

Presentation of self in French teenage blogs

Tobin Laurence
Laboratoire Gestic,
Université de Bretagne-Sud
laurence.tobin@univ-ubs.fr

Résumé - Présentation de soi dans les blogs ados

3,8 millions, c'est le nombre de blogs hébergés par Skyblog en février 2006. Ce chiffre qui représente déjà plus de 20% des adolescents français explose de jour en jour. Les blogs sont des sortes de journaux de bord personnels en ligne, principalement composés de photos et commentaires en style SMS. L'ado s'y dévoile auprès d'un public extérieur restreint en affichant par juxtaposition les éléments qui composent son univers : amis, fêtes, passions, premiers pas... Quelque part dans cette identité bricolée s'annonce une photo et un "c'est moi" parfois embarrassé. A partir des photos de présentation de soi d'une cinquantaine de blogs ados de Vannes (56) et sa région, on a tout d'abord examiné la stratégie de présentation des blogueurs d'après la quantité et le rang d'apparition des photos. On a également étudié la gestuelle identitaire, signes de reconnaissance et postures qui permettent à l'adolescent d'afficher son appartenance à une culture lycéenne. On a enfin dégagé certaines caractéristiques posturales des photos posées de groupes d'amis et la façon dont les différentes relations amicales (meilleur ami, groupe intime, grand groupe) sont données à voir.

Abstract

In February 2006, there were 3,8 million active blogs on Skyblog, the most popular blog-hosting site in France. This number corresponds to more than 20% of French teenagers, and is increasing explosively. Blogs are a sort of on-line personal logbook, comprising mostly photographs and comments in SMS style. The teenager reveals him/herself to a restricted external audience by posting a juxtaposition of elements that comprise his or her world: friends, parties, interests, experiences. Somewhere in this patchwork there is a self-photograph and a sometimes-embarrassed "this is me" text. Working from such photographs from about fifty teenage blogs from the Breton town of Vannes and its surroundings, I have examined the various presentation strategies from the quantity and appearance rank of photographs of the blogger. Identity gestures and postures linking the blogger to various high school sub-cultures were examined. Then, posed photographs of various groups of friends were studied (best friend, close friends, larger groups) to determine how certain postures typify the various relationships being exposed.

Key-words: *weblog, self presentation, posed photographs, teenage cultures, friendship*

1. 3,878,546 French teenage blogs

Free and easy to set up, blogs are on-line personal diaries composed of photos with added commentaries written in an SMS type of language. Very popular among teenagers, their number is exploding in France. In the spring of 2005, when this study was conducted, there were 2 million blogs; by mid-February 2006, the number was 3,878,546, and growing by the second, as shown on the blog count on Skyblog, the principal platform hosting teenage blogs in France. But why such a success?

1.1. Weblogs as a genre

“The blogger is his/her own audience, his/her own public, his/her own beneficiary” (Miller and Sheperd, 2004). As outlined by these authors, the blog arose as a new rhetorical opportunity in the late 1990s in the culture of ‘mediated voyeurism’ and reality TV. The relationship of public to private being displaced, the self-disclosure function of blogs serves the purposes of self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control.

1.2. A territorial network

The other aim of a blogger is to communicate and stay connected with peers in the territories and social worlds to which s/he belongs. Territorial cues such as zip code (56 in this study) are often part of the pseudonym adopted by the blogger. Lists of references to other blogs, as well as exchanges outside the blogosphere in chat rooms ensure the necessary publicity and networking.

As shown by various incidents where students have been sued for libel, youngsters are not always aware of how easy it is to access their blogs, and that their communications can reach far beyond their original territories.

2. Blog contents

Teenage blogs present a patchwork of multimedia objects, personal photos and comments made by the blogger or posted by friends and visitors. The success of a blog is measured by its audience: the number of comments posted by outsiders and number of quotations, references and borrowed visual material found in other blogs.

2.1. Amateur photographs

Amateur photographs are the prime visual material found in blogs. About 60% of posted items are personal photographs of the blogger, close friends, familiar surroundings and group events like school trips and parties. It is these that I have studied in greater detail.

