# Introduction

## Finding The Coquette and

## Exploring Pseudonyms and Intimacy on Tumblr

In the summer of 2010, a friend from high school sent me a link to a website she randomly stumbled across. She thought I might enjoy it for what she described as humorous popular culture commentary. The website turned out to be a Tumblr blog called *Coke Talk*, and the specific post dated back to 2009. I did not have my own Tumblr account, but I could still access the information from Coke Talk's page. At the time, I did not know much about blogging, blogging culture, or Tumblr as a platform. The Coke Talk blogger started off her post by writing, "Jim Henson should make my pussy into a Muppet. My pussy would be called The Rainbow Connection, and she would have a little tampon sidekick named Rag who'd be just like Beeker."[1] As I kept reading, I could not stop laughing. This post was one of the most ridiculous things I had ever read, as this person who was supposedly under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol went on about how her genitals should be replicated into Muppet form and further discussing how it would interact with some of Jim Henson's famous characters. I thought the idea was absurd in a good way, and I appreciated the humor and specific Muppets references the blogger included in the post. Coke Talk grabbed me with her discussion of overt female sexuality, reclaiming of taboo terms like "pussy" and "tampon" and infusing intertextuality with Muppets references for added humor.

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[1] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," June 13, 2009.

My curiosity about this blogger and what she was doing prompted me to explore her website. I went all the way back to her first post from May 2009, and worked my way forward, finding out she also had a separate advice column, which I quickly began reading as well. What really grabbed me was the writing style Coke Talk used to convey her ideas, a style I personally thought was smart and witty. I enjoyed her entertaining narratives and how she represented a strong and sexual female character. Along with other fans, I felt a connection to this pseudonymous blogger, even though I had never met her or contacted her directly. Though I do not have a Tumblr account myself, I still visit her blogs on a regular basis, reading her new material and rereading some of her older posts that I liked. As Coke Talk created more blogs, expanded her brand, and transitioned her entire brand to The Coquette pseudonym, I wondered about how this blogger situated herself within blogging culture and Tumblr more specifically. I also wondered how Tumblr as a platform enabled the blogger to construct this pseudonymous persona and engage with her growing audience, while keeping her real world identity a secret.

In my paper, I look at how pseudonymity and intimacy play out on Tumblr. Using *The Coquette* as a case study, I argue that connections on Tumblr are built through entertainment and shared interests, and that the interpersonal relationships between bloggers and followers build over time. I also argue that a blogger's choice to use a pseudonym influences how other people connect to the blogger's persona by creating a greater sense of intimacy and allowing for more honest communication between bloggers and readers. Pseudonymous bloggers offer honest representations by constructing a sense of authenticity for readers. In "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience," Danah Boyd and Alice Marwick write, "This concept of 'authenticity' is a popular one…there is no such thing as

universal authenticity; rather, the authentic is a localized, temporally situated social construct that varies widely based on community."[2] A constructed persona that performs authenticity, regardless of pseudonym use, can potentially gain a sizeable following. Thus compelling performances over extended periods of time invite opportunities for micro-celebrity and personal branding.

Examining this particular topic is important considering the prominent role social media currently plays in our society as a popular medium for creating and/or maintaining relationships with other people through online communities. The Internet provides an outlet that allows people to express themselves and share their ideas with an audience, and different social media platforms enable people to share information in different ways. David Karp created Tumblr in 2007 as a microblogging platform, and the Tumblr community became an increasingly popular source for people to share cultural memes with one another. Online social media profiles tend to combine public and private information. The profiles themselves exist in a public forum, but they reflect the creator's own decisions regarding what information he/she shares. These profiles often contain some personal details about the profile creator. The profile creator thus constructs a digital self that is intrinsically a performance. Blogging in particular has a personal written element, and the author's intent is to share this information with an audience, which can create a conversation. Pseudonyms allow bloggers to operate in the public and private spheres simultaneously, while attempting to draw a distinct line between real life identity and online identity. With a pseudonym, the author's real world identity remains concealed, while the persona takes center stage. Pseudonyms directly address that all digital selves are inherently

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[2] Marwick and boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately," 12.

performances since this particular choice in constructing an online persona consciously omits a real world identity responsible for creating the representation.

The scholarship surrounding these ideas about blogging, intimacy in online communities, and pseudonyms includes Jill Walker's Rettberg *Blogging*, Nancy Baym's *Personal Connections in the Digital Age,* and two coauthored pieces by Alice Marwick and Danah Boyd called "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience," and "To See and be Seen: Celebrity Practice On Twitter."[3] All four works observe interactions through social media technology and how people's digital performances function and form relationships in this online space. Rettberg specifically examines blogging, navigating the history of blogs and situating this form of social media in a present cultural context.[4] Her work explores blogs as a significant form of contemporary communication that impacts social media and general information exchanges online.[5] Because she does not address microblogging or Tumblr, I take her observations a step further and discuss Tumblr's significance as a newer and increasingly popular blogging platform. Baym explores the different qualities of social media, including the potential risks, limits, and possibilities it offers for interpersonal communication.[6] Ultimately she concludes that these mediated forms of communication are overall less intimate than traditional face-to-face interactions.[7] She addresses pseudonymous and anonymous performances in her work, providing both sides of the argument for why some

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[3] Rettberg, *Blogging*; Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*; Marwick and Boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately"; Marwick and Boyd, "To See and Be Seen."

[4] Rettberg, *Blogging*.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*.

[7] Ibid.

people might consider these performances more or less honest.[8] Though I do not attempt to make an argument comparing online and offline forms of intimacy, I provide support through my case study as to why I feel consistent pseudonymous performance over an extended period of time can create intimate interpersonal relationships. Marwick and Boyd focus on Twitter in their pieces, discussing digital perfromativity, audience reception, and the micro-celebrity as a practice in relation to the platform.[9] They discuss how profiles create personas intended for audience consumption.[10] I feel that their studies transition to Tumblr, since both Twitter and Tumblr are microblogging platforms have some similar characteristics. With Tumblr, however, photographic representations play a larger role in constructing a digital self, and text does not have the 140-character limitation. Like Marwick and Boyd, I argue that The Coquette exemplifies microcelebrity through "self promotion," but also thorough the meaningful interactions with fans through her transmedia performances.

In my first chapter, I provide a brief historical overview that emphasizes how different components in blogs relate to earlier communicative forms. Drawing on Rettberg's structure I begin with oral communication then move forward to written, print, and eventually online blogging technologies.[11] With written communication, I focus heavily on diaries, since personal blogs and diaries share several commonalities. Essentially they both provide spaces for personal expression and construction, and the creator intends to share his or her work with an audience. I also mention how diary and epistolary novels' popularity in the Romantic Era reflected an

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Marwick and Boyd, "To See and Be Seen"; Marwick and Boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately."

[10] Ibid.

[11] Rettberg, *Blogging*.

audience's desire to access personal stories and acquire an intimate perspective that was not their own. When discussing print culture history, I spend some time discussing "grrl zines," which historically follow diaries and precede blogs. Zines created a close-knit community for readers, and incorporated participatory elements with readers responding to creators and/or contributing their own voice and work to the zine.[12] Essentially, I felt that zines incorporating the personally created content from diaries with the added participatory element in a print context eventually contributed to blogs forming in an online space. From there I transition to pseudonyms, looking at their role in literature, and later in advice columns. I explore pseudonyms as a label for attributing written work to a name, as a form of marketing adhering to cultural expectations, and as a means of protection. I especially look at pseudonym use in advice columns, because my case study has an advice column connected to her brand. After pseudonyms, I look at blogs arising on the Internet, observing their development in an isolated history overview. I chart the progression from early blogging forms, to blogging templates, to comparisons with other social networking platforms, to finally discussing Tumblr. Essentially, my purpose with this chapter is to provide historical background for understanding why one cannot observe Tumblr and pseudonymous representations solely in a contemporary cultural context. Several historical factors play into why this type of online performance attracts an audience, and how interpersonal relationships can form between the blogger and the spectators.

In chapter two, I offer an in depth analysis of the pseudonymous blogger who calls herself The Coquette. When analyzing The Coquette, I position myself as a fan who is familiar with her blogs and has engaged with her material for approximately three years. I explain how

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[12] Piepmeier and Zeisler, *Girl Zines*.

she constructs her transmedia representation through her various blogs, noting that the self she performs throughout these blogs demonstrates a self-conscious manufactured persona. Her consistent performance reflects authenticity in an online environment, thus it cultivated a fan following which allowed her to achieve micro-celebrity status, a status she continues to maintain today. Though other pseudonymous bloggers received attention in scholarly works, I feel The Coquette offers a unique example of pseudonym use for a blog, especially considering The Coquette's real world identity remains a mystery as her personal brand continues to grow. In addition, her presence on Tumblr, a newer blogging platform, indicates that the limitations and affordances that influence her representation vary from bloggers on other platforms. The first section discusses the ways The Coquette positioned herself through different titles, beginning with an inside joke "Spaceships and Kool-Aid," then changing to a more controversial name with "Coke Talk," and ending at the more marketable name "The Coquette." I then look at The Coquette's original personal blog and how her pseudonym factored into the persona she constructed through her written voice and the images she posted. In the following section, I write about her advice column, *Dear Coquette*, noting how she further constructs her persona in this participant motivated blog. She receives questions specifically directed towards her, but all her answers on the column are part of her digital performance. In the third section, I discuss her other three blogs: her style blog, her online store, and Notes to My Future Husband. I note how these extensions from her personal blog offer new forms of representation that bolster her already established persona. In the final section, I look at how the blog and personal brand transitioned into a business opportunity for the blogger. I examine her handbag line and *Note to My Future Husband* becoming a book. Though I attempt to thoroughly examine my case study

and analyze the different constructed parts that contribute to the entire persona, I do not offer an in depth look at her Twitter account "coketweet." Since my study focuses on Tumblr, I only provide analysis for her Tumblr blogs; however I do comment on how many followers she has because she does not allow other people to see her follower/following information on Tumblr. My purpose for analyzing The Coquette is to highlight how her constructed online persona maintains cultural relevance and interacts with fans over an extended period of time. She exemplifies the micro-celebrity practices Marwick and Boyd discuss in their works, building her own personal brand and maintaining an emotional interpersonal relationship with her followers.[13]

Chapter three provides a look at reader responses and online recognition The Coquette has acquired throughout the years. My evidence in this section reflects an ethnographic study focused on qualitative observations. I caution my reader that participatory material The Coquette posts on her blogs is under the blogger's direct control. What people submit thus, influences the self she constructs, especially when she responds to submissions. First, I expand on the advice column, this time concentrating on the readers who write in and the conversations that sometimes evolve and last beyond a typical question and answer post. I provide examples for how The Coquette has personally influenced people through direct and indirect contact, and I also feature positive and negative comments people have written in about their feelings towards her persona. Unlike chapter two, I spend more time on the "A Few Testimonials" section of the blog and how this feature emphasizes the sense of community in this online space that The Coquette created. In the second section, I discuss fan images The Coquette has included on her personal blog. Images include the blogger's consumer products and original artistic material that

[13] Marwick and Boyd, "To See and Be Seen."

people send in to her, and the submissions encompass an individual appreciation for the ideas she promotes through her representation. Finally, I discuss the online recognition The Coquette has received apart from her blogs, recognition that both confirms her position as a micro-celebrity, and perpetuates her brand among a larger audience. Overall, fan participation and their emotional reactions reflect the intimate relationship these readers have with the pseudonymous blogger. Her micro-celebrity implies a significant fan following that has interacted with her on some participatory level throughout the course of her blog's existence.

Personal Tumblr blogs allow people to share private thoughts and feelings with a public audience fostering a sense of intimacy between author and reader. Entertainment and common interests connect bloggers with one another, and over time interpersonal relationships develop and strengthen. As a microblogging platform, Tumblr's easy posting also creates a sense of immediacy allowing the audience to follow along as the author's narrative plays out in real time. Pseudonyms aid the narrative process by separating the blogger's real world identity from the representation on the blog, affording the blogger more open engagement with his or her audience. Looking at the history for personal communicative expression helps establish background for examining pseudonymous bloggers in a present day context. As a cases study, The Coquette offers a look at a current Tumblr pseudonymous persona who has gained popularity over the last four years, resulting in her status as a micro-celebrity. Fan engagement with the blogger shows how she impacts individual fans, and her micro-celebrity solidified in online recognition shows how other people enjoy her work. These chapters combine to show how Tumblr bloggers using pseudonyms can form deep relationships with their readers over time.

# Chapter 1

## Situating Pseudonymous Tumblr Blogging in Communications History

Examining the historical significance of blogging allows us to see how this particular form of social media gradually evolved over time. Oral and writing conventions developed over hundreds of years and have impacted how bloggers today interact with one another and create their narratives in an online environment. Some bloggers use a pseudonym when posting on their blogs and interacting with other bloggers. Pseudonyms have a rich history in literature, involving the choice to use a pseudonym as opposed to either attaching one's legal name to the work or leaving the work completely anonymous.[14] A pseudonym allows the blogger or writer to keep the

[14] Heymann, "The Birth of the Authornym," 1380.

collection of work he or she creates under the pseudonym and separate from his or her real world self. The relationship dynamic between the reader and the pseudonymous writer is twofold: the concealed identity allows the author to write more freely and intimately, but the reader can interpret the omitted information as a reason to question the author's authenticity.[15] Blogging, as a general practice, is a continuous process, thus the reader's engagement with the blog over time creates the relationship between the reader and the blogger, and helps the reader determine the blogger's authenticity as an online persona. While bloggers from the earlier 2000s concentrated on lengthy text posts to assert their authorial voice, Tumblr, a newer blogging platform developed in 2007, moves away from only long text posts, and includes other multimedia posts like music, videos, and pictures that serve as different forms of representation.[16] The Tumblr community fosters relationships with and between bloggers through reposting and following other blogs.[17] Drawing on the historical significance behind blogging and pseudonyms will assist with observing how pseudonyms and intimacy play out on Tumblr in a contemporary context.

