queer community have influenced my depiction of queer identity in creative works and exegetical writing by inspiring and informing the exploration of issues such as mislabelling, stereotyping, discrimination, and fear.

Biographical note:

Alayna Cole is a doctoral candidate in Creative Arts (Creative Writing) and a lecturer in Serious Games at the University of the Sunshine Coast. She has broad research interests, but she is primarily focused on creating and analysing narratives that improve diverse representation, particularly of gender and sexuality. Her doctoral thesis – entitled *Queerly Ever After* – comprises a collection of reimagined fairy tales that seek to incorporate plurisexual perspectives.

Keywords:

Representation – blogs – discourse analysis – queer community – diversity

Introduction

Representation of varied social groups allows readers to see their own identities reflected in the texts they engage with, and increases empathy by exposing readers to varied experiences (Smolkin & Young 2011: 217). The literary canon was formed under the influence of 'a politics of representation', with a number of social groups – particularly 'female, black, ethnic, or working-class' identities – excluded from being featured within the canon either as characters or authors of texts (Guillory 2013: 5, 7). Guillory (2013: 7) suggests that increased literary study of texts written by minority authors is a strategy for challenging this lack of representation; this should be coupled with increased prevalence and analysis of texts containing characters of diverse identities. It is the role of writers to contribute to the prevalence of such texts by creating narratives with the intent of increasing accurate and diverse representation of minority social groups: narratives of representation.

Writing narratives of representation requires research methods designed to improve the accuracy of the identities that are being represented, as well as to ensure verisimilitude in the texts that are created. This paper will discuss the limitations of existing research methods and sources for this purpose, and will explore how research methods involving the analysis of blog posts has guided my writing of narratives that represent queer identities. Furthermore, the ethics of analysing these online sources will be explored and guidelines to direct practitioners will be proposed.

Importance of representation

Diverse representation leads to increased self-acceptance and empathy in readers. In a study exploring the effects of exposing young adults of varied cultures, genders, and sexualities to diverse literary works, it was found that being able to identify with individual characters allowed participants to explore personal issues more completely (Athanases 1998: 291). Being exposed to diverse literature also helped the young adults who did not directly identify with characters in these texts to move beyond stereotyped notions of culture, gender, and sexuality (Athanases 1998: 292). Increasing the representation of minority social groups in literature assists with increasing empathy for these groups, while also aiding individuals by allowing them to recognise themselves in texts, explore their personal understandings of self, and feel validated through the experiences of fictional and non-fictional others.

Writing narratives of representation requires a writer to have an accurate understanding of the issues and priorities of the minority social group or groups that they seek to represent. Traditional research methods of accessing academic and scholarly discussion regarding social groups can be problematic when applied to the objective of improving representation. There is a delay in academic writing about representation when compared to discussions within minority social groups, such as the queer community (Hale 1997: 223). Furthermore, relying on secondary sources creates a barrier between the writer and the voice of the social group, which can damage or limit the intended amplification of that voice, depending on the interpretations and potential biases of the mediating party.

Seeking primary sources when researching personal topics has traditionally relied on research approaches such as interviews and questionnaires (Wilkinson & Thelwall 2011: 387). Research methods such as these – which require direct contact between a researcher (writer)

and a participant – involve ethical considerations that can be time-consuming and expensive (Wilkinson & Thelwall 2011: 387). To avoid acquiring the necessary ethics approval for questioning research participants about personal topics, writers may alternatively rely on self-reflexive research methods, such as journaling; journaling allows a writer to explore their own personal experiences and the impacts of social contexts upon themselves (De Carteret 2008: 236). By reflecting on personal experiences in this way, writers are able to include aspects of their 'personal background' in the texts they create and increase representation of the social groups that they inhabit (Smolkin & Young 2011: 223).

While practising reflection through journaling can address the time and expense of qualitative research methods such as interviews and questionnaires, incorporating the self into research limits the scope of experiences that can be explored to those of the writer (Méndez 2013). Although reflecting upon my personal experiences within the queer community has been valuable in directing my research, I do not and should not consider myself a spokesperson for the entirety of this minority social group; relying solely on my personal experiences when writing narratives of representation limits the diversity of the included representation. However, blog posts (and related forms of self-expression published online) are a prevalent source of personal reflection that can be engaged with to support or challenge a writer's own experiences, allowing writers to access the thoughts of a greater quantity of people. Blog posts grant writers the opportunity to engage in reflective research that moves beyond the self.