2.2. Multimedia objects

Objects displayed on blogs range from humour to gore; from cinema, music or sport stars to sugary love messages; and adverts for chocolate vodka, shoes, cars etc. They mostly appear haphazardly, scattered across the pages of the blog, with scanty comments of like or dislike. Gleaned from the web and other blogs, they are left to their own devices: to express the personality of the blog owner, very much like a jungle of objects in a teenager’s bedroom.

2.3. Text

Textual material includes personality questionnaires, ‘rumour’ type cautionary messages about sexual violence or alcohol abuse, poems, song lyrics, and urban myths. These texts hop from blog to blog. Their traditional spelling and overall style betray external sourcing.

2.4. Personal texts and comments

Mostly coded in SMS language, bloggers’ comments about photographs and visual material are often stereotyped. Other comments posted by visitors can be quite incisive or overly laudative.

3. SMS French

Far from the grammatical norms and spelling intricacies of traditional written French, the language used in blogs is characterized by both a ghetto-style lexicon and simplified spelling. It is a thin, expressive and idiosyncratic language, serving as an identity marker. Its almost complete disdain for the rules of standard writing spells rebellion and freedom of speech, and cocks a formidable snoot at school as an institution. Although not constrained by cost or typing difficulties, the language used in blogs shares many of the characteristics of SMS language as described by Liénard (2005).

3.1. Lexicon

Borrowed from suburban slang, a number of usual words are in *verlan*, a slang in which syllables are inverted, for instance ‘tigen’ for ‘gentil’ (nice), ‘a donf’ for ‘à fond’ (totally), ‘gro zoubi’ for ‘gros bisous’ (big kisses).

Other lexical items are slang words in their own right, some of Arabic origin: ‘chouille’ (party), ‘triper’ (to have a good time), ‘kiffer’ (to like), ‘grave’ (a lot).

3.2. Spelling

The two main processes in spelling are simplification and specialisation.

3.2.1. Simplification

Simplification can be achieved in several ways, for example using *consonant skeletons*: ‘tkt’ for ‘t’inquiètes’ (don’t worry), ‘dsl’ for ‘désolé’ (sorry); *truncations*: ‘pi’ for ‘puis’ (then); and generally speaking by omission of accents and punctuation signs. This is a widely-creative pattern that bloggers readily apply.

3.2.2. Specialisation

Specialisation on the other hand means that special forms are used to emphasize the in-group nature of blog language. Examples of specialisation include *syllabograms* that treat spelling like ideographs. A detour via the phonemic form of the words is required to construct the meaning, for instance ‘2m1’ [deux ème un] for ‘demain’ (tomorrow), ‘06’ [o six] for ‘aussi’ (also), and ‘7’ for ‘cette’ (this).

Other typical blogosphere expressions rely on *collapsing* words (‘sprav’ for ‘c’est pas grave’ – it does not matter), borrowing English words (me, now) and dedicated expressions such as ‘mdr’ for ‘mort de rire’ (died laughing) or its English equivalent ‘lol’ (for ‘laughing out loud’).

3.3. Expressivity

Expressivity and emotion are achieved through emoticons, frequent *repetition of graphemes*, and *vocalic mutations*. A word like ‘coucou’ become ‘kikou’, ‘bonjour’ becomes ‘bijour’ and ‘chéri’ becomes ‘chewi’ (a mock English accent?).

In the following blog extract one perceives the pleasure of playing with language:

“ché ma nini!!sa klakai!!swaré defonse!!!lol é ouai!!vieu fou rire !!!pa mal le caleçon
ak d tite voiture!!!!put1 c sexy!!!!!!!!!!!!waouh!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!hop hop
hop!!!!!!gggggggrrrrr bizouxxxxxxxxxx mon ti
nage!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!jtdddddddddddddddddddddddddddddddddddd

This group sports 'peace & love' and 'surf wave' hand gestures. Both boys and girls are represented in this category.



Photo 3: Peace and love

5.3. 'Pretty women' and sex symbols (French 'loveuses', 'cailles' and 'lascards')

This groups exhibits postures from the catwalk or pin-up calendars: leaning on walls or cars, emphasis on the lips, tongue or bottom. They are mostly female, but not exclusively, and are occasionally parodied by men. Some of the poses and gestures are borrowed from the worlds of soft-porn and reality-TV.



