



## **A Tale of Power, Passion and Persuasion: Bloggers, Public Relations and Ethics**

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### **Abstract**

*Within public relations the questions of ethical theory and practice have been given new momentum with the rise of influencers in social media, such as bloggers, and the related phenomenon of stealth marketing. This paper explores the views of a specific community of these new influencers – so-called mum bloggers – following the call for more research in this area and with the theory of dialogic public relations as a start point. Taken from an online survey of Australian mum bloggers, the paper analyses the qualitative responses of 238 bloggers. Almost 70 per cent of respondents believe there are no ethical issues in blogging. Of those respondents who believe there are issues see that ‘sponsored posts’ – written commentary on blogs that is paid for by brands – are a major ethical issue.*

Keywords: blogs, ethics, public relations, bloggers, dialogue, cash-for-comment

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## **Introduction**

Regulation and ethics in social media are difficult issues for Governments and regulators as well as public relations professionals, as the media landscape is changing at such a rapid rate. Within social media, bloggers are becoming more powerful as 'prosumers' – consumers turned producers – and public relations practitioners are in turn seeking to influence the influencers (Gillin 2008; Saminather 2006; Trammell & Keshelashvili 2005; Woods 2005). Bloggers write blogs, which can be defined as websites that are produced by individuals in a diary format and presented in reverse chronological order. Blogs usually include text, photographs, videos and links to other blogs and web pages (van Heerden, Salehi-Sangari, Pitt & Caruana 2009). This paper explores the views of an increasingly powerful group of bloggers – so-called mum bloggers – on ethical issues. Ethics in public relations (or the lack thereof) has been discussed by academics for many years (see, for example, Botan 1997; Marsh 2001; Bowen 2004; Fawkes 2012a and 2012b and Langett 2013). With the rise of bloggers as new influencers – and the ethical concerns about the implications of their influence (Jensen 2011) – more research within the context of public relations theory and practice has been called for. For example, Macnamara (2010) identified the need to investigate, among other areas, the levels of interactivity, the issues of control and ethics in social media which are seen to be topical but far from resolved. Jensen (2011) outlined the many unsettled questions in the area of blogging ethics. Further, Smith (2012) has suggested that social media provides a rich context for public relations research into relationships between stakeholders and organisations.

## **Public relations ethics and 'blogola'**

Within the context of the 'blogosphere', and beyond the public relations literature, the related concept of stealth or covert marketing has begun to receive attention in marketing academic literature. Stealth marketing constitutes sponsored messages disguised as genuine word-of-mouth communications, particularly on blogs or in other internet forums (Jensen 2011; Magnini, 2011; Roy & Chattopadhyay 2009; Swanepoel, Lye & Rugimbana 2009; Martin & Smith 2008; Petty & Andrews 2008; Roffeld 2008). In the US, stealth marketing on blogs has been called 'blogola' (Cammaerts 2008; Jensen 2011). Blogola is a reference to and play on the term of 'payola' – practices originally found in the music industry as far back as the 1950s, where DJs and radio stations were paid to play and provide favourable comment on specific music (Cammaerts 2008). According to Cammaerts (2008), the practice of blogola is becoming commonplace in the blogosphere. The USA Federal Trade Commission introduced rules in 2009 for bloggers to disclose payments or free goods they receive from

organisations, and failure to do so can result in fines of \$US11,000 (Lee 2009; Sprague & Wells 2010).

In Australia the concept of payment for opinion is better known as cash-for-comment (see, for example, Lee 2009). A cash-for-comment controversy erupted in the late 1990s regarding high-profile radio hosts receiving payment for favourable mentions of products/companies on air (Salter 2012). The role of public relations in cash-for-comment payment for positive (radio) publicity has been discussed by Bartlett, Tywoniak and Hatcher (2007) when looking at the evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility in public relations practices relevant to the Australian banking industry. They found that it was public relations practitioners who facilitated the payment to certain radio celebrities for favourable comments about the banking industry. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television programme Media Watch's investigation into these events eventually resulted in the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) requiring disclosure of payments from radio stations, with a new set of standards only coming into effect in May 2012 (Salter 2012).