Transcending the self

The internet and increased global connectivity has presented the opportunity for adaptation of existing social research methods, such as relocating interviews and focus groups to an online setting (Wakeford & Cohen 2008: 307-8). In addition to the adaptation of existing sources of formal research, the internet has inspired new ways for people to express themselves, such as in online blogs, which capture the personal experiences of individuals and groups (Jones & Alony 2008: 1; Wakeford & Cohen 2008: 308).

Blogs have great potential for analysis, providing researchers with published, categorised writing that can be more time and resource efficient to access than other qualitative research sources (Jones & Alony 2008: 8; Rasmussen 2008: 91). Jones and Alony (2008: 11) believe that the most reliable information a researcher can gather and analyse from blogs is individual personal accounts, as blog posts commonly explore the topic of 'the inner self'. This type of self-expression provides catharsis for bloggers and grants them an opportunity to connect with others who can relate to them or the issues they are describing (Jones & Alony 2008: 5). The 'freedom of expression' that bloggers experience allows researchers to access personal accounts of sensitive topics, as well as issues related to their identities that are often excluded from popular discourse due to the politics of representation (Guillory 2013: 5; Jones & Alony 2008: 2; Wilkinson & Thelwall 2011: 387).

To commence the analysis of blogs, a researcher must be guided by relevant research methods. Jones and Alony (2008: 12-14) consider variations of content analysis and discourse analysis as the most 'obvious' research methods to use, depending on the discipline and desired outputs of the research.

Jones and Alony (2008: 12) suggest content analysis is an effective way to participate in distant reading, seeking commonalities between themes discussed in blogs (Moretti 2013: 48-49). Content analysis involves 'the development of analytical categories that are used to construct a coding frame that is then applied to textual data' and is primarily an objective, quantitative research method that seeks meaning in systems and trends (Hardy, Harley & Phillips 2004: 20). Jones and Alony (2008: 12) suggest that content analysis can be used to collect primary data or compare data between blogs and other sources.

The primary distinction between content analysis and discourse analysis is that the latter is characterised by a focus on qualitative and interpretative analysis (Hardy, Harley & Phillips 2004: 19-20). Discourse analysis can be used to encourage close reading, allowing the subjective consideration of how words and language are chosen within blogs (Belsey 2005: 157; Best & Marcus 2009: 1; Jones & Alony 2008: 12-13). Being able to analyse the way members of a social group speak about themselves and to one another about their identities and the issues they face is particularly pertinent for writers seeking to increase accurate literary representation of these social groups.

My research in representing queer identities and perspectives has led me to a process of using discourse analysis to analyse blogs posts, of various forms: reflective journal entries on traditional blogging websites; opinion pieces connected to well-known online publications, such as newspapers; and informal vignettes or discussions on public social media sites that support long-form posts, such as Tumblr. Blog posts and the discussions that surround them are comparable to epistolary forms of writing (Fitzpatrick 2007: 174), but placing these pieces – which are reminiscent of private diaries or letters – in public spaces allows individual navigations of self-identity to provide a public audience with newfound insight into the queer community and its accelerated evolution.

Accessing blog posts written by members of the queer community has influenced my work in three key ways: by determining a standardised, yet flexible, glossary of terms to be used within my creative work, as well as my exegetical writing; by revealing the issues faced by the queer community and the ways the community discusses these issues among themselves and with those outside the community; and to determine similar language choices and personal issues faced by social groups connected to the queer community but not directly contained within it, such as issues faced by women and the ways these issues are connected to wider gender politics within the queer community.

The stylistic options and rhetoric choices of a blogger or writer can be influenced by their social identity, with unique and specific language choices being used to convey a person's connection to social groups, as well as acting to construct the social identities they wish to project (Rubin 2013: 3-4). For a narrative of representation to be accurate and effective, it is important that these language choices are considered. Discussions about words and language are easy to find within the queer community, as identity politics has led to extensive debates regarding the 'best' terms to describe a variety of identities and concepts. Lists of definitions are common on blogs, with audiences ranging from members of the queer community to those outside seeking understanding (Eva 2012; Hulshof-Schmidt 2012). Often these definitions are accompanied with a 'defence' justifying the vast number of nuanced identity labels the queer community uses (Finke 2014), or debates surrounding the validity and appropriateness of alternative labels that are attempting to achieve similar purposes

(Anagnori 2014; Aoife 2013).