Photo 4 : Provocative poses

5.4. Pantomimes

Added to these categories, other postures seem to parody clichéd postures from the world of movies and music stars. It is as if the blogger tried on a new identity by being a star: being Greta Garbo, playing with glasses, pantomiming 'Charlie and his angels', holding a gun (James Bond), holding thumb and index finger under the chin (an 'I am a star' gesture in France).



Photo 5: Posing as a star



Photo 6: Pantomiming James Bond



Photo 7: Being a mock star

5.5. Faces

Various funny faces, mostly involving tongue pulling, may be part of the way of marking identity by rejecting seriousness.



Photo 8: Pulling a face at the serious world

6. Relation gestuality

Bloggers present their friends to the world either with individual photographs or with photographs where both blogger and friend are pictured together. This presents a unique opportunity to rewrite the family album by placing oneself not among actual family (pictures of parents are extremely rare) but among elective family (i.e. friends). Posed group photographs offer the possibility of presenting a postural representation of the relationship. This yields several configurations.

6.1. Duality

The blogger poses with his or her 'best friend'. The trend is that the two friends are pictured standing, upper half or full body visible with complete parallel corporal contact and a strong embrace, a picture of deep friendship. Facial expressions range from serene to almost severe, looking at the camera.



Photo 9: Best friends for ever

6.2. Fusion

Groups of three or four take a different stance. Focal emphasis is on faces, which are joined, touching each other, and bodies radiate centrifugally: one head and several bodies. A subgroup of fusion photos are taken in ID booths.



Photo 10: Close friends (being one)

6.3. 'Firework'

In larger groups yet, bodies tend to be massed together, but heads and limbs emerge, reaching out: one body and several heads. Variety and expressivity in faces and gestures are the rule.



Photo 11: A larger group (being many)

6.4. Magnifying the relationship

A peculiar phenomenon is observed concerning some female bloggers. Posing for a photograph with a friend presents the possibility of magnifying the relationship. Some declarations of friendship between females borrow from the lexicon and gestures of lovers. Bloggers' comments like 'my lover' or 'my wife' are used and the ambiguity is amply echoed in comments left by visitors. As for male teenagers, they seem to have a harder time expressing their friendship posturally.



Photo 12: Magnifying the relationship

Accompanying blog comment:

“Me voila avec ma moitié, ma meilleure amie, mon ame soeur...enfin tout koi !! on fezé dodo avant notre depart en angleterre. !! je t'aime+ke tout ma moitié !!!!”

(This is me with my better half, my best friend, my sister soul...just everything to me. We were having a nap before going to England!!! I love you more than anything, better half!!!)

6.5. Lovers, the magnificent absent

Although mentioned in verbal comments and in carefully-written love declarations, lovers are not widely presented on blogs; and then, mostly on photographs showing only the lover. Blogs are definitely the stronghold of friendship.

7. Conclusion

Comparable to bedroom walls as a site for self-expression, blogs are a sort of identity workshop. They act as a transitional space between the virtual and the real, and between the author and others. Emotional proximity coupled with physical distance is favourable to internal dialogue and self-questioning. The adolescent puts together an identity kit by posting a juxtaposition of elements that comprise his or her world: friends, parties, experiences and dreamed-of stardom, fast cars and fashionable clothing. Blogs offer the possibility both to express teen angst and to bring a feeling of reality through a mediated presence of self. This combined role may explain the success of blogs as a rite of passage for many teenagers.

Bibliography

Thierry, D., & Trédan, O. (2005). Cyberspace et affirmation des identités territoriales [Cyberspace and territorial identities]. *Cahier de recherche Marsouin*. Retrieved on February 7, 2006, from <http://www.marsouin.org>

Liénard, F. (2005). Langage texto et langage contrôlé. Description et problèmes. *Linguisticae Investigationes*, 28(1), 49-60.

Miller, C., & Shepherd, D. (2004). *Bloggng as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog*. Retrieved on February 7, 2006, from <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/>