Bloggers are beyond the realm of the Australian Press Council and the Australian Journalists' Association code of ethics (Journalism and Media Ethics Fact Sheet 2010), resulting in payment being seen as a 'grey' area of law (Lee 2012). In April 2012, Media Watch broadcast an expose on payments to celebrities for favourable comments in a new medium other than radio – Twitter – and in October 2012 Media Watch devoted its entire programme to the rise of the personal/mum blogger and some of the ethical issues encountered online (see [abc.net.au/mediawatch](http://abc.net.au/mediawatch)). The Australian Government's Convergence Review Final Report (2012) into Australia's media and communications policy framework recommended that content on social media, including blogs, should be free from any regulation. The report was commissioned because of the changing nature of the Australian media and the blurring of lines among radio, newspapers and television and internet sources.

In 2013 the Interactive Advertising Bureau Australia (IABA) released Social Advertising Best Practice Guidelines which discussed 'best practice' around what they describe as 'paid social advertising', including sponsored blog posts, sponsored tweets and sponsored Facebook posts. The IABA guide stated that best practice, related to sponsored blogs, was

- Sponsored blog posts should be identified as a sponsored feature
- The client should brief the bloggers about the product being covered in the post but the blogger should maintain independence over the final content and positive or negative feedback

- The client should set clear expectations with the blogger about whether they need to review reactions and/or comments on the sponsored post (IABA 2013).

The IABA is described as the peak industry body for online advertising and its decision to publish the guidelines is one example of the increased blurring of lines between advertising, public relations and marketing. However, at time of writing, the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) appears to have as yet not released guidelines for practitioners specifically related to organisations and sponsored social media, including blogs. In June 2014, leading public relations academic, Professor Macnamara argued in a cross-post for the Conversation and Mumbrella that so-called 'native advertising' or embedded content, including paid online posts, comments and reviews was a media credibility crisis in waiting (Macnamara 2014).

## **Ethics, dialogue and relationship building in public relations**

Stealth marketing and social media cash-for-comment are areas of ethical interest for both public relations practitioners and theorists as bloggers are fast becoming a key stakeholder group. According to Smith (2010) the blogosphere is seen as an important and legitimate arena for public relations efforts. The question of ethics in public relations within social media is also closely related to the 'big questions' – the definition of public relations, its theoretical foundations and what, as a discipline, it should try to achieve.

The concept of dialogue in public relations – seen as an 'ethical form of communication' – has been discussed by Kent and Taylor (2002), based on the work of scholars Pearson (1989) and Botan (1997). Kent and Taylor (2002, p. 33) argue that 'dialogue is considered more ethical because it is based on principles of honesty, trust and positive regard for the other rather than simply a conception of the public as a means to an end.' The related concept of relationship building is a central theme in the public relations scholarly and practitioner literature (Langett 2013). With the rise of social media there has been even more focus on dialogic communication in public relations (for example Gordon and Berhow 2009; Rybalko and Seltzer 2010).

Scholars have recommended the normative views of a dialogic theory of public relations (Pearson 1989; Botan 1997; Kent and Taylor 2002) and a relationship-grounded research paradigm (Bruning 2002; Ledingham 2003). These contrast with the arguably more functional approaches when applied to stakeholder (and specifically blogger) engagement, written

largely from a practitioner perspective. For example, Booth and Matic (2011), both practitioners, wrote that the ‘nobodies’ of the past are now the new ‘somebodies’, demanding the attention of communication professionals who ‘seek continuous engagement with targeted consumers throughout the various channels of the social web’ (p. 184). Their paper reviewed a tool to identify the ‘new somebodies’ (that is, bloggers) who are ‘the influencers creating a revitalized level of brand awareness for companies’ (2011, p. 184). While helpful for practitioners, the tone of the article sees the new somebodies as a ‘means to an end’ and could also be viewed as derisive of these former nobodies. Similarly, Brown (2009) wrote a chapter in his book on public relations and the social web titled ‘the lunatics have taken over the asylum’ and points to ways to interact with these new influencers. Gordon, in her textbook for students (2011, p. 336) said that the key issue in social media for practitioners is ‘control’. Bridging the academic and practitioner divide, public relations academics Uzunoğlu and Öksüz (2012, p. 1), albeit writing for a marketing communications journal, offered practitioners a case study of a ‘well-planned, creative campaign that successfully exploits the opportunities provided by interactivity’ – and provided a guide to side-step restrictive alcohol advertising laws through *exploiting* (their words, our emphasis) bloggers and social media with an outreach programme on behalf of an alcohol company. The tone of this article is hardly dialogic in nature but *again* sees the bloggers and landscape of social media as a means to an end – in this case a (covert) way to promote alcohol. The how-to guide for public relations practitioners related to social media provided on the PRIA website (accessed June 2014) and originally from the PR Daily talks about ‘connection’ and ‘conversation’ but finally discusses ‘conversion’ and says ‘you can’t talk about social media without having a return on investment (ROI) conversation’ (Royse 2012).

