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# “Keep moving forward. LEFT RIGHT LEFT”: A critical metaphor analysis and addressivity analysis of personal and professional obesity blogs

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## ABSTRACT

Blogs are a valuable information source for health researchers and individuals managing chronic conditions such as obesity. Yet, there is little research on obesity blogs with existing studies focusing on specific obesity-related issues or examining blogging as a weight loss tool. Even less is known about how the overall obesity experience is conceptualised by blogging individuals and medical experts (particularly via metaphor - a device that aids discussions of sensitive issues) or the addressivity and self-presentation strategies employed on an interactive platform which affords tailored identity construction. This study analysed 343 posts from six (personal and professional) obesity blogs using critical metaphor analysis and addressivity analysis. The preferred source domain of metaphors in both blog types was Journey - with potentially positive implications for doctor-patient communication. Across blogs, Journey metaphors were recruited to highlight similar aspects of obesity in ways that challenged the mainstream before-after weight loss narrative. In personal blogs, Journey metaphors were employed to present the authors as travellers; in professional blogs, as guides. Metaphors thus contributed to self-presentations consistent with traditional views of the doctor-patient relationship. Finally, while individuals used various addressivity strategies, medical experts preferred those that project professionalism.

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## 1. Introduction

People increasingly seek health-related information online and those of us living with chronic conditions, of which obesity - “excessive fat accumulation that may impair health” (World Health Organization, 2016) - is an example, are more likely to do so than other internet users (Pew Research Center, 2014). Blogs in particular are considered “uniquely suited” to the needs of chronic disease sufferers (Pew Research Center, 2014). As a source of naturally occurring data that is not influenced by the investigator’s presence, blogs are also regarded as a promising data source for health research (Eastham, 2011). Yet, with few exceptions, obesity blogs have been understudied. Lingetun et al. (2017: 65) analysed obese women’s blogs to understand how they conceptualised pregnancy and concluded that pregnancy was used as “an excuse” for being obese. Leggatt-Cook and Chamberlain (2012) studied women’s blogs explicitly stating that blogging was used to aid weight loss. The analysis examined the therapeutic relationship between bloggers and readers established through commenting. As bloggers

documented their “weight-loss journey[s],” readers supported them by responding that they are, indeed, on a “journey to a most amazing place” (Leggatt-Cook and Chamberlain, 2012: 966–972). However, readers were occasionally critical of bloggers’ accounts of food consumption and physical activity and thus, held them accountable.

Such research holds valuable insights concerning specific obesity-related issues and blogging as a weight loss tool. Yet, it tells us little about how individuals and medical experts conceptualise the overall obesity experience (particularly via metaphor - a device that aids discussions of sensitive issues) or the addressivity and self-presentation strategies employed on an interactive platform which affords tailored identity construction. The interactivity of blogs, specifically commenting, has received much attention in general (Bronstein, 2013; Karlsson, 2007) and, as demonstrated by the above examples, it has also been studied in obesity blogs (see Leggatt-Cook and Chamberlain, 2012). Commenting though is not the only way in which blogs can be interactive. Bloggers use a range of more or less obvious linguistic devices to make readers feel addressed (Myers, 2010a). Also, instead of interactivity, some readers have attributed their continued engagement with blogs to “a language of affect” (Karlsson, 2007: 151). Affect is closely linked to metaphor, which works by arousing emotions in

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order to persuade (Charteris-Black, 2004, 2011). Metaphors are not only persuasive devices (Charteris-Black, 2004) - they can also grab and hold readers' attention (Semino, 2008) and they aid discussions of sensitive issues (Semino et al., 2015). As quotations from previous research show (see Leggatt-Cook and Chamberlain, 2012), metaphors are common in obesity blogs, which adds further support to the argument that research into their role in conceptualising obesity is much needed.

The following sub-sections detail the approach to blogs, interactivity, metaphor and self-presentation adopted in this study and explain how metaphor and interactivity can contribute to self-presentation on blogs.

### 1.1. Blogs

Blogs are websites on which posts are regularly written and displayed in reverse chronological order (Rowse, 2005). They can be divided into "filter blogs" - for curating and reflecting on external content such as research articles, "knowledge-logs" - to present information and observations about a topic, "personal journals" - dedicated to the experiences, internal states and reflections of the blog author and "mixed blogs" - which combine the features of several of the above types (Herring et al., 2004). While women have emerged as the main producers of "personal journals," men mostly write "filter blogs," "knowledge-logs" and "mixed blogs" (Herring et al., 2004). "Personal journals" were initially severely understudied (Herring et al., 2004), but are now recognised as a platform where dominant discourses can be challenged and alternative ones advanced (Jaborooty and Baker, 2017).