This chapter focuses on the historical components for the communication and literary roots in blogging, as well as the connection blogging has with print culture and mass media. The chapter also looks at the reasons behind using an authorial name that is different from one's legal name, how authenticity is still valued with works created under a pseudonym, and how pseudonyms can build relationships between personas and readers in advice columns. Finally, this chapter gives an approximate outline of key events that led to the rise of blogging in the late twentieth century, ending with Tumblr and how Tumblr distinguishes itself from other blogging

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[15] Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 32.

[16] Walker, "Can Tumblr's David Karp Embrace Ads Without Selling Out?"; Boutin, "Twitter, Flickr, Facebook Make Blogs Look So 2004."

[17] Karp, "Tumblr."

template websites. Blogs are not purely a unique phenomenon that occurred entirely in the past few decades; there is an extensive cultural history that led to blogs becoming popular, with the Internet serving as a new platform to express ideas. The choice for bloggers to post entries under a pseudonym became a fairly common practice, with similar underlying reasons for using a pseudonym in the past. Observing the history behind how people construct themselves through technologies and use this representation to connect with other people provides a base for examining both this relationship between author and reader and how the personal narration navigates a public setting, all in a contemporary media framework. Media thus offers new ways to convey concepts of selfhood and build intimate relationships with other people over time.

## I. Early Blogging Origins

Blogging first emerged on the Internet during the 1990s, and it was innovative within a technological context.[18] Digital media offered new methods for communication, and blogging was an early social media tool through which people could exchange information with one another. Active participation in the blogosphere falls under the social networking category, a term that Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison define in their work, *Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship*.

> We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of

[18] Rettberg, *Blogging*, 52.

> connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.[19]

This type of interaction between participants in an online forum is in some ways consistent with interpersonal interactions that take place offline, specifically with speech and writing.[20] Certain essential elements for the basic conversational and writing conventions in the blogosphere have historical origins that date back several centuries.

The conversational and social aspect present in blogs has similarities to oral tradition with language and communication at the most basic level.[21] Bloggers tend to opt for an informal written voice, comparable with two or more people having a casual discussion about any given topic.[22] In addition, the comments section, which is usually accessible unless the blogger removes it at his or her own discretion, gives readers the opportunity to become active participants in the conversation by posting their own responses.[23] If these readers have a question about a post, they have a chance to ask the original writer or other interested readers for thoughts and opinions on the related topic, creating the potential for an open dialogue.[24] In some cases, discussions in the comments section can evolve to the point where they completely diverge from the original post, which can be dependent on what people take away from the conversation. Another conversational element in blogs is when other bloggers "like" or "reblog" a post.[25] Liking a post means that other bloggers appreciate the post and share similar attitudes regarding

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[19] Boyd and Ellison, "Social Network Sites."

[20] Rettberg, *Blogging*, 32.

[21] Ibid., 33.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 57.

[24] Marquart, "Microblog Sensation: The Growing Popularity of Tumblr," 73.

[25] Ibid.

the post's topic. Reblogging lets bloggers display a post on their own blog that they find on another blog, allowing posts to circulate among different groups of followers. This essentially allows bloggers to share their interests with their followers by sharing posts that they like, but did not originally contribute. Bloggers can also include their own commentary to reblogged posts, adding their own insight to the conversation.[26]

Besides the conversational elements from oral tradition, parallels exist between blogging and other literary forms, since blogging offers a highly authored representation of self. Diary writing or journal keeping, for instance, is comparable with personal blogs in which people reflect on their own lives, often using first person narration.[27] Some people originally referred to blogs as diary sites or online journals, as with the template websites DiaryLand, Livejournal and Dreamwidth, which all still exist today. While the traditional diary's history cannot be traced back to an exact date, increased literacy rates during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century contributed to the diary's rising popularity in western civilizations.[28] Before this period, reading was a necessary public activity for sharing and exchanging information quickly amongst large groups of people in society.[29] People privileged with literacy performed readings aloud so that everyone else who could not read had the option to listen and understand the text through speech. Reading was therefore a communal experience, bringing people together for informative or entertainment purposes. With increased literacy though, reading silently to oneself became a

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Hendrick, "A Mediated Discourse Analysis of Pseudonymous Blogging," 227–230.

[28] O'Sullivan, "Diaries, On-Line Diaries, and the Future Loss to Archives; Or, Blogs and the Blogging Bloggers Who Blog Them," 55.

[29] Ibid., 56.

growing trend that transformed reading from a public activity to a personal and private one.[30] Earlier diaries written during the Protestant Reformation period and the following couple centuries concentrated on documenting daily activities in a record keeping manner; however the more personalized accounts involving the individual and his or her journey to self-discovery emerged much later in the nineteenth century when Romanticism flourished.[31] In "Diaries, On-Line Diaries, and the Future Loss to Archives; Or, Blogs and the Blogging Bloggers Who Blog Them," Catherine O'Sullivan explains, "…the diary became a space where an individual's identity was actively conceived and constructed. Diarists were no longer abstracted from their personal experiences for the sake of spiritual assessment or placed in the periphery when calculating the day's moments. Instead, they became the focus of their diary's attention."[32] Diary writing as a style, a method of self-expression, and a form of entertainment became more popular with the help of other social factors during the Romantic era. The growing middle class and another dramatic increase in literacy rates meant that more people had the luxury of time and the proper skill set to read and write.[33] Women in particular frequently read for entertainment and contributed to diary reading and writing becoming a more popular leisure activity the nineteenth century.[34] Society restricted women to a domestic role, and the diary offered them space to express themselves and tell their stories about the private family life.[35] The diary thus acquired

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[30] Rettberg, *Blogging*, 40; O'Sullivan, "Diaries, On-Line Diaries, and the Future Loss to Archives; Or, Blogs and the Blogging Bloggers Who Blog Them," 56.

[31] O'Sullivan, "Diaries, On-Line Diaries, and the Future Loss to Archives; Or, Blogs and the Blogging Bloggers Who Blog Them," 60.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Delafield, *Women's Diaries as Narrative in the Nineteenth-century Novel*, 82.

social recognition as a feminine gendered space. More religious groups also encouraged diary keeping, but as a means to cultivate morals, especially among teenagers and more specifically females.[36]

Nineteenth century diary keeping also had close ties to communication through letters because the two forms of writing used similar techniques for composing a narrative for their respective audiences. Both diaries and letters offered a conversational narrative that incorporated daily activities and personal reflections, and they were written for a specific audience; however, letters addressed a specific reader in a correspondence, but some diarists kept their writing a secret, meaning the author was the only intended audience.[37] Both diaries and letters possessed public and private elements. These physical text documents contained personal details about an author, and the public could feasibly access and share these documents with or without the author's consent. For example, if someone kept a diary during their lifetime and then passed away, his or her journal still exists and other people could potentially read it. Several nonfiction diaries and real life correspondences received publication during the Romanticism period, leading to a marketable diary form and epistolary form. As Delafield points out,

> Two factors are also vital to an understanding of the context of diary writing and publication in the early nineteenth century. Firstly, the value of private experience became a relevant concept within the Romantic tradition. The urge towards self-expression and definition was fired by a new sensibility giving both a voice to the concept of 'I' and a link to the subjectivity and authority of private experience. Secondly, at a practical and commercial level, the publication of diaries was linked inevitably with the growth of literacy, the cheapness of the printing process and the availability of material.[38]

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[36] O'Sullivan, "Diaries, On-Line Diaries, and the Future Loss to Archives; Or, Blogs and the Blogging Bloggers Who Blog Them," 61.

[37] Delafield, *Women's Diaries as Narrative in the Nineteenth-century Novel*, 82.

[38] Ibid., 11.

Before being sold though, publishers edited the documents. For example, the first diary published by a female author was Frances Burney's *The Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay*, and "its public appearance was only authorized after the renegotiation of public and private character which exposes the very tensions that the private diarist experienced in using her text for self representation."[39] The authorial voice in the published work was not solely Burney's, but a version of her original words reworked for public consumption.[40] During this same period, writers, who were mostly female, incorporated the diary style in their fictional novels, despite criticism that the style did not flow smoothly as a story.[41] Epistolary novels, which used the letter writing style, dated back to the Protestant Reformation, but continued as a popular form for narrative fiction.[42] Whether fictional or nonfictional, the market demand for the diary form and the epistolary form emphasize a general interest in narratives that connect the public to these more private accounts; the familiar tone reads as if the author is speaking to a close friend, creating a more intimate connection between the reader and the author.

Like diaries, blogging and online profiles offer a representation of a person or group of people, and are thus a construction of self.[43] The motivation behind starting a blog varies, just as historically, people's reasons for keeping diaries varied. Diary entries and blog posts can both be continuously updated with new material that is dated to keep track of time. In blogging this is

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[39] Ibid., 39.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Sanders, "Women's Diaries as Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century Novel, by Catherine Delafield."

[42] Ibid.

[43] Hendrick, "A Mediated Discourse Analysis of Pseudonymous Blogging," 225–230.

referred to as "timestamping."[44] Though there is a constant narrative playing out, the different entries or posts can exist independently from one another, while simultaneously contributing to the blog or diary's overall narrative representation.[45] Blogs and diaries diverge regarding the order for new posts or entries. Diaries are like books, conveying time and events chronologically from first to last. Conversely, blogs show posts in reverse chronological order, beginning with the most recently published post and going back to earlier archived posts from there.[46] This original format for blogs is helpful for avid readers who like to stay up to date with the blogger's posts. This format displays new material first so followers do not have to consistently go through older posts to get to the most recent postings. Though bloggers reflect on personal interests in their posts, blogs exist in an electronic space, making them available for public consumption; however, if the blogger makes the decision to change their privacy settings, then this action restricts the group that can access the blog's content.

One perception about diaries is that they contain strictly private material that the author keeps to himself or herself, but this is not necessarily always the case. Though diaries contain private written accounts and personal details about the author, they are written with the intent to be shared with an audience, even if the audience is unknown or limited to the author.[47] The author's decision to record events and/or thoughts indicates that some audience will eventually read the diary writing. A diary or letter correspondence operating in both a private and public manner is therefore similar to how blogs straddle the divide between public and private. In his

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[44] Singh, "Anonymity, Authorship, and Blogger Ethics," 25.

[45] Ibid., 22.

[46] Rettberg, *Blogging*, 65.

[47] Hendrick, "A Mediated Discourse Analysis of Pseudonymous Blogging," 228; Singh, "Anonymity, Authorship, and Blogger Ethics," 23.

work "Anonymity, Authorship, and Blogger Ethics," Armadeep Singh describes how Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* can be applied to diaries and blogs because authenticity and sincerity are two crucial concepts for both types of written works.[48] Singh explains, "authenticity, in short, is a certain way of being, while sincerity is primarily a way of saying, a rhetorical posture."[49] In terms of diary writing and blogs, authenticity and sincerity are essential for the reader to cultivate a relationship with the authorial voice. Though an outsider, the reader feels a more direct and intimate connection with the author's personal narrative. Keeping their work sincere and authentic helps bloggers develop a deeper relationship with readers.

Print culture also had an influence on blogging culture, and there are parallels between their respective rises in society. In western civilization, print culture began with Johannes Guttenberg's moveable type invention in the mid 1400s, just before the Protestant Reformation.[50] This technological development made printing cheaper and more efficient, and as a result, books, pamphlets, and newspapers were more accessible and affordable. Dissemination in publication provided abundant literary material that helped increase literacy rates.[51] Consequently, print became a new way for people to share information with each other, and new technologies continuously developed and modernized print culture. Producers in print culture included the mass media, which was the most prevalent and corporate voice in the industry. The mass media represented the voice of a small exclusive group that distributed information to the collective public, with little concern for readers on an individual level. There were also some smaller scale

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[48] Singh, "Anonymity, Authorship, and Blogger Ethics"; Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Rettberg, *Blogging*, 37.

[51] Ibid.

personal print publications that offered a more personalized perspective in their writing, and circulated among fewer people.[52] Though print offered a new way to create conversation and communicate, one had to enter the publishing industry to fully engage with the print and offer responses that could reach the entire community.[53] Similar to publishing's need for the printing press, blogging could not exist without the invention of the Internet. When the Internet became more accessible, people's knowledge and skill set for how to navigate and interact with the World Wide Web expanded.[54] "These new literacies have been called network literacy, multi-literacies, digital literacy and secondary literacy," and they continue to grow today as the Internet acquires new possibilities for engagement.[55]

While blogging offers a digitized form of the text based diary, "zines" are another result of traditional diaries, in which zine authors self-create publications that express themselves by combining text and images in a hard copy pamphlet that they share with an audience. Zines are a countercultural twentieth century form of print culture that often invites comparisons with blogging. Some people, like Michael Faris in his thesis "Traversing the City of Blogs: Pedagogy, Performance, and Public Spheres," go as far as to argue that zines are direct predecessors for blogs.[56] Zines have roots in the small-scale personal printed pamphlets and newspapers from earlier centuries, as opposed to the corporate mass media authorship. Photocopying in the mid-1900s largely contributed to the rise of zines.[57] This new technology allowed people to

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[52] Ibid., 40-41.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., 39.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Faris, "Traversing the City of Blogs, 86.

[57] Piepmeier and Zeisler, *Girl Zines*.

unprofessionally publish multiple copies of their own material at lower costs, thus enabling amateur publishers to easily share their own printed material with other people[58]. Because zines offer an outlet for consumer creation and authorship, people who are familiar with zines consider them an early form of participatory culture, since zines provided a space for consumers to create their own content.[59]

Regarding their unique appearance and author driven content, "zines are quirky, individualized booklets filled with diatribes, reworkings of pop culture iconography, and all variety of personal and political narratives. They are self-produced and anti-corporate. Their production, philosophy and aesthetic are anti-professional."[60] Their discussion topics span a broad range from personal narratives to commentary on public issues, and the appearance has a homemade quality with images cut out pictures and drawings, and text in a mixture of type and handwriting. During the 1990s, girl zines garnered a noticeable presence in zine culture, and it created a female community that received recognition in mainstream culture.[61] Girl zines' emergence is tied to third wave feminist movement ideologies, with messages like embracing a "girl power" mentality that favors girls being strong while simultaneously embracing their femininity, and encouraging females to pursue pleasure in all life endeavors.[62] "Zines…are sites where girls and women construct identities, communities, and explanatory narratives from the materials that comprise their cultural moment: discourses, media representations, ideologies,

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[58] Rettberg, *Blogging*, 41.