The few examples above show the seeming chasm between scholarly literature on normative approaches to relationship management, dialogue and ethics and the arguably means-to-an-end approaches of (mostly) practitioners. The divided ethical identity of public relations – with the idealised codes of conduct espoused by academics on one side and the practitioner-led expectations which privilege clients over society – has been given in-depth analysis by Fawkes (2012a) in her recent conceptual paper. Fawkes (2012a) painted the two sides as saint v sinners and suggested a Jungian middle ground as one way forward, where self-acceptance and a willingness to embrace contradiction could offer a resolution. A more critical view of the dialogue concept has been proposed by Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2012) who ask whether it is actually possible for an ‘organisation to engage in dialogue with its stakeholders where a specific interest is served and whether it is even desirable to do so’ (2012, p 6). Theunissen and Wan Noordin also discuss the functional notion of control and balance,

at the heart of communication management, and argue that true dialogue is actually about relinquishing some control (2012).

What do the stakeholders think of ethical public relations practice? The stakeholder concept itself is contested, and originated in the management literature. Freeman's now classic definition of a stakeholder is... 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives' (1984, p. 46). Clearly, bloggers have been shown to affect the operations of a firm in both positive and negative ways, as shown by those practitioners with concern for control of their messages in the blogosphere (see Weber 2009) and bloggers therefore can be defined as stakeholders. Stakeholder theory has been adopted by some public relations academics (see de Bussy 2008; 2010 and Smith 2012) but as de Bussy (2013) points out, the stakeholder theorists in the management literature do not consider or discuss stakeholder theory in direct relation to public relations or communications.

## **Blogging ethics**

The specific question of blogging ethics has been given some attention by academics, albeit mostly in an American context. Smudde (2005) applied the normative approach to blogging and argued that, within blogging, 'successful and effective public relations is ethical and dialogic, creating candid, open, simple, and clear messages to manage perceptions of an organization' (p. 38). However, Smudde's article of blogging ethics only extended to practitioners blogging for their organisations themselves – not to their interactions with influential bloggers. Perlmutter and Schoen (2007) analysed 30 American political blogs for codes of ethics and found that most did not have a code of ethics on their site. Cenite et al (2009) found that while there was some support for a code of ethics among bloggers, the support was 'less than enthusiastic' with just under half *not* supporting a code or 'neutral'. They arrived at four attributes of ethical blogging: truth telling, accountability, attribution (that is, fairly attributing sources of content) and minimising harm.

Langett (2013, p. 88) conceded, in his paper arguing for 'dialogic civility' in a digital era, that achieving dialogic civility between public relations practitioners and bloggers can be an ongoing challenge, 'in a time of self-serving organizational agendas and bottom line objectives'. Langett offered three recommendations that facilitate dialogic blogger engagement ethics

1. Recognising the Other (blogger) as necessary to the public relations practitioner identity ...
2. Learning the narrative upon which the Other (blogger) stands...

3. Ensuring the organizational content pitched to the blogger is relevant to the audience and represents characteristics espoused by the blogosphere. (Langett, 2013, p. 88)

Given the contrasting views of public relations theorists and practitioners and the largely unexplored question of ethics related to dialogue between practitioners and bloggers, the area of what stakeholders think, in this case the bloggers, is one which is ripe for research. Bloggers currently have no shared code of ethics in Australia and are in a blurred terrain between professional and personal (see Pihl 2013). Social media has been described as the 'wild West' – rich in opportunity but with many dangers (Fertik and Thompson 2010). There has been limited empirical research into this area of theoretical and practitioner interest. A notable exception is Smith's (2010) qualitative analysis involving 10 interviews with American bloggers which, though limited in scope, provides themes worth further exploring. Smith's major finding was that bloggers go through an evolutionary process as they become more experienced and this process influences their willingness to work with public relations practitioners. His findings on the bloggers' attitude to payment for posts are limited but he suggested that bloggers at times found themselves placed in an ethical quandary and some viewed practitioners as tricksters and charlatans.