In a health context, "personal journals" offer an opportunity to review whether and how mainstream health and illness narratives are reworked online (Page, 2012). Advertisements, health magazine articles, television infomercials and news reports typically have a before-after narrative structure, which presents fatness as temporary and weight loss efforts as following a linear trajectory leading to weight loss (Ata and Thompson, 2010; Blaine and McElroy, 2002; Geier et al., 2003; Maor, 2014; Puhl and Heuer, 2009). These narratives derive from the wider before-after framework prominent in Western societies, which sees modernity as unidirectional progression from the past to a desired future (Levy-Navarro, 2009; Maor, 2014). The straightforward exit from the "before" category that such narratives suggest is not an experience shared by many. Of people who lose a significant amount of weight through dieting, 95% regain it within a few years (Heatherton et al., 1997). Unlike other online genres (such as discussion forums), "personal journals" are not necessarily linked to a contextual frame of an organisation's home page that creates expectations about content (Page, 2012; Seale et al., 2006). While influenced by diary and autobiography writing, "personal journals" are also less retrospective and are written in discontinuous, episodic posts (Page, 2012). This all suggests that they can offer a platform on which alternative, perhaps more fluctuating versions of the weight loss narrative can be expressed.

### 1.2. Interactivity

Blogs are frequently described as "distinctly social" (Lomborg, 2014: 15). Much like the telephone, they are the direct facilitators of interaction, but unlike other social media (for example Facebook, where users can connect with classmates with whom they have had offline contact) interaction on blogs does not build on pre-established relationships. Instead, interactions occur between strangers whose interests overlap. Given the lack of shared common ground from the outset (Lomborg, 2014), it can be argued that interactivity - that is, whether readers are addressed on what constitutes a dialogical platform (Page, 2012) - is especially important.

The most obvious form of interactivity is when blog authors enable commenting and respond to readers' contributions. Additionally, bloggers may draw on a range of addressivity devices to engage the reader (Myers, 2010a). The use of such devices can help produce "the right audience," reassuring readers "that it might be completely reasonable to interact with this total stranger" (Myers, 2010a: 93). Addressivity strategies range from the more explicit (using the pronoun "you," directly naming the addressee(s), posing questions and issuing directives) to the less explicit (for example, requiring readers to draw inferences that can only be made with specific shared knowledge) (Myers, 2010a). The pronoun "you" has emerged as the most common addressivity strategy in blogs (Myers, 2010a). "You" is prototypically used to refer to the addressee(s) in an interaction, but may also be impersonal when it refers to people in general ("you" in such cases can be replaced with "one") (Myers and Lampropoulou, 2012).

### 1.3. Metaphor

Curiously, some readers have attributed their continued engagement with blogs not to interactivity, but to "a language of affect" (Karlsson, 2007: 151). Affect is closely linked to metaphor - defined as talking and potentially thinking about one thing in terms of another (Semino, 2008). Metaphor, as Charteris-Black (2004, 2011) wrote, works by arousing emotions in order to persuade. In addition to the power to persuade, metaphor can grab and hold readers' attention (Semino, 2008) and has been shown to aid the discussion of sensitive issues (Semino et al., 2015). Understanding what metaphors are preferred by specific groups of people (such as patients and medical experts) is significant, as different metaphors frame issues differently. When discussing their findings about metaphors in cancer narratives, Semino et al. (2015) found that War metaphors conceptualised the illness as an enemy, presented patients as fighters and associated not recovering with defeat. In contrast, Journey metaphors framed cancer as a travel companion and did not suggest that not recovering amounted to personal failure (Semino et al., 2015). While both Journey and War metaphors conferred an active role to patients, the emphasis in Journey metaphors was on perseverance, in War metaphors on violent action at any cost (Semino et al., 2015).

### 1.4. Self-presentation

The above examples suggest that metaphors can additionally function as tools for self-presentation - a major concern of bloggers who need to position themselves on "a crowded terrain" (Myers, 2010b: 264). Goffman (1959) who described life as a stage and all individuals as performers also spoke of "back stage[s]" and "front stage[s]." In the "front stage," people aim to present an idealised version of who they are according to a specific role (a patient, a medical expert) (Hogan, 2010). Metaphors can be enlisted in such strategic identity management to purposefully "give" (rather than accidentally "give off") an impression (Goffman, 1959). Goffman's (1959) "front" and "back stage[s]" are useful for understanding offline as well as online self-presentations (e.g. Koteyko and Hunt, 2016). Some researchers have even suggested that online media can be classified as inherently "front" or "back stage" depending on the degree of control over access that authors have vis-à-vis an audience (Hogan, 2010). Blogs being freely accessible to readers qualify as "front stage" platforms on which authors may wish to construct idealised versions of their selves according to specific roles (in contrast to "back stage" online media such as Facebook, where the audience of posts can be controlled via privacy settings).

But it is not only metaphors that contribute to self-presentation. As mentioned, the pronoun "you" (which can be personal or

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