For instance, there are debates surrounding the most appropriate term to use as a 'collective' label when discussing all queer people who are attracted to multiple genders – which can encompass a range of individual identities. With academia struggling to keep up with the frequent debates surrounding language use within the queer community (Hale 1997: 223), the term 'bisexual' is still often used within scholarly discourse – and more widely – to describe those who are attracted to multiple genders. Previously, this term has been used to denote those who are attracted to 'both genders', but when non-binary genders are acknowledged, this definition becomes inadequate (Ochs 2009). Although modified definitions of the term have been created to be more inclusionary of many genders, some people who identify as being attracted to multiple genders have deliberately moved away from using bisexuality as a personal label due to conflicts surrounding its well-known, binary definition (Bi/Pan Revolution 2014). Therefore, although some people choose to use the term 'bisexual' to individually identify themselves, it would be problematic to use the label as a collective term for all people who are attracted to multiple genders.

One alternative that has been suggested is 'polysexual', which exists as a direct opposite to 'monosexual' (a term used to describe those attracted to one gender), making the term seem like a reasonable choice. However, 'polysexual' can cause confusion because of its similarity to 'polyamory' or 'poly', which refers to non-monogamous practices or lifestyles where people participate in multiple sexual or romantic relationships with the consent of everyone involved (Eisner 2013: 31). The issue of this conflation was debated between two bloggers from within the queer community: Ajda (2014) asserted that this conflation of terms contributes to the problematic stereotype that plurisexuals cannot live monogamously (Eisner 2013: 41). Analysis of the way these terms – as well as other suggestions, such as 'non-monosexual' and 'plurisexual' (Gaming Pixie 2013) – have been used and debated through blog posts within the queer community has led to my decision to use 'plurisexual' as a collective term in my own research. This decision has been supported within academia, with Mitchella, Davisa and Paz Galupoa (2014: 11) suggesting that the term 'non-monosexual' 'linguistically position[s] monosexual as the ideal, normative sexuality' and proposing 'plurisexual' as an alternative that does not possess this exclusionary nature.

The exploration of language evident in blog posts written by the queer community has also guided my depictions of similar discussions and debates within my own narratives of representation, often involving characters navigating the difficult task of determining their own self-identity and whether they wish to assign a label to describe their lived experiences. In my unpublished short story, 'Coral' – which is part of a larger collection of reimagined fairy tales entitled *Queerly Ever After* – the Sea Witch acts as a mentor for the eponymous character, exploring varied plurisexual identities based on discussions found in blog posts about these individual terms:

> 'There are more terms than those that I know, and more people still who prefer not to use them at all, but it can be nice to feel as though you belong. It was a long time ago that I heard the word "queer", and it's the word I use for myself if asked. There was a girl I met in a forest once who proudly called herself "pansexual". In a distant market I found the term "bisexual", I have encountered a prince who used the label "omnisexual", and once I met a water spirit who referred to herself simply as "fluid",' the Sea Witch said.

> Coral flicked her tail, sending currents of water through the cave. 'I like "fluid",' she said. 'I wonder if I'm that.'

These navigations of identity politics within my writing demonstrate that realistic representation of the issues of the queer community can be depicted in fiction that does not inhabit the 'realism' genre. These representations are further influenced by blogs written by members of the queer community that reveal insights into the external issues of mislabelling, stereotyping, discrimination, and fear that this social group faces. Exposure to issues and perspectives beyond those that I have personally experienced as a member of the community allows me to formulate broader, more accurate understandings of how these issues impact individuals and the queer community as a whole.