### **Behold: the rise of the mother blogger**

One particular major stakeholder group for any organisation (and by association public relations practitioners) wanting to influence parents is blogging mothers themselves. Bloggers who are also parents (in particular blogging mothers) are now being courted by multinational organisations (Anderson 2011; Byron 2008; Huffstutter & Hirsch 2009). Major multinationals and marketers have started to recognise the commercial importance of these new influencers (Friedman, 2010; Lopez 2009; Morrissey 2009; Thompson 2007; Woods 2005). ). Lopez (2009, p. 739) noted the collision of business and mum bloggers as follows:

Mommy bloggers have been officially outed as a prime commodity audience for advertisers. With the combination of thousands of eyeballs and an undeniable consumer market for all manners of baby products, it was only a matter of time before advertisers started snatching up real estate on all the best blogs.

In the US, there are reported to be approximately 4 million Blogs by Mothers (henceforth called BbMs), which influence millions of parents around the world (Anderson 2011). Products and services other than those for babies (including cars, cosmetics, clothes, cereal and mobile phones, to

name some) are being promoted on BbMs and not just through advertising. 'Sponsored' posts and relationship building with mother bloggers by commercial organisations are becoming increasingly common (Byron 2008; Hosking 2011; Morrissey 2009; Thompson 2007). These activities are particularly common in the US, but are also occurring in Australia and other parts of the world (Lopez 2009; Capel 2012). One American journalist puts the new influence in these (rather patronising) terms: 'These days, mommy bloggers don't just gab about spilled milk and poopy diapers. In fact, they've become so influential in the \$22 billion toy market that toy makers go to great lengths to get their seal of approval' (Anderson 2011, online reference). In the US, Mattel, for example, has approximately 400 blogging mothers on its books, with their database including the bloggers' locations, interests and children's ages (Anderson 2011). In Australia, the second ever 'Digital Parents Conference' was held in March 2013 and was attended by approximately 200 blogging mothers and a handful of blogging fathers. Sponsors for the Australian conferences have included Kleenex, Disney, Microsoft, Hallmark, a financial institution, a wine company, a major public relations consultancy and a fertility services company (see [digitalparentsconference.com.au](http://digitalparentsconference.com.au)).

Specific statistics on blogging mothers in Australia are not readily available. However, a report by ACMA stated that 40 per cent of Australians regularly read a blog or social networking site and one in 10 Australians writes a blog or uploads content to the internet (ACMA 2009). With the rapid change in social media, these statistics are now likely to be much higher. Early research from Britain painted the average blogger as male (Taylor 2004), and a Taiwanese study showed bloggers had a median age of 23 (Huang, Shen, Lin & Chang 2007). However, other studies have shown that just as many women blog as men (Haferkamp & Kramer 2008; Lenhart & Fox 2006). Women are more likely to write journal or diary blogs (Karlsson 2007; Wei, 2009; Kleman 2008) and to write about personal experiences (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2008). In Australia 88 per cent of the 594 respondents to a survey on bloggers were female (Nuffnang Australia Blogger Survey Results 2011). The same survey showed that 50 per cent of bloggers were over 30.

With the rising importance of mum bloggers and the lack of research on their opinions related to ethical practice, the following research questions were developed:

- Do Australian blogging parents believe they should be paid by companies to promote their products?
- What are the major ethical issues Australian blogging parents identify?



These questions also provide a basis for discussion of ethical practice from the stakeholder viewpoint (rather than purely normative or practitioner approach) within public relations research. For academics to determine theories of ethics relevant to today's media landscape it is important to understand this new terrain, even if it is seen as an untamed territory. Many years ago, Gioia (1999, p. 228) exhorted academics interested in stakeholder theory to 'get off the veranda' and research the stakeholders, grounding theory in more data – this research does just that.

## **Research methodology**

An online survey of Australian blogging parents was emailed to the 2,234 members of the Digital Parents group. Digital Parents is an online community of Australian parent bloggers who use the site to share ideas and experiences ([www.digitalparents.com.au](http://www.digitalparents.com.au)). Membership is by application and must be approved by the site's founder and manager. Despite the name, a small number of the group members are not parents and the site attracts a variety of contributors.

To generate qualitative data, respondents were asked via open-ended questions to discuss their thoughts on ethical issues related to blogging. Other closed-ended questions related to respondent demographics, frequency of blogging, use of other social media, online shopping activities, and the range of topics discussed on their blogs. This paper predominantly focuses on the responses to the open-ended question on ethics. A total of 245 bloggers responded, with 238 usable responses. Given the limited research into bloggers and their views of ethics within Australia this exploratory research was seen as a first step to understanding the blogosphere according to Australian parent bloggers and drill deeper into a highly influential online community.