[59] Piepmeier and Zeisler, *Girl Zines*, 2; Jenkins, "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century (Part One)."

[60] Piepmeier and Zeisler, *Girl Zines*, 2.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid., 4.

stereotypes, and even physical detritus," and their voices converge and/or diverge with mainstream gender norms depending on the author's opinion.[63]

Like diaries and letters, zines also contain a combination of public and private elements. As Alison Piepermeir explains in her book *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*, "Girls and women discuss…highly charged issues in zines in part because zines are a more accessible medium that provides a space for bridging the intimate and the public."[64] Because they control all the assembly and distribution processes, zinesters construct a self-representation when they produce their zines. The zine therefore becomes a personal document for the author, reflecting a portion of the author's identity. Though zines contain a self-authored personal narrative, their creation is for a public readership. Piepmeier says, "For the most part, zines are not fictional texts, but, like all autobiographical texts, they must be understood as complex literary artifacts that are 'completely strategic' rather than as simplistic records of what happened or 'who I am.'"[65] Zines contain stories and messages that create conversations in the zine community and develop connections with readers who can relate to the topic or are emotionally impacted by the narratives. Zinesters encourage readers to respond and contribute to future zines, further fueling participation and collaboration between authors and audiences.

Zines and blogs are both examples of participatory culture that form a community where consumers create their own content and express their own ideas.[66] On some occasions, zinesters and Bloggers recontextualize pop culture imagery to coincide with their narrative. "Girl zines"

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[63] Ibid., 2.

[64] Ibid., 94.

[65] Ibid., 90.

[66] Jenkins, "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century (Part One)."

and blogging communities have open dialogues between authors and readers. The one differentiating factor between zines and blogs is that zines are on paper (excluding e-zines) giving them a material dimension, and blogs are online. Piepemeier argues that as a physical artifact, a zine ages with time, and the reader's ability to touch and feel the document's pages and see this time passage adds to the reader's entire experience.[67] Though blogs cannot be physically held in the same way as zines, bloggers incorporate other senses such as sound when they post songs and videos directly onto their pages. Blogs' existence in an online space gives the reader a greater sense of immediacy; the lag time between an author and a reader with printed material diminishes.[68] Instead of waiting for a zienster to send out the next zine issue, blog readers can check daily to see if bloggers added new posts because bloggers create new individual posts with more frequency. Potential readership and direct communication between readers and authors in a more immediate fashion also increases online.[69] How zinesters and bloggers navigate public and private authorship is similar because they construct a personal narrative for a public audience. Both blogs and zines are community-building spaces that bring people together who have common interests and want to engage in conversations about these interests. As community building spaces, they foster an intimate relationship among participants, especially between the author and readers.

## II. Why Pseudonyms?

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[67] Piepmeier and Zeisler, *Girl Zines*, 16.

[68] Barlow, *Blogging America*, 10.

[69] Rettberg, *Blogging*, 42.

Anonymously written texts, or texts written under a pseudonym, have a long history in literature. The term anonymous usually refers to the complete absence of an author's name, whereas a pseudonym is a name that is created by the author. This created name is separate from the author's legal name, but serves as the public identifier for the work.[70] Pseudonyms offer "a middle ground between unruly anonymity and the vulnerability of connecting all activities to a legal name."[71] With any text-based work, the writing becomes associated with the author name it is written under, regardless of whether the name is real or constructed. Putting a name to a piece of writing thus becomes a branding choice that people use for different reasons, and even an author using his or her real name is a choice whether consciously made or not.[72] As opposed to writing completely anonymously, a pseudonym allows the writer to build a reputation under that name. In her paper *Birth of the Authornym: Authorship, Pseudonymity, and Trademark Law*, Laura A. Heymann says, "In neither instance does the name serve to identify the person who put pen to paper; rather, the name identifies the "author" to whom the text should be attributed."[73] In both cases, the text is merely a partial representation of the actual physical person, and either the legal name or crafted name offers a label to categorize the work under. For example, pen names like Dr. Seuss and Mark Twain have reputations that are more closely associated with their respective texts than the actual physical people who created these names and wrote the works.

Various contributing factors influence the decision to write under a pseudonym. In some cases, one person can have multiple pseudonyms that allow him or her to create author identities

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[70] Griffin, *The Faces of Anonymity*, 1.

[71] Lothian, "Archival Anarchies," 2.

[72] Heymann, "The Birth of the Authornym," 1378.

[73] Ibid., 1396.

that navigate different social constructs such as gender, race, or sexuality.[74] "Gender morphing," as Heymann describes, involves creating a pseudonym that suggests the opposite gender from the author, and it is more commonly used among females.[75] In this case, females use more gender neutral or masculine sounding names, but under some circumstances, males do create more feminine sounding pen names. Essentially this "gender morphing" intends to combat gender bias based on market forces. Certain genres traditionally favored feminine authorship, while others favored masculine authorship. These gender conventions stemmed from both publishers who controlled the industry and consumers in the target demographic. While some people think "gender morphing" is a positive tactic for appealing to consumer expectations, in relation to females, there is a perception that morphing becomes " a more defensive measure that allows the female writer to obtain an authorial freedom not available to her under her own name."[76] As a defensive measure, the gender-morphing pseudonym for women enhances the historical restrictions they faced when publishing texts about certain topics considered traditionally masculine. Market and cultural forces historically indicated that female authors had difficulty selling their work to audiences in masculine genres.

Besides "gender morphing" to appeal to industry expectations, some authors used pseudonyms for other reasons. Experimenting with different writing styles or genres that would appeal to audiences outside an author's usual audience is another reason why some authors use pseudonyms. For example, Anne Desclos wrote the provocative BDSM novel *Story of O* under

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[74] Ibid., 1389.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid., 1399.

the pseudonym Pauline Reage, a name that still held feminine connotations.[77] In the 1950s, people did not think a woman could write such a risqué book, and Desclos sought to undermine this widely held opinion.[78] Putting the book under another name separated this work from her day-to-day profession as a journalist and the writing she produced under her legal name.[79] Pseudonyms also serve to create one comprehensive name in a situation where there are multiple authors who want to compile their text as one piece.[80]

Advice columns are a form of publication traditionally associated with anonymity and pseudonyms. The first known advice column dates back to 1690s in the *Athenian Mercury*, which shortly thereafter led to a spinoff in *Ladies Mercury* that specifically focused on women's questions.[81] As more columns developed over the following centuries, society regarded the advice columnist and the audience as feminine. Historically, society portrayed women's problems as unimportant and therefore topics would be appropriate for a public published column.[82] "Dorothy Dix," "Ann Landers," and "Dear Abby" were all syndicated advice columns in the twentieth century, with the exception being Dix whose column first ran in the mid 1890s. Publications around the country featured these columnists who all used a pseudonymous author figure.

> [Advice columnists] are performers, and the traditional advice column was designed to be playful. There was no telling whether [they] were the melancholic people they claimed to be, or if they were pranksters or editors making backhanded assignments; the columnists

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[77] Réage, *Story of O*.

[78] Bedell, "I Wrote the Story of O."

[79] Ibid.

[80] Heymann, "The Birth of the Authornym," 1401.

[81] Weisberg, "The Advice Columnist We Deserve."

[82] Ibid.

> were often written by a rotating staff rather than the character with whom they were associated.[83]

The pen name therefore served as a branding choice, which sometimes included multiple authors coming together under the one name. As long as the advice remains true to the persona, the reader can acknowledge authenticity in the response. With advice columns, anonymity becomes important for both the columnist and the person who writes in. With this format, people can be more sincere and open in the questions they submit. Any embarrassment that comes from attaching a name to a personal question disappears, and this allows for more deeply personal queries on taboo or controversial topics, including, but not limited to gender, sexuality, politics, and religion. Anonymously submitted questions also prevent the columnist from getting too caught up in the problems these advice askers encounter.[84] Advice columns as a genre constantly evolved and maintained cultural relevance concerning the questions addressed and the answers provided. The personal nature of the questions submitted by advice seekers, and their existence in a public forum help readers develop a relationship with the author, and build a community with other readers.

Today, people continue submitting their questions to newspaper and magazine advice columns, looking for a fresh perspective on their various inquiries. Online advice columns have become more common over the last twenty years, including the widely popular "Dear Sugar." Though originally pseudonymous, the columnist revealed her real name is Candice Strayed in spring 2012.[85] Having her column on the Internet instead of inside an edited and published work

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[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid.

means that the columnist can write more freely when interacting with readers, and controls which questions he or she gets to answer. This creates a more direct connection with readers. With "Dear Sugar," "[Strayed] is just as entertaining as Dear Abby—her columns are profane and funny—but she is far more genuine. She is earnest without being too cloying."[86] Strayed fields thousands of submissions from people looking to connect with her on a more individual level rather than asking her concrete questions, emphasizing the emotional connections that readers feel with her.[87]

The choice to remain completely anonymous, use one's real legal name, or use a pseudonym exists not only within literary circles, but within the blogosphere as well. Blogging communities consider anonymous blogging as a general practice acceptable, but if the blog is fictional and presented as real, then the community regards this false account as taboo.[88] This connects back to the idea that there is a degree of sincerity and authenticity expected in all blogs, and not remaining true to a persona goes against these two concepts. Similar to literature, pseudonyms often exist to conceal a blogger's real world identity, allowing the written material to be associated with this constructed public online persona. Bloggers are not creating a new and entirely separate identity, but instead an extension of self where the pseudonym serves as protection from potential reputational harm.[89] The harm in a contemporary setting less often relates to severe social repression, as it once did when women used "gender morphing" to freely write, but instead the harm relates to other risk factors like job termination or identity theft[90].

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[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Hendrick, "A Mediated Discourse Analysis of Pseudonymous Blogging," 228.

[89] Barlow, *Blogging America*, 9.

[90] Singh, "Anonymity, Authorship, and Blogger Ethics," 34.

Pseudonymous blogging began shortly after blogs became an established form of social media. For example, BitchPhD and Belle de Jour are two notorious pseudonymous bloggers from the early/mid 2000s that garnered a significant following for their blogs, and they have both been discussed in scholarly works.[91] Both women quickly address in their posts their choice to write under a pseudonym; BitchPhD was an academic in her professional life, but her blog dove into her personal views about controversial topics, and Belle de Jour wrote stories about her private profession as a call girl that remained separate from her everyday public self.[92] Having a pseudonym when writing a blog functions similar to the advice column because the blogger and columnist write more freely when their real world identity remains unknown. The more intimate narratives bloggers and columnists write gives readers a sense that there is a direct connection between them and the author. The anonymity readers have in a blog's comments section or an advice column's submissions encourages readers to participate and express themselves more freely.

## III. Brief Blog History

The latter part of the twentieth century introduced society to the Internet, and this technological achievement eventually made blogging possible. According to Scott Rosenberg in his book, *Say Everything*, "The efforts to identify a 'first blog' are comical and ultimately futile, because blogging was not invented; it evolved."[93] After the Internet's creation, several years

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[91] Hendrick, "A Mediated Discourse Analysis of Pseudonymous Blogging," 235–249.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Rosenberg, *Say Everything*, 81.

passed before blogging transformed into the format we recognize it as today. In the 1970s, now former Stanford Computer Science professor Les Earnest created a computer program called "Finger," which uses a bulletin board format to post brief bits of information.[94] The "Finger" is arguably one of the most primitive social media forms and a precursor to blogs.[95] Earnest explained in an interview that his original intention for this program was to keep track of people within his lab, but the program became a popular place for socializing with non related lab discussions. "Finger" soon spread to a broader online user base.[96] The next significant movement forward in blogging history occurred in 1994 when Swarthmore College student Justin Hall created his own personal webpage.[97] Here he kept concise accounts of his life experiences, including text, pictures, links to other websites that interested him, and sound clips.[98] One year later, an early online diarist named Carolyn Burke began featuring entries on her site, Carolyn's Diary.[99] Another online diarist named John Barger came up with the term "weblog" three years later in 1997, which was short for "logging the web."[100] Two years later in 1999, programmer Peter Merholz shortened the name to "blog," which became the prevalent term still used today.[101]

Entering the new millennium, the number of bloggers exponentially increased, which became possible with new software templates, like Brad Fitzpatrick's Livejournal and Pyra

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[94] McCullagh and Broache, "Blogs Turn 10--who's the Father?".

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Rosenberg, *Say Everything*, 17.

[98] Ibid.

[99] McCullagh and Broache, "Blogs Turn 10--who's the Father?".

[100] Thompson, "The Early Years."

[101] Ibid.

Labs' Blogger[102]. These template websites made blogging easier because bloggers no longer needed to know how to code or have some basic knowledge of HTMLs.[103] Besides the increase in blogging platforms available, growing Internet accessibility also contributed to more people blogging. The original blogs primarily consisted of long blocks of text in which people wrote stories about events in their life, topics they found interesting, or anything else they felt like taking the time and energy to post about. Bloggers maintained control over their evolving story with the ability to create, edit, and delete posts at any given time. In addition, bloggers could watch over the comment section and had the power to delete inappropriate or disrespectful remarks. Blogs have a personal written element, but the author's intent is to share this information with an audience, creating a conversation. These blogs existed in the public online world, but the private nature of the posts allowed them to exist in both the public and private sphere simultaneously.[104] Today, millions of people have online blogs that allow them to share their personal stories and interests with large groups of people around the world.

As the 2000s reached the mid decade, however, new social networking websites like MySpace, which started in 2003, and Facebook, which launched in 2004, began to surpass blogging and become a more dominant form of social media.[105] These sites relied on more of the social aspect of blogging, including acquiring friends, and posting comments, pictures, links, or videos on one another's profiles. Facebook became the favored form because it created more of a closed network[106]. Compared to MySpace, which publically displayed profiles, Facebook limited

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[102] Rosenberg, *Say Everything*.