Members of the queer community have written in-depth blog posts regarding mislabelling and stereotyping of identities. In a blog published as an opinion piece, Ford (2015) explains that when a plurisexual person dates somebody on a long term basis, this can lead to others assuming they have either become or have always been monosexual. In response to this, she states that '[her] queer identity is not defined by who [she is] dating', but she also mentions that when she corrects people who have false expectations, she is made to feel guilty about an unintentional deception 'based on a projection of the other person's assumption' (Ford 2015: n.p.). This experience is labelled by Wiest (2013) as the act of 'sexual profiling', where society attempts to fit others into categories using assumptions based on behaviour and relationships, or even a person's appearance. People frequently attempt to label the sexuality of others through stereotypical assumptions based on their behaviour or appearance (Martin 2015), but who a person can be attracted to or have romantic feelings for does not rely on these factors (Martin 2015; Wiest 2013).

These identity assumptions are problematic, as they often align with sexuality and gender 'norms' and thus perpetuate oppressive heteronormative and patriarchal expectations (Trooien 2016). This oppression needs to be challenged, as nobody should be disempowered by the labels of others or be expected to adhere to a constructed template of an identity (Martin 2015). These issues of mislabelling and stereotyping – as well as the ongoing discussions surrounding identity labelling – have been explored within my creative work, with these blog posts guiding my representation of queer identities. For instance, another story from *Queerly Ever After*, entitled 'Sienna', is a narrative of representation exploring these topics, where the eponymous character experiences mislabelling and stereotyping of her sexuality by an ignorant and misogynistic wolf:

> 'This girl must be some friend,' the wolf said.
>
> 'Yes, she's my *girlfriend*,' Sienna reiterated.
>
> 'Oh!' the wolf exclaimed. 'You know, I've cured lesbians before. It's well known that all lesbians are just waiting for the right guy to come along. How do you know you don't like men if you've never been with one?'
>
> 'Who says I haven't? Or that I'm a lesbian?'
>
> 'You said you were a lesbian,' he said. 'You just told me – you have a girlfriend!'
>
> Sienna sighed. She turned and faced the wolf, immediately regretting it as he leaned towards her. She retreated. 'I am attracted to men *and* women,' she said. 'And all other

genters, while we're on the topic.'

'Bisexual, eh?' the wolf said with a wink.

'Pansexual, actually,' Sienna corrected as she resumed walking.

'I knew you wanted me!' the wolf said, triumphant.

Sienna was so astounded that she laughed. The sound was harsh, humourless. 'How do you figure that?'

'You just admitted that you're attracted to everyone. And you bisexuals or pansexuals or whatever can have sex with as many people as you like, right?'

'Are you serious? Just because I can be attracted to all genders doesn't mean I want to sleep with everyone I see, and all at once. That sort of life might make some people happy, but my perfectly fine, *monogamous* relationship is enough work for me, thank you very much.'

'No need to be rude,' the wolf said, his long canines glistening. 'You should smile more.'

The conversation between Sienna and the wolf was further inspired by discourse analysis of blogs written by social groups connected to the queer community – particularly women and the issues of gender they face. A blog post written by Wheeler (2013) was analysed to explore the experience of women who have been told to 'smile' by strangers in public settings. Wheeler (2013: np) suggests that commands such as 'Smile!' are an attempt to 'control' women and to intimidate them into adhering to a gender role where they are always happy, which dehumanises them. She also demonstrates how this sort of street harassment is threatening, and at the end of a personal anecdote says, 'Who knows what would have happened if I hadn't walked away' (Wheeler 2013: np). These recounts led to the inclusion of the wolf's final comment to Sienna in the above segment, as well as the narrator's observations before Sienna's first exchange with the wolf: 'speaking to such a wolf was dangerous, but … angering him by refusing to answer his question may put her at further risk.'

Writing that shares personal experiences surrounding language choices, mislabelling, stereotyping, discrimination, and fear is more readily found in blog posts than in academic sources, and engagement with these experiences contributes to creating accurate narratives of representation, as well as characters and scenes that foster verisimilitude. Creating narratives of representation featuring accurate and authentic depictions of minority social groups – even within fiction writing belonging to genres other than 'realism' – is valuable, as these texts allow readers to identify with the characters they engage with, while also fostering empathy by exposing readers to diverse perspectives that reflect real experiences and issues (Smolkin & Young 2011: 217). The value of narratives of representation, and the ways that engaging with blog posts can positively influence their creation, highlights how useful blogs are as research tools for writers.