## **Findings**

Only women responded to this survey (100%). The majority of Digital Parents (DP) who responded were aged between 26 and 45 (89%) and are married (80%) with children, many with two (younger) children. The majority of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that bloggers should receive compensation for mention of brands (81%) while 16% are neutral and only 3% disagree. Relevance to their blog (96%) and interest for their readers (93%) were the cited by the DP bloggers as the most important for working with brands. While advertising and sponsored posts were reported to be the most common ways of generating money, 58 per cent of bloggers said they did not generate any money from their blog.

## **Sponsored content and ethics**

The majority of respondents did not currently take payment for sponsored content on their blog but a sizable proportion did (41%). While 11% did not take sponsorship and would not want to, 48% did not but would like to. The majority of surveyed bloggers would prefer to be compensated for sponsored content with both cash and free product or experience (68%), 14% would prefer cash only, 13% product or experience only and 5% would not accept compensation.

When asked about ethics, the majority felt there were no ethical issues with blogging (68%). The 32 % of the respondents who did believe there were ethical issues were given an opportunity to describe any ethical concerns in an open-ended comment section.

## **Reviews, sponsorship and disclosure**

The major themes to emerge from the open-ended responses to the question 'what are the ethical issues related to blogging' were linked to cash-for-comment – or, as the bloggers call them, sponsored posts. Broken down, these were further elucidated as money or a free product or service potentially buying (favourable) opinions, the perceived pressure to accept any sponsored post benefits (in case none were to follow), disclosure of sponsorship and the issue of sponsored posts annoying or offending readers.

Most other responses to the question of ethics were linked to issues of privacy for bloggers, their family and friends. However, these responses were in the minority.

The following comments are representative of the views related to sponsored posts.

*As much as everyone protests, I think there ARE problems with sponsored posts. The big bloggers do them well and are professional and transparent in their approach (especially XXX). But honestly, WHEN have you ever read a bad or neutral product review on a blog? Not saying people should, but I hate that whole 'this opinion is mine and the company didn't tell me what to write' stuff. You're doing the post and you have received some benefit, so be honest with yourself that your opinion has been influenced. I don't mind ads etc. – I probably prefer them to sponsored posts, but I know sponsored posts are bigger than ads now.*

This comment identifies clearly the problem of money potentially influencing opinion.

The problem of how to 'just say no' to problematic sponsorship is also a concern among some bloggers as this blogger points out.

*As I'm relatively new to blogging, I've struggled a little bit with promoting products I might not actually buy in the 'real world' – but I have not wanted to say no to the relatively few offers for promotions/sponsored posts that have come my way.*

Some bloggers were clear on their view of honest reviews. A theme that also came through was that an obviously 'paid for' review may annoy readers and also harm the bloggers' reputation.

*Doing a review and giveaway, for me, is to promote a product I'm interested in that I think my readers may also be interested in – some people seem to assume bloggers will accept any review and write a glowing and positive piece regardless. That's not true. Our reputation is at stake, and we always review honestly. I knock back a number of reviews because I don't like a product.*

The approaches by brand representatives to review products was seen as a waste of time by some, as represented in this quote.

*I don't review inexpensive products because it's not worth my time, but I feel it's unethical to take payment for reviews. Is it though? I don't know.*

The issue of being paid to be positive was raised ...

*I rarely see blogger reviews with a balance of positive and negatives, or that compare competitive products, give a rating out of 5, or say whether the blogger would buy the product in real life. Rather, the 'reviews' are just descriptions of how their kids used the items, and tend to be overwhelmingly positive. I mean, they want people to enter the competition to win the item ...*

'Disclosure' of payment, free product or other inducement was also seen as an issue with the following comments highlighting this point.