[103] Leach, "Curating Online."

[104] Rettberg, *Blogging*, 46–48.

[105] Boutin, "Twitter, Flickr, Facebook Make Blogs Look So 2004."

[106] Rettberg, *Blogging*, 68-77.

profile views to accepted friends only. In 2006, Twitter introduced a new form of blogging called microblogging, which limited posts to a mere 140 characters.[107] As a result, twitter users could make new updates or "tweets" in less than a minute. Instead of linking profiles in a network of friends, people would "follow" one another and constantly get updates when one of their followers tweeted.[108] Overall, with the latest trends focusing on brevity and real-time updates, text heavy blogging began to become outdated.[109] The longer text based posts on blogs required a significantly larger time commitment to consistently update with new quality writing than these newer forms of social media.

David Karp created Tumblr in February 2007 as a tool for "Tumblelogging" or a short form variation on blogging. Tumblr distinguished itself from other blogging platforms as simple, quick, and easy to use; some describe Tumblr as similar to a scrapbook or a cross between Twitter, Youtube, and Wordpress.[110] With Tumblr, bloggers assemble their narrative with a virtual collection of all their interests through images, texts, and sounds. Tumblr is a more photographic image based microblogging platform, basically a more "visually oriented Twitter" in which bloggers "follow" one another.[111] Essentially, Karp wanted to create a product with a clean and organized layout that would enhance user creativity.[112] Part of the community building process on Tumblr includes creating and sharing original material.[113] Karp even wants advertisements to

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[107] Marwick and boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately," 3.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Marquart, "Microblog Sensation: The Growing Popularity of Tumblr."

[110] Walker, "Can Tumblr's David Karp Embrace Ads Without Selling Out?"; Halliday, "David Karp, Founder of Tumblr, on Realising His Dream."

[111] Walker, "Can Tumblr's David Karp Embrace Ads Without Selling Out?".

[112] Halliday, "David Karp, Founder of Tumblr, on Realising His Dream."

[113] Marquart, "Microblog Sensation: The Growing Popularity of Tumblr.

have more creative concepts when companies use Tumblr as a marketing tool; he notes how ads became more prevalent on sites like Youtube and Facebook, but that they are intrusive to the user's experience and not memorable or original from a marketing standpoint.[114]

Most of Tumblr's activity takes place on the blogger's personal dashboard.[115] Here the blogger can create his or her own posts, see what people he or she follows are posting, and reblog posts he or she enjoys. Reblogging posts allow bloggers to partake in a digital conversation with others who share similar interests.[116] These reblogged posts therefore continuously circulate throughout new groups of followers. Posts include a note section that lists all the bloggers who liked or reblogged it, noting all the participants in the conversation.[117] Reblogging is influential when deciding what blogs to follow because connections between bloggers emerge through their common interests. The dashboard displays seven different icon buttons for the different kinds of posts one can make, including text, picture, quote, video, chat, audio, and link.[118] Unlike other social media outlets, Tumblr does not publicly display follower counts for either how many followers a blogger has or how many people a blogger follows. Follower counts appear on the blogger's dashboard, which only he or she has access to. When deciding on their blog's aesthetics, bloggers have a choice to use preset templates or make their own theme. The site equips users with directions for how to make their own themes with HTML code.[119] Through this style and content personalization, the blog becomes a representation of the

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[114] Walker, "Can Tumblr's David Karp Embrace Ads Without Selling Out?".

[115] Ibid.

[116] Marquart, "Microblog Sensation: The Growing Popularity of Tumblr," 73.

[117] Karp, "Tumblr."

[118] Ibid.

[119] Marquart, "Microblog Sensation: The Growing Popularity of Tumblr," 72.

blogger. As Boyd explains, “Bloggers see their blog as a reflection of their interests and values. They also contend that the blog does not show them in entirely, but only what they choose to perform in that context.”[120] The individual’s control over his or her blog enhances the blog’s performative nature; the blogger decides whether posts are public or private and he or she has the option to delete comments. Because Tumblr blogs are closely aligned with their creator from a visual and content standpoint, these online spaces become personal constructions of selfhood that operate within the interface’s framework.

## Conclusion

For countless generations, people sought to express themselves through the technologies available to them and connect with other people. Diaries, letters, zines, and advice columns all promoted self-authorship and had the potential to build a relationship with an audience. The twenty first century offers numerous possibilities for digital self-representations and potential interactions among participants in an online social network environment. Blogs and newer microblogging platforms like Tumblr allow people to construct their narrative, and cultivate their interests while sharing these ideas with other people. Tumblr’s reblogging process makes posting a more conversational process.[121] Relationships between bloggers occur over time as overarching

[120] Boyd, “A Blogger’s Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium" 18.

[121] Marquart, “Microblog Sensation: The Growing Popularity of Tumblr," 73

narrative contextualizes the individual posts. The sense of immediacy and real time posting means that the narrative has infinite possibilities no foreseeable ending. Though social network participants, including Tumblr users with personal blogs, have online profiles that contain some personal details, these profiles are undoubtedly public. People decide for themselves how much personal information they reveal online with the foreknowledge that other people will probably see it. Bloggers constructing their own narrative know the blog is an extension of their identity and that they must draw line between public and private.[122] When bloggers express their private identity through the blog, they use a pseudonym to conceal their real world public identity. Readers interact with the pseudonymous constructed identity similarly to how they interact with bloggers who chose to use their legal names; however, the pseudonym adds mystery to the entire narrative. Examining a private life through a blog makes readers feel intimately connected to the blogger because the entire narrative is like a secret shared between two friends or what someone might write about in a diary. As a multimedia microblogging platform, Tumblr allows people to construct dynamic identities through pictures, video, text, and music; these constructed personas can interact with one another, forming interpersonal relationships over time. Situating Tumblr within a longer history of self-authorship and pseudonymity allows us to see both what is distinctive and technologically innovative about this new blogging platform and how participants' expectations of Tumblr are shaped by longer standing narrative traditions.

[122] Boyd, "A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium," 18.

# Chapter 2

## Constructing a Persona, Imagining an Audience, and Achieving Micro-celebrity:

## An Analysis of The Coquette

On social networking websites, people assume authorship over their own representation, and they interact with other participants in the online world through reading and/or writing. Though many voices are readily available, very few stand out from the crowd and gain a large

following. The personas that attain a sizable audience fall into the micro-celebrity category. According to Alice Marwick and Danah Boyd, "Micro-celebrity…can be understood as a mindset and set of practices in which an audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management; and self presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others."[123] Unlike macro-celebrity perpetuated by mainstream mass media, micro-celebrity occurs through the Internet and requires both a significant following and "strategic self-presentation."[124] The strategy micro-celebrities employ involves building connections through intimacy or perceived intimacy. Celebrities and regular people alike attain this micro-celebrity status on social networking sites like Twitter and Tumblr, conveying personal information specifically for public consumption.[125] Thus though the profile is intrinsically a performance, the personal details create a more intimate self-portrayal.

One voice that established a firm online presence over the past few years is a pseudonymous blogger who portrays herself as female and calls herself "The Coquette," formerly known as "Coke Talk[126]." Since 2009, *The Coquette* has expanded from a solely popular culture infused personal blog, to an advice column called *Dear Coquette*, a style blog, a funny response to another blog she named *To My Husband*, and a twitter account with the username "coketweet."[127] She also branched out into profitable business ventures like her online boutique and professional writing gigs as an advice columnist for the iPad newspaper *The Daily*

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[123] Marwick and Boyd, "To See and Be Seen," 140.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

[126] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On the Recent Change."

[127] The Coquette, "The Coquette"; The Coquette, "Dear Coquette -"; The Coquette, "Coquette Style"; The Coquette, "Notes To My Future Husband"; The Coquette, "The Coquette @coketweet."

and *Playboy* online.[128] Her own site *Dear Coquette* features her work from these paid opportunities. Throughout the entire process, the person behind Coke Talk decidedly remains unknown, with no intention of exposing a name in the future. Through anonymity, multiple representations, and a strongly voice, The Coquette became an influential pseudonymous female figure, building an entire brand and fostering a community of followers immersed in her online world. Working through Tumblr, The Coquette establishes possibilities for agency and power by negotiating the affordances and limitations of the interface.

As an interface, Tumblr encourages certain practices that offer bloggers the opportunity to achieve micro-celebrity. Tumblr community members and non-members can access the information available on these profiles, unless the blogger applies privacy settings; these profiles' highly public nature makes them accessible to a limitless audience, allowing blogs to circulate among the general public. Users establish "personalities" or personas through their blog, and interact with other bloggers' representations on their sites. The blogosphere welcomes pseudonyms, enabling bloggers to enhance their self-representation by choosing how people refer to their posted work in the online community. The self-authored nature of the persona makes readers feel more intimately connected to the persona, allowing the reader and writer/ blogger to develop a relationship over time.[129] These relationships are often based on similar interests that can last for years, strengthening a sense of community. As bloggers promote their narratives and interests through their websites, their sites can potentially evolve into personal brands.[130] Micro-celebrity facilitates the practices of personal branding. A micro-celebrity's

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[128] "The Daily"; "Looking for Ask-coquette, Playboy Has It!".

[129] Marwick and Boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately."

[130] Ibid.

followers perpetuate his or her brand, meaning that more followers indicate a greater potential of more people discovering the brand. People who capitalize on micro-celebrity create more profitable brands and a stronger sense of brand identity. Blogging performances that cultivate relationships and develop connections with their followers resulting in followers being more conscious about the blogger's brand and overall messages.

This chapter explores *The Coquette* as a case study for how pseudonymous Tumblr bloggers can expand their brand through follower participation, eventually achieving micro-celebrity. Throughout the chapter, I discuss how The Coquette negotiates the limitations and affordances that the Tumblr interface enforces on her narrative. I begin by describing how the blogger constructs her Coke Talk/The Coquette persona on her personal blog through popular culture images, stories and opinions, and a writing style that incorporates a vast vocabulary, profanity, and sarcasm. This representation serves as the foundation for all her subsequent projects. From there I observe how follower participation spurs the creation of other endeavors like the advice column and style blog. With increasing popularity and follower loyalty, she now monetizes her brand with her online boutique. I examine this shift into blogging for profit by looking at the boutique and her book *Notes To My Future Husband*. The Coquette's expansion under this separate online pseudonymous persona is significant for examining follower participation in relation to bloggers attaining micro-celebrity and brand recognition.

## I. The Narrative and a Name

On May 31, 2009, *Coke Talk* officially launched under a collective authorship.[131] As the blogger's self-told origin story goes, four close friends sat around blowing lines of cocaine together on some Saturday night/Sunday morning while out partying in Los Angeles, when one of them randomly decided that they should all start an anonymous blog to compile their wild party stories and any other nonsense that captivated their attention at any given moment.[132] They originally wanted to call this blog "Spaceships and Kool-Aid," because as the blogger explained,

> It is a reference to cult mentality. A while back, one of my girls got all hot and heavy into MonaVie. For those who aren't familiar, it's basically a pyramid scheme to sell Scientology in a wine bottle — not quite a cult, but very cult-like. As I used to say, all they were missing was the spaceships and kool-aid. Eventually, the phrase worked its way into our everyday chit-chat, and it became our silly code for all the ridiculous shit we see and do on a nightly basis.[133]

She later went on and said, "Thing was, Spaceships and Kool-Aid was too cumbersome to be the URL, so we just went with coketalk."[134]

The phrases "Spaceships and Kool-Aid" and "Coke Talk" imply certain cultural undertones. The words "spaceship" and "kool-aid" have religious cult suicide affiliations dating back to the mid to late 1900s. The now mainstream expression "drinking the kool-aid" relates to the Jonestown cult called People's Temple.[135] In the 1970s, the religious organization underwent a mass suicide/murder as leaders instructed members to drink grape flavored kool-aid laced with cyanide.[136] After the tragic event that left over 900 people dead, the phrase "drinking the kool-

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[131] The Coquette, "In Case You Were Wondering, This Is What We Do..."

[132] Hepburn, "Rare Interview With Anonymous Blogger, 'Coke Talk'."

[133] The Coquette, "Dear Coke Talk," September 10, 2009.

[134] Hepburn, "Rare Interview With Anonymous Blogger, 'Coke Talk'."

[135] Moore, "Drinking the Kool-Aid," 92.

[136] Ibid.

aid" took on both positive and negative interpretations in popular culture depending upon the context; cult disasters and political uses for the idiom are negative, but business and entertainment uses for the phrase can be either positive or negative, relating to trends in popular culture.[137] The metaphor refers to an individual or group of people has a particular unexamined belief they hold true.[138] Since The Coquette builds her blog around entertainment, the phrase holds a more lighthearted connotation. The story she provides about friends sharing an inside joke also emphasizes the term's more playful use in the blog context. The word "spaceships" paired with "kool-aid" is reminiscent of the Heaven's Gate cult that resided in Rancho Santa Fe, California, a location in close proximity to Los Angeles.[139] The group committed mass suicide by drinking a lethal concoction in 1997; they believed a spaceship was following the Hale-Bopp comet, and the only way for them to board the vessel was through death.[140] In her story, The Coquette frames "spaceships and kool-aid" not as a serious cultural threat, but rather as an inside joke about her "existential nihilist" life perspective. The religious cult references therefore relate to the cult following that the blog acquired early on with its ethos of playful nihilism. The blogger posted her interests and personal beliefs about life's meaninglessness affording people the freedom to pursue happiness however they choose.[141] If readers liked what they saw and read, they "followed" her in the Tumblr sense.

Choosing the name "Coke Talk" for the blog also has strong cultural references, with the word "coke" associated with the Coca-Cola Company and cocaine. Though for her purposes, the

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[137] Ibid.

[138] Ibid., -95.

[139] Davis, "Heaven's Gate," 241.

[140] Ibid.