Benefits, limitations, and ethics

Blogs can provide simultaneous breadth and depth of information, with broadness found in the connections made between multiple participants in discussions and depth in their longitudinal nature (Jones & Alony 2008: 9). Experiences recounted in blogs are typically

candid and genuine, and – although they can be affected by bias based on the intended or established audience of the blog, or deliberate deception through online anonymity – these experiences are not 'subject to the influence or interference of the researcher', which is possible in other forms of qualitative data collection (Jones & Alony 2008: 9-10).

While blogs offer a range of benefits, there are limitations and considerations to be made when accessing these research sources, some of which have been explored by Jones and Alony (2008: 9) and Wilkinson and Thelwall (2011: 389) in relation to more traditional research outputs; while some of these considerations remain applicable for using blogs to inspire and inform fiction writing, the distance that narratives of representation place between a blogger and the ideas that they have publicly expressed can allow for greater use of these ideas with fewer ethical concerns in terms of anonymity and privacy.

There are two schools of thought regarding the ethics of using blogs as research: some consider blog research to be similar to other qualitative forms of research that require participants to be consulted and approve their involvement, while others believe that blog posts that had been made publicly accessible can be analysed and cited without permission being sought (Jones & Alony 2008). Ongoing debate has established key differences between the analysis of blogs and other qualitative forms of research, namely the lack of interaction between participants and researchers when analysing blogs (Wilkinson & Thelwall 2011: 394). It is suggested that there is a difference between the study of individuals and of documents, and that analysis of blog posts belongs to the latter category; while 'individuals tend to be protected by ethical procedures', it is possible for a researcher to analyse a document without seeking the permission of its author (Wilkinson & Thelwall 2011: 394). As such, I have not sought permission from the author of blog posts that I have analysed in the creation of my own texts, provided they are publicly accessible.

The personal nature of blog posts does create some questions regarding the anonymity of bloggers, which is a more complex issue. Limiting the blogs used for research to those accessible on the public web – that is, hosted on websites that do not require user identification or a password to view – can reduce these concerns, as texts that are publicly accessible can be considered published works, not personal correspondence (Wilkinson & Thelwall 2011: 394). Some bloggers write anonymously using usernames or pseudonyms – and in these cases their identity should be protected by writers inspired by their experiences and discussions – but other bloggers publicly share their identity alongside their posts. In situations where a blogger's identity is already made public, including information about this identity in writing – fictional or otherwise – is 'merely copying their identity from one public situation (the web) to another (an academic article [or a creative work])', and therefore using parts of a public identity as inspiration has fewer ethical concerns (Wilkinson & Thelwall 2011: 397). Publicly available blog posts are published works that may be interpreted and analysed by a reader, and thus a researcher, in similar ways to how published literary texts can be studied without the permission of their author (Barry 2013).

Using blogs as research sources can also cause issues of sampling, which is similar to other established qualitative research (Jones & Alony 2008: 9). There are limitations to the perspectives that can be accessed through blogs: for instance, bloggers need to be attracted to writing, particularly via a digital medium, and need to have the access and ability to use technology (Jones & Alony 2008: 9). Although this can restrict the power of web research,

Wilkinson and Thelwall (2011: 389) believe that these issues of sampling do not 'invalidate' the research, but should encourage researchers to consider their findings with caution. When engaging with and writing about the issues an individual explores within a blog post, it is important to avoid depicting these experiences in narratives of representation as being indicative of an entire minority social group, instead aiming to emphasise that each example is a possible experience of an individual within that larger group.

Conclusion

Narratives of representation are designed to increase diverse representation of minority social groups in literary works, and it is the responsibility of writers to contribute to the prevalence of such texts. To ensure accurate and authentic depictions – and thus increase the identification and empathy of readers – a writer must consider the research methods they are using.

Discourse analysis can be used to consider how minority social groups discuss issues within blog posts, which offers a new method for accessing candid and personal expressions that move beyond the self, without introducing the influence of a researcher upon a participant. Existing methods relied upon for writing such narratives – including surveys, interviews, and journaling – remain effective despite their limitations, and may be used in conjunction with analysis of blog posts; however, as accessing blog posts to inspire narratives of representation is a recent development, further research is required to see how this analysis might interact with other pre-established research methods, and the creative works that different processes and approaches may produce.

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