*I think disclosure is important. It seems to be a grey area for some bloggers.*

*It is important to be clear about what blog content is sponsored or paid for, and what is not. Transparency is important for trust.*

*Sometimes I find it hard to discern between a post that is sponsored or in some way affiliated with a product/brand and those that are just the blogger writing about their experience with something in their everyday life. I believe that sponsored posts and anything written about a product/brand where the blogger has been given something for free should be stated at the very start of the post to reduce any confusion and sense of being misled.*

## **Discussion, limitations and future research**

While the majority of bloggers surveyed wanted to be paid for mention or reviews of brands/products/services on their blogs, the majority also did not see any ethical issues relevant to blogging. This represents something of a paradox. However, it is clear that those who do have concerns over ethics are mainly concerned with the question of money, 'transparency' and their own interests and their readers' interests. This represents a new finding as previous studies do not appear to have uncovered these responses. One of the few studies looking at bloggers' ethics arrived at only four attributes of blogging ethics: truth telling, accountability, attribution and minimising harm (Cenite et al 2009). While it could be argued that the question of sponsorship could be covered under the concept of 'truth telling', the area of sponsored posts and product reviews is far more nuanced. In addition, the actual scale items for truth telling used by Cenite et al (2009) were not connected to relation to payment.

The fear of annoying readers is echoed in the findings of Smith (2010) whose American study of bloggers found they expressed an obligation to readers, which might influence content. Smith's bloggers were, like the Australian bloggers, not keen to 'piss their readers off', to paraphrase a colourful comment by one of Smith's respondents.

The comments of the new blogger in our study not wanting to turn down offers from the brands also echoed Smith's (2010) observation that a willingness to engage with public relations practitioners evolved. He found more experienced bloggers were less likely to be excited by public relations approaches or content.

The findings have implications for the theory and practice of public relations. If public relations is defined as a practice of dialogue and relationship management, what is the outcome when a major stakeholder

(other than a customer, staff member or supplier) is concerned with a commercial *and* dialogic relationship? The majority of blogging mothers' ethical concerns related to payment for writing posts. In the works of Botan (1997) and Kent and Taylor (2002) on general public relations ethics, the monetary aspect of relationships is given scant, if any, attention. The practical reality of commercial entities building relationships is that money is of central concern. The ideals of dialogue and relationship building are to be lauded but it appears that for a relationship to be of interest, many bloggers want cold, hard cash. The concept of 'the uninvited brand' (Fournier and Avery 2011) has resonance – if brands want to be at the table, money may be the only way to be invited. In this case it may be the uninvited PR practitioner who must resort to efforts beyond dialogue or rhetoric to establish a relationship. For public relations theory on ethics to progress, academics need to acknowledge, as Fawkes (2012a) has done that, particularly in the blogosphere, dialogue ethics must include an understanding of commercial negotiation. Similarly, Theunissen and Wan Noord in their conceptual paper, argue that while dialogue 'has potential value, it is no more ethical than or preferred to persuasion' (2012, p. 11).

This paper is not without its limitations as it only surveys one 'type' of blogging stakeholder group – that is, blogging mothers – and is bound by the geographic boundaries of Australia where there are no laws on disclosure. However, its limitations could also be seen as strengths as the very characteristics of mum bloggers mean they are in demand from big business to influence a major consumer group, that is, parents. The Australian context means the 'wild West' situation of no laws or ethical codes makes it a location worthy for research.

This paper has implications for public policy, as the practice of disclosed and undisclosed payment for blog posts appears to be an issue with further exploration and with significant ethical implications. The results relate to the stakeholder or 'prosumer' point of view and some respondents had given serious and considered thought to the areas of ethical concern they face. As public relations practitioners grapple with how to work with the 'new influencers' this paper provides an insight into the opinions of the bloggers. The paper attempts to address the issues raised by Gioia (1999) in the stakeholder literature, aiming to represent the complex social, economic and organisational realities managers face. It has also responded to Macnamara's (2010) call for further research into ethics in social media and the issue of control. Future research could indeed involve more depth interviews with the current group of bloggers to further explore the issues raised by blogging mothers. Other groups of bloggers such as fashion bloggers or travel bloggers could be surveyed to see if their responses are similar to those outlined here. A survey of public relations practitioners *and*

academics on their attitude to ethics in the blogosphere would be useful for a comparison of responses between these two groups.

The current Public Relations Institute of Australia code of ethics states that: *Members shall be prepared to identify the source of funding of any public communication they initiate or for which they act as a conduit.* If public relations practitioners are to be the boundary spanners between bloggers and organisations/brands, and most bloggers want compensation to write about brands, then issues relating to the current code of ethics need to be further explored. Similarly, many traditional public relations definitions view public relations as a management function which seeks to further the organisation's interests (see Heath and Coomb 2006; Cutlip, Center and Broom 2000) . Given the empirical results from this research, then perhaps it is time to honestly review whether or not public relations is always about true dialogue with stakeholders.

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