[141] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On True Love and a Greater Purpose."

word coke denotes cocaine, she does address the Coca-Cola brand on occasion. In a post on her personal blog in 2009, The Coquette put up a picture of a Coca-Cola can and Pop Rocks candy saying, "The kindergarten speedball, my original gateway drug[142]." Essentially she juxtaposes the large corporation with her persona's preference for an anarcho-capitalist political philosophy; however, in the past readers have asked if she is involved with the company.[143] In the context of her blog, coke automatically references the drug, and she presents her blog's perceived connection with the Coca-Cola Company as a ridiculous notion. Coca-Cola has some history intertwined with cocaine because the soft drink product contained coca-leaf extracts from the early to mid 1900s.[144] Cocaine is an illegal drug that signifies cultural constructs like race and class, depending on the form it comes in. Users snort or dissolve then inject the powder form into the bloodstream; they smoke the rock form.[145] The rock form has the street name "crack," and it is socially recognized as an inner city drug used by racial minorities.[146] Society perceives cocaine in its more refined powder form as a drug for wealthier privileged people, since it is more expensive and users generally fall within the middle to upper classes.[147]

The Coquette's assertion of the original name "Coke Talk" thus directly implies high social status. The story accompanying how the blog started provides a sense of intimacy with a close group of friends partaking in an illegal party activity. The group's recreational drug use set within the LA party scene context contributes glamour to the story, since people link Hollywood

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[142] The Coquette, "The Kindergarten Speedball, My Original Gateway..."

[143] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Fun Sized Advice. |," November 4, 2010.

[144] Gootenberg, "Between Coca and Cocaine," 233.

[145] Volkow, "COCAINE."

[146] Stuntz, "Race, Class, and Drugs," 1795.

[147] Jaffe, "80s Style Is Back, Cocaine Use Included!".

with celebrities and opulence. Essentially, The Coquette describes a very exclusive situation that tells a story readers might find intriguing based on how she situates the tale in terms of popular culture. She positions herself as a Hollywood elite and insider who operates behind the scenes and judges with an informed and critical viewpoint. The idea of collective authorship also gives the sense of a physical tight knit community and a face-to-face intimacy that created the website.

Within a matter of weeks, the blog's original innovator presented herself as the only blogger who remained, marking the transition from collective to sole authorship.[148] She claims she assumed the entire Coke Talk persona onto herself, making sure to carefully divide this online entity from her public self. Though the blogger supplies readers this story, the reader cannot be entirely sure how true this account is. Readers constantly negotiate the manufactured media text with its possible truthfulness throughout the blog. Whether true or not, The Coquette constructs this story to mobilize the brand.

In February 2011, blogger Coke Talk told followers she "sold out" when she began writing an advice column called *Dear Coquette* for Rupert Murdoch's iPad newspaper *The Daily.*[149] The word "coquette" means a flirtatious woman who seeks to win men's attention, admiration, and affection. *The Coquette* is also the title for an epistolary novel by Hanna Webster Foster who anonymously published the book in 1797.[150] The novel is based on a true story about a socially respectable clergyman's daughter who makes decisions about her potential suitors, which results in her dying alone from complications while birthing an illegitimate child.[151] The

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[148] Hepburn, "Rare Interview With Anonymous Blogger, 'Coke Talk'."

[149] The Coquette, "Listen up, All You Lovers and Fuckers. I've Got..."

[150] Foster, *The Coquette*.

[151] Ibid.

term “coquette” therefore denotes feminine gender performativity, supplementing the self-created female image the blogger expresses through her personal site. The word coquette also speaks to the blogger’s behavior with how interacts with readers through her posts. The blogger calculates how she reveals information in real time, and over the past four years she has gained followers along the way. By 2012, the blogger transitioned her entire brand from Coke Talk to The Coquette, choosing the more professional penname to note authorship for all her blogs.[152]

## II: Personal Blog: Constructing the Persona

The Coquette’s personal blog is similar to a diary with the blogger’s personal anecdotes and opinions on certain subjects, and her choice to incorporate eclectic images and recontextualize them for her own purposes reflected a grrl zine tradition. To assert her persona and convey her stories in a memorable and unique way, The Coquette’s chosen weapon is her words. In her book *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, Nancy Baym says, “In textual media, the use of written language is a significantly more powerful force in making and forming impressions than it is when people interact body to body…it’s often the articulate, insightful, and witty ones who know how to spell who gain notice at the online equivalent.”[153] The Coquette draws upon elaborate vocabulary to create a distinct voice that she carries throughout the entire blog. This constant written voice implies a sense of authenticity over the years because it is consistent from post to post, bolstering The Coquette’s claim about sole authorship. She models herself as a skillful writer and cultural commentator who uses language to offer an alternative

[152] The Coquette, “Dear Coquette - On the Recent Change.”

[153] Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 109.

viewpoint. The Coquette includes profanity when delivering her insights, which bolsters her viewpoints with a raw and edgy shock factor that lends truth to her star persona. Her word choice emphasizes the strong emotions she wants communicate to her followers. This distinct use of language incorporates some self-mockery that encourages her readers to invest in her and have faith that she is not taking herself or any of this blogging too seriously.[154]

The Coquette's narratives throughout the blog have a strong connection to postmodernism. Since the entire blog exists online, hyperreality is an overarching yet indirect component for the site, and her pseudonymity draws attention to this sense of questioning what is real versus what is not. According Jean Baudrillard in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, the hyperreal involves "a generation by models of a real without origin or reality."[155] Hyperrealism is seductive and comes to displace the real through the use of the use of technologically mediated images that seem more vivid than actual reality.[156] Though most content on her blog does have an origin, there are some posts that were strictly digitally produced. In addition, many pictures have been digitally manipulated or recontextualized through text. The Coqutte relates to hyperreality thematically because she gives readers text and images that serve as representations for the person behind the persona; however, there is still mystery as to whether or not this real-world person exists. Because she implements a pseudonym, her origin and reality cannot be verified. This constant question about what is truth and what is not affects how readers interact with the blog and how much they believe what she says and posts. They constantly negotiate truths and fictions when interacting with her media text. For readers, the exact relationship

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[154] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Labels."

[155] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

[156] Ibid.

between the blog and the blogger remains unknown, thus discerning reality from representation becomes a personal choice for the reader.

The Coquette also enforces her postmodernity through her popular culture critical interpretations. She incorporates several disciplines and mixes in concepts like philosophy and literature when concocting these interpretations. She juxtaposes profanity, high culture, and linguistics. The overall effect The Coquette achieves therefore reflects an intellectual embrace of low culture. Her stories, with this high culture and low culture combination, have similarities to some Brat Pack writers from the 1980s, like Bret Easton Ellis. Ellis' *American Psycho*, which the Coquette mentions as one of her favorite books, observes how protagonist Patrick Bateman's entire identity is composed from external sources, primarily brand awareness for high-end consumer goods.[157] In the novel, the unreliable narrator invests himself completely in consumer culture and simply absorbs the culture around him without self-reflection, a trait that Ellis recognizes as undesirable.[158] Some posts on The Coquette's blogs focus on consumerism and materialism, especially the content found on the style blog and her boutique.[159] Like Ellis, she critiques these goods, performing self-reflection regarding how she chooses to participate in consumer culture. She also perpetuates the message to "not take any of this seriously," referring to everything she posts. Additionally, The Coquette mentions the importance of personal experiences and relative truths, which echoes a postmodernist mantra. Essentially, her assertive voice and the way she incorporates culture into her different sites is fundamental to her entire constructed persona.

The background layout for *The Coquette* is a basic Tumblr template, but the memorable

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[157] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On My Favorite Books"; Ellis, *American Psycho*.

[158] Ellis, *American Psycho*.

[159] The Coquette, "Coquette Style."

avatar and various posts give the site its own distinct style. The blog offers both The Coquette's commentary on popular culture, as well as a glimpse into a Hollywood lifestyle that she portrays as being her own. The Coquette cheekily describes herself as "staggering through life with an eager nose and a sharp tongue," because she frames herself as constantly looking out for whatever is culturally relevant at any given moment.[160] Her other fans and I appreciate what we see as her impeccably phrased strong opinions, in which she sprinkles profanity for an added effect.

Image 1

The picture "depicting" The Coquette as the personal blog's avatar is Britney Spears with her mouth agape, and casually dressed in grey sweatpants, a red satin jacket, huge white sunglasses and a trucker hat (Image 1).[161] According to The Coquette, "the Britney pic was a total spur-of-the-moment thing. The baby bottle. The trucker hat. The indignant posture. At the time, something about it just felt right [and] it caused quite a bit of drug-induced laughter."[162] This particular Britney photo also speaks to the larger message of the blog, since the singer is an iconic popular culture figure who has been a tabloid fixture for years, and experienced the highs and lows of the Hollywood scene. The photo is far from a made up glamour shot, but instead a more comical representation of Britney alluding to her intersectionality as a mother and well- known celebrity stalked by the paparazzi, and it resonates with her sometimes more controversial presence in the limelight. The image also touches on the humor and sarcasm that The Coquette readily employs throughout all the blog

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[160] The Coquette, "The Coquette."

[161] Ibid.

[162] Hepburn, "Rare Interview With Anonymous Blogger, 'Coke Talk'."

posts. The Coquette regularly comments on popular culture, reinforcing the Hollywood insider perspective she wants to portray for readers. She presents herself as working behind the scenes and being generally knowledgeable about the glamorous and seedy components in the entertainment industry, offering opinions and critiques about highly public personalities and issues in popular culture.

Pseudonymity is a central component for The Coquette because the persona is more powerful than the actual person responsible for the Tumblr personality.[163] The pseudonym enables her to write and express herself in ways that will not reflect on her identity in the real world. Pseudonyms are a generally accepted practice in the blogosphere, as opposed to other social media websites like Facebook, MySpace, or Google+ that strive to represent public identities in an online interface; Facebook actually discourages pseudonymous performativity, and deactivated the *Coke Talk* account explaining, "Facebook is built around real world interactions. Operating under an alias detracts from the value of the system as a whole. Users who operate under fake names are also prone to abuse. We take this standard very seriously and remove fake accounts as we become aware of them."[164] Tumblr is therefore a platform that allows The Coquette to separate her public identity from her online persona. When originally discussing her decision to remain anonymous she explained,

> Everyone has three lives: a public life, a private life, and a secret life…I much prefer the secret life…Personal blogs — when they're at their very best — share moments that are intensely private, but unless they are anonymous, they can never delve into the secret without causing harm. I want to cram as much brutal truth into my writing as possible,

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[163] Ibid.

[164] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," February 21, 2011.

> and I can only do that when I'm free to share experiences from my secret life. Names are omitted to protect the guilty, including mine.[165]

Essentially, she frames her argument explaining that by writing under a pseudonym, she can share more intimate details about her life, which can create a stronger bond with her readers. Baym echoes this point mentioning, "the sense of safety in anonymous sites may be more important for honest self expression."[166] The earnestness conveyed in the posts can only happen if The Coquette's wild side remains separate from her day-to-day life. The pseudonymous blogger therefore must calculate how she presents these more intimate posts since she wants to conceal her real world identity to preserve her reputation. She fully explains her desire to honestly share her adventures, but sets boundaries by not revealing a name and withholding details that could lead to this discovery. Some would argue that anonymity threatens her credibility, but she structures her counterargument by mentioning that it allows her to present a more truthful and accurate account of events that supposedly happen in the real world. Ultimately, readers must decide for themselves how they feel about the point she makes and how much stock they put into what the persona projects as truth. The blogger's consistency with her written voice and the material she posts over the years gives readers a better indication that the persona reflects some sincerity behind the manufactured identity.

Though her original intention for keeping her identity hidden put self-preservation as the utmost motivating factor, the blog's increasing popularity allowed for expansion opportunities. Unless a blogger alters their blog's privacy settings, the blogs on sites like Tumblr are in highly public domains and exist to be seen by anyone and everyone. Both bloggers and non-bloggers

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[165] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," October 5, 2009.

[166] Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 116.

can encounter pages in the Tumblr universe and access posted material. This generally unlimited access allows blogs to circulate well beyond real-world acquaintances, meaning that followers can potentially increase on a grand scale. Re-tumbling aids this circulation process and enables blogs to spread more quickly amongst different groups of people who share similar interests. When single posts are re-blogged, bloggers can find the original source in the post's note section. If they are curious about the blogger who contributed the post, they might look into his/her page. In an interview from 2010, The Coquette acknowledged the unlocked potential that her blog had, saying, "Still, privacy is only part of the reason I protect my identity. I'd be an asshole if I didn't recognize that the mystery itself has value... If I were a person instead of a persona, the entire experiment would lose its core mystery and come crashing down."[167] The performance thus generates intrigue amongst readers regarding the blog's creator and the persona's authenticity. People who encounter the mysterious persona through re-tumbling might want to learn more about her, and as a result they discover her entire brand.

Initially, The Coquette's posts reflected her modeled "secret life," offering the chance for a glimpse into her exclusive and glamorous Hollywood party lifestyle, filled with sex, drugs, and memorable experiences with friends. The Coquette's narrative appeals to readers who take an interest in the type of lifestyle she portrays, and reader interest is a significant component for her achieving micro-celebrity. In interviews and on *Dear Coquette*, she answers questions specifically addressing her life; these questions probe into information surrounding the blog and information she chooses not to include on her sites. According to Marwick and Boyd, "celebrity is successfully practiced when it provides the illusion of 'backstage,' giving the impression of

[167] Hepburn, "Rare Interview With Anonymous Blogger, 'Coke Talk'."

uncensored glimpses...Although there is no way to determine the 'authenticity' of any celebrity practice, this uncertainty appeals to some audiences, who enjoy the game playing intrinsic to gossip consumption."[168] The pseudonymous blogger claims she is not a famous person in the real world. She allegedly has exceptional distaste for fame in American culture, particularly for how it relates to the "scene queens," "reality television," and basically all those people who seek attention but lack true talent[169]. She says,

> I don't believe in role models, I don't have any heroes, and I treat fame like it's a fucking venereal disease. Ask anyone in this town with real money or power, and they'll whisper a dirty little truth – privacy has a higher street value than fame. Aside from a few superficial novelties, being famous offers little in the way of real benefit. Notoriety is a marketing tool and if you're not selling anything that makes the world a better place you're clogging up the drain.[170]

Thus The Coquette indulges in Hollywood glamour, but frames herself as one who maintains distance from the spotlight. By performing in this way, The Coquette brands her micro-celebrity as simultaneously glamorous and yet in control of her own image, especially involving the way her audience perceives her.

The Coquette's commitment to maintaining privacy, as mentioned in the quote above, thus becomes another explanation for why the blogger remains anonymous. With this information, she wants to convince readers that the person behind The Coquette pseudonym does not want to be recognized for anything available on the blog; however she is not against the pseudonym generating public attention. Though online profiles are intrinsically performative in

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[168] Marwick and Boyd, "To See and Be Seen," 140.

[169] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," July 14, 2009.

[170] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," July 14, 2009.

nature, The Coquette's pseudonymous persona demonstrates how calculated and constructed identities can lead to micro-celebrity.

Operating the blog also allows the person behind *The Coquette* to maintain control over the narrative she constructs with her posted material. She tells readers, "I would never allow someone else to control a copyright to my likeness, be it on a cheesy reality show or in some hot girl-on-girl action. You won't find me in front of a camera any time soon."[171] Readers simply engage with the narrative that The Coquette creates through her own controlled authorship; they cannot see the entire person behind The Coquette because their only information is what she chooses to give them.

Despite her proclaimed attitude towards fame, her persona gained momentum in the Tumblr universe, successfully performing celebrity on a micro level.[172] The blog appealed to people's desires to have this insider perspective that Marwick and Boyd discuss.[173] *The Coquette* offers a fantasy life on the Hollywood scene that the blogger portrays as her own, a life filled with the VIP section of well-known clubs and underground hot spots, expensive brand-conscious tastes, decadent weekends, New York Fashion Week adventures, movie premieres, fashion photography shoots, and fabulous vacations that readers experience by consuming the blog posts. Her readers have the option to live vicariously through her blog. She points out "nothing she does is original," harkening back to the glam punk era that current Pasadena housewives spent their younger years partying in.[174] For readers who might be more skeptical about the truth

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[171] The Coquette, "Dear Coke Talk," September 10, 2009.

[172] Marwick and Boyd, "To See and Be Seen."

[173] Ibid.

[174] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," June 17, 2009.

regarding her self-described lifestyle, mentioning that the type of partying she participates in has gone on before her time lends credence to the way she depicts her debauchery filled nights out.

The earliest posts reflect The Coquette's partying, recreational drug use and open views on sexuality, information that only her close friends are privy to in the real world. She also offers her views on life in Hollywood and general popular culture. Like diaries that are written for an imagined reader, the blog is constructed for an envisioned audience. The posts illustrate The Coquette's sense of humor and her strong written voice. Her enduring tone ultimately solidified within the very first post (Image 2), which features a picture of a man holding a shotgun aimed at the famous Hollywood sign, with the caption beneath reading, "In case you were wondering, this is what we do here."[175] Visually captivating and poking fun at Hollywood, The Coquette emphasizes the lighthearted entertainment value that the blog provides, and she invites and encourages followers to get in on her jokes executed with her "tongue-in-cheek sarcasm."[176]

Image 2

Over these past four years, The Coquette continuously posted videos, links, and images she found online. This collection demonstrates her humorous perspective of partying, sex, drugs, alcohol, celebrities and whatever else captivates her interest at any given moment; she conveys humor with the image alone, or through her commentary responding to the visual. There are hundreds of pictures with everything from a picture of a Kermit the Frog doll lying down on a curb with a beer bottle tucked under his arm (Image 3), which The Coquette comments, "Yeah.

[175] The Coquette, "In Case You Were Wondering, This Is What We Do..."

[176] The Coquette, "Dear Coke Talk," August 28, 2009.

When you find a good rainbow connection, they never tell you this is how you'll look the next morning," to a girl staring at a row of knives (Image 4), which The Coquette captions herself saying, "size does matter," with an implied sexual reference to penis size, to The Coquette comparing Anna Nicole Smith to a Zen poet (Image 5).[177]

Image 3

Image 4

Image 5

In *The Coquette's* early days, one particular post generated a lot of attention and led to the blog rapidly amassing followers. The post had two images of topless women (Image 6).[178] One was a brunette with her head tossed back with the phrase "New York is a friendly town" photo shopped in across her torso.[179] The other was Scarlet Johansson with the phrase "LA is a friendly town" etched along her torso.[180] The Coquette then added the commentary "It's an exercise in ironic juxtaposition, kids…" with the words "ironic" linking to the Guy Hepner art website and "juxtaposition" linking to another site that no longer has content

[177] The Coquette, "Yeah. When You Find a Good Rainbow Connection,..."; The Coquette, "Size Does Matter."; The Coquette, "There Is an Ancient Custom Amongst Zen Monks And..."

[178] The Coquette, "It's an Exercise in Ironic Juxtaposition, Kids…."

[179] Ibid.

[180] Ibid.

available.[181] The overtly sexual post acquired more notes than all her previous posts, totaling 183 likes or reblogs.[182]

Though a Tumblr account's following counts remain hidden, the post generated so much attention through likes and reblogs within a day that the blogger comically remarked on her sudden increase in followers. She said, "I post one pic of Scarlett's rack, and suddenly I've got more followers than Jesus with a beeper. What the fuck? Oh well, the more the merrier. Just don't get any in my eyes."[183] The image is forward and attention grabbing, and The Coquette recognizes why people might be interested in this specific post by joking about how some people would conceivably masturbate to the image. Her joke therefore establishes a playful attitude towards sexuality, which she further demonstrates with the pleasure-pursuing ethos she mentions throughout her blogs.

Overall, the pictures' combined effect reflects a non-traditional feminine gender performance. Judith Butler argues that gender, sex and sexuality are intrinsically performative in nature, and that gender especially is a social construct.[184] An overwhelming majority of the

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[181] "Guy Hepner"; The Coquette, "It's an Exercise in Ironic Juxtaposition, Kids…."

[182] The Coquette, "It's an Exercise in Ironic Juxtaposition, Kids…."

[183] The Coquette, "Tumblarity Bukkake."

[184] Gauntlett, *Media, Gender and Identity*.

images depict women who are willingly partaking in or alluding to sex, drugs, partying, or any other pleasurable activity. These images emphasize The Coquette's promotion of overt female sexuality. The Coquette performs her brand identity across multiple platforms reinforcing femininity through the images she chooses. The Coquette's femininity is further reinforced through female images that she jokingly aligns herself with. In one picture, there is a hand with all the fingertips dusted in glittery paint, and the index finger is noticeably fully covered with pink iridescent color (Image 7).[185] Referring to this image, The Coquette writes, "Sometimes it's nice to spend a Friday night at home, just me and my magical rainbow vagina[186]." Here she asserts that she is female by anatomy and implies her joy for masturbation. In the Tumblr community, there is a common practice that involves posting "gratuitous pictures of yourself" or GPOYs for short.

Image 11

[185] The Coquette, "Sometimes It's Nice to Spend a Friday Night At..."

[186] Ibid.

A GIF (graphics interchange format) that she describes as "the essence of [her] being," features a topless woman dancing around holding sparklers in each of her hands, emphasizing that The Coquette is fun and a free spirit.[187] She also includes GPOYs that feature Dolly Parton in a playboy bunny outfit (Image 8), superwoman (Image 9), an open mouth with pink lipstick peeking through torn pink paper (Image 10), an illustration of a woman lying on her back in a red bikini and matching stilettos pointing a gun at the viewer (Image 11), the Californians from SNL (Image 12), an approximately six-year-old girl smoking a cigarette (Image 13), and a poison jar filled with rainbow glitter (Image 14).[188] These pictures physically represent and collectively assemble the entire persona.

Image 12

Image 13

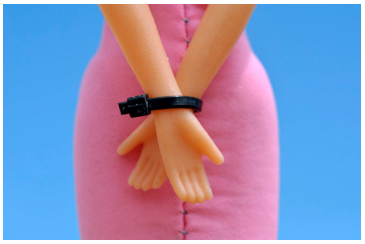
Image 14

[187] The Coquette, "Oh, Look. It's a Gratuitous Picture of the Essence..."

[188] The Coquette, "GPOY," October 12, 2012; The Coquette, "GPOY," May 21, 2012; The Coquette, "Gratuitous Picture of Your Inner-child Wednesday!"; The Coquette, "This Is the Closest I'll Ever Come to Posting A..."

There are also pictures with Barbie dolls and Disney princesses portrayed doing cocaine or associated with sex (Images 15, 16, and 17)[189]. With these images, *The Coquette* creates content in the grrl zine tradition, since she responds to or recontextualizes images how she sees fit. Both *Coke Talk* and "zines are responding to a larger culture, a culture in which girlhood and womanhood are composed of sometimes radically contradictory ideas,"[190] In the case of the Barbies and princesses, the juxtaposition between childhood femininity ideals and adult themes addresses this very notion. The Coquette did not create this entire collection of images herself, but by posting them she emphasizes her recognition for their cultural significance, especially in the context of her blog.

Image 15 Image 16 Image 17



[189] The Coquette, "Bait"; The Coquette, "Anyone Else Ever Play Bondage Barbie™?"; The Coquette, "Tonight I Fully Intend to Blow Lines While..."

[190] Piepmeier and Zeisler, *Girl Zines*, 92.

Besides posting images and links that offer external sources to construct *The Coquette*, the blogger provides followers with her very own written and photographic posts, giving people a more direct representation of her assumed life. In her "Coke Talk of the Day," she includes personal stories from all areas in her life, opinions about various topics, and possible insight as to why she operates the way she does. People reading *The Coquette* blog face much of the same issues that people reading grrl zines do. As Piepmeier explains, "While grrl zinesters are assembling the 'bits and pieces of their lives' in their zines, in many cases they are not pulling together an authentic self, something that represents 'who they really are.' Instead, this idea of 'who they really are' is the thing that's being destabilized, called into question or even rejected in many grrl zines."[191]

Though a constructed performance like girl zines, The Coquette's stories come from her real life endeavors. Thus her combination of over the top performance and relatable personhood create a personable and compelling figure. Over the years, The Coquette filled in followers on events in her personal life, furthering her strong and independent personality and allowing for an ongoing narrative to unfold. As if confiding in a diary, The Coquette writes about the absurd moments she encounters in her life and the memories she wants to preserve in written form. In

[191] Ibid., 89.

earlier posts, she wrote openly about some of her wild weekends including an orgy in a Malibu mansion, "blowing a fat line of cocaine off a rock hard cock in a Vegas bathroom," and other adventures worth mentioning.[192] When discussing her partying ways, she explains to readers the adventerous mentality and open-mindedness with which she approaches each experience. She differentiates between "wild and crazy," explaining that she subscribes to being wild whereas crazy exhibits more self-destructive behavior.[193] Following a night out, she sets the scene with stories about Sunday morning brunch poolside at a swanky hotel like The Roosy, The Mondrian, or The Downtown Standard.[194] These outrageous stories could have any effect on the reader: create excitement, serve as an escape, be a relatable experience, or completely baffle and disgust a reader, all depending on the reader's disposition. She constructs these stories to share with an audience filled with strangers and elicit an opinion that will entice people to respond.

In regards to her real world identity, she only tells curious readers, "I'm pretty respectable by day. I work in entertainment. I can't really go into specifics, but I've got pant suits and a masters degree."[195] Throughout the years, however, The Coquette also included stories about events and people from other parts of her life in her personal blog. She frames herself as someone who came from a lower-middle class family from Florida who then moved to Los Angeles and worked her way up to an executive position in the entertainment industry.[196] This dedicated work ethic that resulted in her class mobility therefore reflects traditional ideals about the American Dream. She speaks to the idea of being completely self-made and that this

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[192] The Coquette, "Dear Coke Talk," August 18, 2009; The Coquette, "Wild or Crazy."

[193] The Coquette, "Wild or Crazy."

[194] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," June 7, 2009.

[195] The Coquette, "Dear Coke Talk," August 3, 2009.

[196] The Coquette, "Here's a Stupid Question"; The Coquette, "Dear Coke Talk," September 15, 2009.

glamorous lifestyle she portrays was achieved through hard work and not easily handed to her. Readers can respect this mobility story and infer that The Coquette appreciates where she is now because she remembers her roots. She writes about interacting with her Republican Floridian family, which creates an interesting dynamic since she is extremely liberal in comparison[197]. She also discusses the other people who are part of her daily life, including her "vanilla" co-workers, her own lovers, and friends with their own back stories, including one in a domestically abusive relationship, incarcerated friends, friends who died, friends getting married, and friends with interesting occupations like sex workers, producers, and writers.[198] Overall, incorporating people with whom she has significant interpersonal relationships with emphasizes her life beyond the blog. Incidents with strangers also make for comic diatribes. For example, she once refused to give up her seat on an airplane for a Hasidic Jewish man with a "wacky hat" because she did not want to be subjected to religious beliefs that did not apply to her.[199] Another time, she mentioned she always parks in parking spaces reserved for pregnant women at the Century City Mall because she thinks the policy is absurd; when a woman confronted her about parking there her response was, "My abortion isn't until this weekend, so fuck off."[200] These situations present The Coquette as being forthright and having as strong a personality as she demonstrates in her blog. Mentioning places by name, like the hotels or the mall creates a more tangible picture of where the woman behind *The Coquette* might spend her time. These little bits and pieces she

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[197] The Coquette, "Dear Red States,".

[198] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On the Oldest Profession."; The Coquette, "Is the Tag on My Reputation Showing?"; The Coquette, "I Can't Even Deal Right Now."; The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," September 21, 2010; The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," October 21, 2011.

[199] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," January 13, 2012.

[200] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," July 8, 2009.

strategically offers from her life enable readers to piece together the story and imagine the persona as an actual person in the real world.

Personal stories from The Coquette's "real" life began to diminish around late 2011 with her mentioning events in her life less frequently. Though stories about situations she encounters in her presumed real life are now limited to only a few sentences, she continues to supply readers with her opinions and cultural commentary. She explains to followers, "I miss being able to blast out all the craziness going on in my life. I wish I still could, but too many people are reading it now," possibly implying that people who know the person behind the persona follow the blog.[201] Her comment speaks to the increasing popularity her personal blog has acquired over the years and her significant following. The Coquette practices micro-celebrity with "ongoing maintenance of a fan base, performed intimacy, authenticity and access, and construction of a consumable persona."[202] This persona maintenance cultivates a relationship with followers that both entertains and allows followers to connect with the persona on an individual level.

## II. The Advice Column: Communicating with the Persona

During summer 2009, *Coke Talk* readers began submitting questions to the anonymous blogger through her personal website. They asked her just about anything, and she always enjoyed supplying them with a sassy answer, claiming she sometimes answered questions under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The Coquette's first exercise for giving advice was not a question that someone wrote in, but a response to a post by fellow Tumblr blogger The Dame.

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[201] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," November 5, 2011.

[202] Marwick and Boyd, "To See and Be Seen," 140.

The Dame mentioned that while working as a stripper, men who rejected her suggestion to go have a private dance would throw in that she was beautiful, and this compliment annoyed her; she told her followers that she would post again when she figured out why this situation bothered her so much.[203] The Coquette responded to The Dame's dilemma saying, "Your underlying problem has to do with reflective vs. deflective patterns of mitigated speech and a glitch in the artificial power dynamic that exists in the strip club," culminating in the answer that men genuinely think they are being nice by pairing the compliment with rejection.[204] In this post, The Coquette's written delivery gave the impression that she was perceptive when giving advice to The Dame, demonstrating her understanding for general social interactions, linguistics, and how strip clubs operate on a more social level. In the notes, The Dame reblogged the post and responded, "I love you! Thank you!" signifying their relationship as "Tumblr friends."[205] This exchange between The Dame and The Coquette exemplifies the conversational component in Tumblr reblogging discussed in chapter one.[206] The Coquette's response to The Dame allowed The Dame's followers to see the answer for the original post; the response also showed The Coquette's own followers that the blogger's willingness to open up participatory discussions, interacting with readers by giving advice and answer questions.

Shortly after helping The Dame with her dilemma, the *Dear Coke Talk* posts became a regular fixture on *Coke Talk*. The first official *Dear Coke Talk* post directly addressed the blogger, with someone asking her, "Where/how did you get so wise?"[207] The Coquette launched

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[203] The Dame, "Using 'You're Beautiful' as an Excuse."

[204] The Coquette, "Using 'You're Beautiful' as an Excuse."

[205] The Dame, "Using 'You're Beautiful' as an Excuse."

[206] Marquart, "Microblog Sensation: The Growing Popularity of Tumblr," 73.

[207] The Coquette, "Dear Coke Talk," August 2, 2009.

into a brief overview about her earlier life that was sparse on details, but still eloquently delivered her point. She discussed how she grew up poor in the south, and worked hard to achieve her glamorous Hollywood lifestyle.[208] Her claim speaks to the American Dream with her present self-made elevated social status. Most poignantly, she confessed, "Whatever genuine wisdom I have comes from having faced my own mortality…I was forced to contemplate the very real likelihood of my own death without the benefit of having lived a full life, and I had to acknowledge some cold, sticky truths about the meaning of it all."[209] This admission indicates that the person behind The Coquette endured suffering earlier in her life, and she took that time to undergo some self-reflection that eventually led her to the beliefs and personal philosophy she possesses today. Though vague, mentioning her near encounter with death humanizes the persona, as someone who struggled and persevered, and it resonates with readers who all have their own personal suffering. This personal detail thus emotionally connects readers to the persona.

Image 19

[208] Ibid.

[209] Ibid.

As more questions flowed in, the blogger decided to branch out and create a separate Tumblr called *Dear Coke Talk* in late October that same year. This blog was another preset Tumblr template, and Dolly Parton served as the main avatar and sole visual representation for the advice column, reinforcing the feminine gender performativity. Not only is Dolly one of The Coquette's personal icons, but the picture (Image 19) was exceptionally appropriate because it was "from the movie Straight Talk, a silly little comedy-of-errors in which she is mistakenly hired as a radio talk show psychologist who gives homespun advice to callers."[210] The accompanying description for *Dear Coquette* reads, "Shady advice from a raging bitch who has no business answering any of these questions," which essentially explains her position in all these matters that random strangers choose to write to her about.[211] Her performances show nontraditional advice that sometimes flies in the face of expected advice.

The Coquette's enduring anonymity is sometimes met with readers' skepticism, and they question her writing's validity. One person who wrote in said she was probably a fifteen year old who made up everything.[212] The Coquette simply responded, "If a drug-free, never-been-fucked, fifteen year old girl could write this shit, wouldn't that be *more* impressive?" and she has a point because she thoroughly constructs the entire persona.[213] As she sarcastically told one reader, "Sure I'm a feminist…If you insist on pigeonholing me, I'm also an upper-middle class professional bisexual polyamorous existential nihilist anarcho-capitalist hedonistic objectivist secular humanist west-coast hipster party girl. Do the math on that."[214] Though her point with

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[210] Hepburn, "Rare Interview With Anonymous Blogger, 'Coke Talk'."

[211] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette -."

[212] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On My Haters."

[213] Ibid.

[214] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Labels."

this excerpt was to emphasize that these categories are severely limiting when applied to individuals, this does speak largely to The Coquette's intersectionality and the multilayered persona she embraces; she is a postmodern figure, and all these converging ideas merge into one representative entity. She constructs a vision of someone who fits into all these different categories, but she hints that categorization, though convenient, does not offer the most accurate depiction for an individual. She refuses to have a fixed identity. The Coquette blatantly tells people they do not have to listen to her advice or read her blog if they dislike what she has to say.[215] She knows her strong stance on certain subjects generates negative reactions from opposing viewpoints.[216]

Readers have options regarding how they interact with the blog and read her advice. The links in the upper left hand corner categorize the site's content. "All the past advice," includes everything ever written listed out by their cleverly self-titled entries.[217] "Fun sized advice" has her most brief and straight to the point replies.[218] The "Random Advice" button generates any advice from the full catalogue of responses.[219] For her most popular posts, The Coquette created "The Hall of Anti-fame" because, as mentioned in her personal blog she hates fame, and creating a "hall of fame" would therefore be hypocritical; this small detail emphasizes how the persona is well thought out and consistent between the two blogs.[220] Beneath each advice entry, The Coquette included a comment section that allows other people to offer their perspectives on any

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[215] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On My Lovers and Haters."

[216] Ibid.

[217] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette."

[218] Ibid.

[219] Ibid.

[220] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Fun Sized Advice," November 21, 2010.

given topic.[221] She tells all people who write in, "I wanted to take a quick second to tell you how much I appreciate you sending in your questions — from the whacked-out lunatic diatribes to the heartfelt and intimate personal dilemmas, I love 'em all," indicating that without reader responses, either positive or negative, this blog could not exist.[222]

*Dear Coquette* requires reader participation, creating an open dialogue between The Coquette and all her "lovers and haters."[223] The blogger's anonymity and the anonymity she provides her questioners with the conventional advice column identity concealment. This dual identity protection creates a sense of intimacy that bonds all participants' "secret lives" together, making this community similar to grrl zines. The Coquette encourages people to "Go ahead. Be vulnerable" where they submit their anonymous questions.[224] With this format, people can be more comfortable, honest, and open about sending in their questions and comments. Anonymity removes any embarrassment that comes with attaching a name to a personal question, allowing more deeply personal questions on taboo or controversial topics, like gender and sexual frustration, politics, and religion. The questions range from highly personal, to general information about culture, to specifically seeking more information about the blogger herself; questions can be completely silly to downright serious, and she responds accordingly.

The Coquette's own concealed identity also affects how she approaches questions, explaining "What I do here may be unfiltered, but it's still cooked up from the same basic ingredients as the rest of pop culture. I work with what people give me. This is a cut-and-paste

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[221] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette."

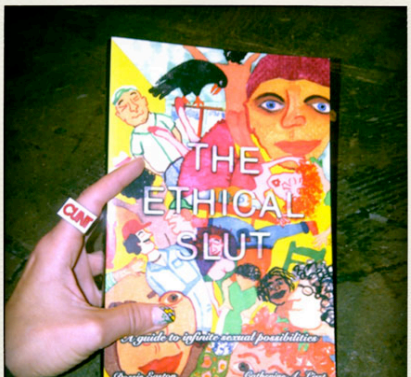
[222] The Coquette, "To Everyone Who's Written in to Dear Coke Talk,".

[223] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On My Lovers and Haters."

[224] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette."

operation, and I don't make any of this shit up."[225] What people submit to her dictates the topics she responds to, and because controversial topics tend to arise, she supplies straightforward and sometimes controversial answers. Basically, people who write to The Coquette never know what she might write back, and there is a certain lure in the mystery; readers' curiosity expressed through their questions about who she is, or if she will ever respond keeps *Dear Coquette* running. The questions ultimately influence her responses. These replies therefore vary on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration the content and wording people choose to use when writing to her. She claims she just goes with whatever she is feeling at the given moment and has fun with it. She takes a no nonsense approach to dishing advice, offering up "verbal bitch slaps" when necessary.[226] The anonymity factor allows her to say whatever she wants however she wants. The strong written voice that she uses in her personal blog effectively transfers over to *Dear Coquette*. Her wording becomes important when directly responding to questions, and there is intention behind every word. She uses "tongue-in-cheek" sarcasm, profanity, and sexual references as she pleases, creating in strong statements. Though some answers are vulgar and irreverent, she demonstrates enormous sympathy and empathy in other responses about more sensitive subjects. Sometimes she purposely contradicts herself to show readers that some questions do not have clear-cut answers.[227]

Besides imparting her knowledge and giving her opinions on various topics, The Coquette draws on philosophy and literature, offering suggestions for outside reading material. Books like *The Way Of The Superior Man*, *The Art of War*, *The Ethical Slut* (Image 19), *The*




[225] "Dear Coquette - On Self-reflexivity."

[226] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Prince Charming Disease."

[227] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Fun Sized Advice," May 31, 201

*Mastery of Love*, and *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships* are just a few suggestions she offers readers, and she provides the link to Amazon.com if they want to find out more about them and eventually buy them.[228] Essentially, she presents herself as giving people the tools and the confidence to open their minds and search for the answers beyond her blog. She models herself as a figure who can help people determine deeper rooted issues, but explains that how they tackle these issues is a strategy they must figure out for themselves.

> Self-awareness takes work, and dealing with underlying issues is always a unique and intensely personal struggle. Sure, I'm good at parsing people's issues out of a few hundred words of bullshit, but that's just a parlor trick. Telling you what's broken isn't the same skill set as being able to fix it…I deliberately stop short of telling you how, because I can't. I know better, and I'm not one of those assholes like Dr. Phil or Dr. Laura who deal in cheap platitudes and feel-good McTherapy. Nobody can tell you how. Not really. Over time, a good therapist may be able to give you the tools for you to come up with your own solution, but that's not the same as saying therapy is the answer. That's why this shit is hard. You gotta do the work yourself, one shovel full of crazy at a time.[229]

Thus she delivers answers with self-awareness about her own limitations for how she can help people. The message she perpetuates is for people to ultimately think for themselves.[230]

Overall, The Coquette differentiates herself from other advice columnists because her personal blog that established the persona was the precursor for *Dear Coquette*. Unlike other advice columns available through larger publications or websites, reader interest specifically directed at The Coquette created the advice column. Followers wanted The Coquette's insight and desired to learn more about the mysterious blogger. The Coquette presents the advice column

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[228] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On an Inferior Man."; The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Opening up."; The Coquette, "The Ethical Slut Here's One More for My List Of..."; The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Victim Mentality."; The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On More Fun-sized Advice," November 27, 2011.

[229] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On How."

[230] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On What to Believe."

as a spontaneous project that formed when followers continued asking her questions[231]. Tumblr's encouragement for connections between bloggers and sharing posts through reblogging was instrumental in making *Dear Coquette* happen. As Steve Almond explains in the introduction for *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life From Dear Sugar*, "Advice columnists…adhere to an unspoken code: focus on the letter writer, dispense the necessary bromides, make it all seem bearable. Describing your own [suffering] is not part of the code."[232] The Coquette, like Dear Sugar, incorporates personal information that resonates with readers; however, the blogger's column diverges from the column on The Rumpus because people question The Coquette specifically about the person behind the pseudonym.

Originally, the blogger strived to answer all the questions she received, but the sudden increase to hundreds within the first month, and eventually thousands of questions meant that many inquiries went unanswered.[233] Though she says the selection process is random, the questions she addresses and posts enhance the constructed persona. The Coquette offers a fresh perspective,

and every word she chooses reflects her creativity, culminating in a thought out response, which plays an important role in the verbal representation she offers to readers. Not everyone agrees with her and plenty of people troll her site, but other people appreciate her entertaining wit and brutal honesty. At

[231] The Coquette, "On Giving Advice."

[232] Strayed and Almond, *Tiny Beautiful Things*.

[233] The Coquette, "To Everyone Who's Written in to Dear Coke Talk,".

readers' requests she set aside a section of the advice column dedicated to the praising comments she received from her "lovers" called "A Few Testimonials."[234]

Her advice column's popularity eventually led to her paid jobs as an advice columnist for the iPad newspaper *The Daily* (Image 20), which lasted for two years, and as an advice columnist for *Ask Coquette* on Playboy.com (Image 21). [235] *The Daily* also had her write another column called "Unsolicited Advice," where she entertained readers with the advice she would give to celebrities.[236] These opportunities allowed the blogger to branch out beyond Tumblr and reach a wider potential fan base through these online publications. Her micro-celebrity provided her with these paid writing jobs. Though she no longer writes for *The Daily*, which ceased publication after two years, or Playboy, these professional projects helped broaden her fan base and reach a wider audience, further bolstering her micro-celebrity.

## III. Style Blog, Store, and Notes to My Future Husband

In December 2010, The Coquette created a style blog she called *Whore Talk*, which later became *The Coquette Style Blog*, and the description reads as "A decadent orgy of materialistic delight in the pursuit of fashionable fuckery."[237] The site's avatar is the fashionable Edie Sedgwick (Image 22), one of Andy Warhol's "It girls" in the sixties, and the original background

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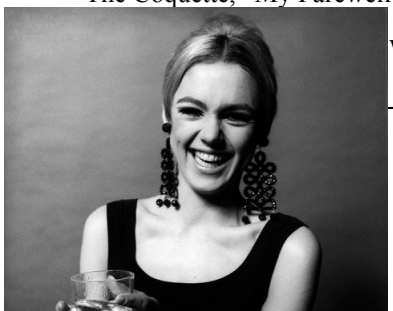
[234] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On My Lovers and Haters."

[235] The Coquette, "My Farewell Letter to the Readers of The Daily"; "Looking for Ask-coquette, Playboy Has It!".



West and Kim Kardashian ."

-"; The Coquette, "I'd Like to Announce My New Style Blog, Whore..."

featured the famous Château Marmot hotel in Los Angeles.[238] The images supplied the blog with a classy and trendy feel, coinciding with the vibe of the clothing, shoes, accessories, cosmetics, and other items The Coquette found and displayed. Similarly to the advice column, reader's communication with the blogger had some influence with her decision to branch out and create another blog. The blogger said, "I started a style blog for a lot of reasons, but the one that finally tipped the scales was that you bitches wouldn't quit asking about my nail polish."[239] The Coquette breaks down posts into several categories: threads, shoes, beauty, beasts, gear, flavor, booty, bling, party, and bullshit.[240] Most products on the blog are feminine, but she does include some items specifically for men, mostly found under the "Beast" tag.[241] Though she mainly features expensive items, her goals involve predicting trends and conveying a certain style. For example, in 2010 she asserted that fanny packs were coming back, and in 2012 several designer featured the bag in their fashion shows.[242] The Coquette explains, "don't forget that this isn't about being able to afford the shit at the ass end of my links, and this certainly isn't about me. [The Coquette] is a style blog, not a shopping or a fashion blog. I'm providing a compass, not the map."[243] Essentially, the blog is more a reflection of taste as opposed to a guide for what exact items followers should buy. The Coquette claims her purpose for creating *The Coquette* is to

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[238] The Coquette, "Whore Talk -."

[239] The Coquette, "I Started a Style Blog for a Lot of Reasons, But..."

[240] The Coquette, "Coquette Style."

[241] Ibid.

[242] The Coquette, "Fanny Packs You Think I'm Kidding, but I'm Not...."; The Coquette, "Fanny Packs My Fanny Pack Prediction Is Still..."

[243] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On My Drunk Style Fans. |."

highlight more interesting and eye-catching pieces; they might reflect her style, but she does not necessarily own everything.

On the style blog, The Coquette posts images of her fashion finds and includes her own commentary beneath the picture. She writes her commentary in the same style as she writes on her personal blog and in her advice column. The style blog indicates the persona's personal tastes and why she finds each item worth mentioning. These items help readers envision how The Coquette might look if they saw her as an actual person in the real world. The brands and specific pieces she discusses coincide with her trendy and successful LA party girl persona and insider fashion perspective; the goods are trendy high priced exclusive aspiration items that tie in with the fantasy The Coquette presents.

Occasionally on her personal blog, The Coquette posts pictures of herself, but she does not show her head in the frame (Image 24).[244] Usually, the images included her hands holding something, giving the readers a look at her stylish manicure. With her style blog, she began featuring full headless body shots that modeled the apparel and jewelry (Image 25 and 26).[245] The Coquette claimed the figure, which portrays a slender lighter skinned woman, is her real life body.

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[244] The Coquette, "Gratuitous Picture of Your Crotch Wednesday!".

[245] The Coquette, "Vintage Finds for Summer! Check Out All The..."; The Coquette, "Agent Provocateur Cha, Cha, Cha! Say Hello to The..."

Image 25

Image 24

Image 26

Shortly after the style blog launched, The Coquette created *The Coquette Boutique* in March 2011 where she sold her own goods, and the background and avatar were the same as the style blog.[246] The Coquette recognized her growing followers as potential buyers, and ultimately turned her fun blogging project into a profitable business. The description for the online store was, "I'm not materialistic. I like pretty things," directly referring to herself and the mindset she

[246] The Coquette, "Listen up, All You Lovers and Fuckers. I'm pleased...Boutique."

wants her consumer audience to have[247]. The boutique's first line was a jewelry collaboration with designer Steven Shein.[248] The NEIVZ + Coquette jewelry collection was limited edition and only available through the blogger's store; the funky colorful pieces were handmade, laser-cut, and made in Los Angeles.[249] The rings and necklaces were literally statement jewelry with highly charged words like "Coke", "Fuck", and "Cunt" that aligned with the profanity she freely used on her other blogs (Image 27).[250] Over time, the blogger added more items to the store, expanding on the jewelry collection and incorporating clothing. She did not create all the goods she sold, but she promoted local California designers and handpicked the items available for purchase[251]. She imbedded messages from her personal blog and her advice column into some of the products, mostly the new jewelry additions. Reader response from her advice column encouraged her W.W.C.T.D. (What would Coke Talk do?) bracelet after a fan wrote in saying that they would buy it if she made it  (Image 28).[252] Her personal blog post about "Wild or Crazy" later transitioned into her occasional "stay wild" signoff, which then inspired the "Stay Wild" necklace (Image 29).[253] The Coquette's followers could appreciate the message behind these items, and thus be more inclined to buy into the brand. The NEIVZ + Coquette jewelry collaboration eventually sold out, along with other items available for purchase through the site.

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[247] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On More Fun Sized Advice," February 24, 2011

[248] The Coquette, "Listen up, All You Lovers and Fuckers. I'm pleased...Boutique."

[249] Ibid.

[250] Ibid.

[251] The Coquette, "CC Skye Jewelry Sorry I Haven't Posted in A..."

[252] The Coquette, "What Would Coke Talk Do?".

[253] "The Coquette Boutique — Stay Wild Neckace ($50-100)"; The Coquette, "Wild or Crazy."

Image 27 Image 28 Image 29

The Coquette's most recent blogging project was a spinoff of another blog titled *To My Wife*, where an unmarried man wrote cute and sometimes cheesy sentimental little notes to his imagined future wife, with the description, "Things I'll Do, Things I Won't. Either Way, You'll

Be Mine And I'll Be Yours."[254] *To My Husband* was a funny response with much more mockery, a tone initiated in the tagline, "Notes To My Future Husband. Things You'll Do, Things You Won't. Either Way You Won't Be This Guy," which linked to the original site; this combative measure directly challenged the original blogger and presented his project in an undesirable light.[255] The first post on To My Husband stated, "No seriously, you won't pull this kind of sentimental, saccharine bullshit, because you won't be a mincing douchenozzle made entirely of Velveeta."[256] The last sentence in the description was later changed to "Don't Worry. We Won't Take It too Seriously," highlighting that the blog's intended message is somewhat ridiculous. The Coquette served as administrator for this Tumblr, enlisting the help of other single lady bloggers, including well-known Tumblr personality Molly McAleer who writes for the CBS show 2 Broke Girls.[257] Together, all the women came up with various little "suggestions" for their future husbands. For example, they jokingly make ultimatums like, "Our prenup: sudden interest in *Two and a Half Men* by either party shall render our marriage null and void."[258] Several posts contain themes and interests that The Coquette included in her other blogs, like the Muppets, the Coachella music festival, and open relationships.[259] The avatar for blog was comedian Tina Fey who is famous for her ability to deliver smart humor. The idea of not taking anything too seriously is a reoccurring theme with The Coquette, but it is especially blatant on *To My Husband*.

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[254] Jannuzzi, "TO MY WIFE."

[255] Sicha, "To My Husband."

[256] The Coquette, "No, Seriously."

[257] Friar, "To My Husband"; McAleer, "Some Big News (and a Bigger Thank You)."

[258] The Coquette, "Our Prenup."

[259] The Coquette, "Coachella"; The Coquette, "An Open Marriage"; The Coquette, "No One Likes."

## IV. Transitions: Blog to Brand to Business

In 2011, *The Coquette* underwent several changes that coincided with the blogger's hobby emerging as a business venture. Before her blogs became her brand, she told readers, "Please don't ever forget that this is my hobby. I do not advertise, merchandise, or monetize this site in any way. I do it for fun. I do it because I love hearing people's secrets, and I love talking shit."[260] With her professional advice columns, *Notes To My Future Husband* book, and the boutique's creation, marketing and her merchandise became a main component in the franchise; the products she featured fit into the all-encompassing personal brand she created through her first three blogs. Thecoquette.net became the centralized location for The Coquette's material.[261] The original layout equally highlighted the five different blogs by showing their avatars and brief clever descriptions; she also provided links to their respective pages.[262]

The blogger made the full transition from Coke Talk to The Coquette in March 2012, thus streamlining her entire brand into the one comprehensive name.[263] Later that year, she revamped her blog hub, placing her newest boutique items at the forefront.[264] The once colorful background is now plain white with links for the different parts of the brand listed across the top right side of the page.[265] The main focus on the blog hub is the blogger's handbag collection,

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[260] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On My Consistency. |."

[261] The Coquette, "Hey, Bitches! I Wanna Announce Thecoquette.net,..."

[262] Ibid.

[263] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On the Recent Change."

[264] The Coquette, "Check It Out, Bitches. My Debut Handbag Collection..."

[265] The Coquette, "Home."

which is also the first link.[266] She displays the collection as the only visuals on the site are three brightly colored bags dominate the page in three different styles: "The Heartbreaker" in blue (Image 30), "The One Night Stand" in red (Image 31), and "The Professional" in yellow (Image 32).[267]

Image 30 Image 31 Image 32

The handbags themselves are not only products, but they become the site's new avatars each with their own names that tie into The Coquette's comprehensive persona. Using the left or right arrow keys shows the same three bags but in different neutral colors. The Coquette claims to have designed these bags, which are made with 100% genuine Italian leather, and she priced them between $595-$750.[268] This pricing drastically differs from the items the boutique originally featured like jewelry pieces between the $40-$150 price range and clothing items that did not exceed $300.[269] She intended for the handbags to be more luxury items, and pricing them in this range targets the consumer she wants to appeal to. With these bags, she aligns her

[266] Ibid.

[267] Ibid.

[268] The Coquette, "Handbag Collection."

[269] "The Coquette Boutique — Stay Wild Neckace ($50-100)."

products with the high style tastes on her fashion blog. She also reinforces the high class Hollywood insider persona to appeal to more affluent consumers. Along with her focus on quality and creating a high-end commodity, The Coquette appeals to longtime fans by including an interior pocket specifically designed for condoms etched with her signature "Stay Wild" mantra.[270]

The bags thus become more representative of the blogger, offering a classy exterior with a secretive sexual feature on the interior. Consumers who have followed The Coquette's narrative over the years can appreciate this dual component ties the bags into her entire brand. Buying the bags thus offers fans the chance to display their classy yet sexual nature. A few months later, The Coquette released a smaller, more affordable handbag priced at $135 and made with suede or metallic lambskin.[271] She called the bag "The Floozy" and it came in several different shapes and colors (Image 34).[272] Floozy is synonymous with a promiscuous woman, which coincides with the bag's proposed use as "a perfect bag for a night out on the town" equipped with the "Stay Wild" condom pocket.[273] On her personal blog and advice column, The Coquette addresses her own promiscuity, embraces her sexuality, and encourages followers to sexually do what feels right for them personally. "The Floozy's" significantly lower price point makes it a comparatively attainable item for consumers, enabling more people to buy into The Coquette's brand.

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[270] The Coquette, "I Can't Show It to You yet, but Here's a Little..."

[271] The Coquette, "I'd Like to Announce the Latest Addition to My..."

[272] Ibid.

[273] Ibid.

Image 33

Image 34

The Coquette's expansion into retail opportunities speaks to a more general relationship between fashion blogging and merchandising potential. Digital culture and social media has impacted the fashion world over the past couple decades with fashion blogging decentering the fashion industry. Whereas fashion was once an elite culture with specific designers and magazine commentaries with an exclusive insider perspective residing at the top, fashion blogging opened opportunities for new conversations. "The most popular fashion bloggers signpost a collective slide away from the *Vogue* style of fashion commentary (exclusive and aloof) towards a very different vernacular: engaged, chatty, and - until very recently – unaffiliated," and they observe all style from high fashion couture to trendy street styles.[274] The Coquette positions herself as a fashion industry insider, and followers have asked her specifically about her style and products she uses. She constructs her prose on the style blog in the same casual style that she uses on her other blogs. By establishing herself in an authoritative position in the hierarchy, consumers potentially feel the products that she helps create, endorse, and sell come from a trusted source.

[274] Khamis and Munt, "The Three Cs of Fashion Media Today."

In summer 2012, The Coquette announced that she wrote her first book based on this blog and called it *Notes To My Future Husband: A Bitch's Guide To Our Happily Ever After* (Image 35).[275] Though most content came from the blog, The Coquette wrote an introduction that shared more personal details about her past loves who she says helped inspire some ideas in the book.[276] She discussed how she turned down four proposals from four different men, and mentioned her most recent experience with a man breaking her heart.[277] These personal details about the persona's relationships humanize her because she positions herself as someone who has experienced the deep emotions that accompany falling in love and having your heart broken. She also presents various relationships that occurred at different points in her life, implying that this variety equates with experience and forms the perspective she takes when writing the book.

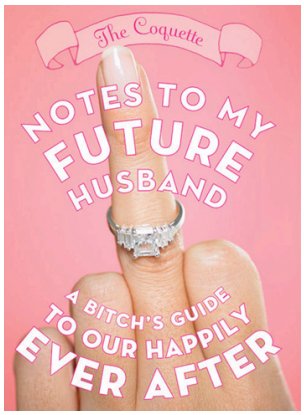


Image 35

People can purchase the book through Amazon or Barnes and Nobles, and The Coquette even included some signed copies available for sale through her boutique; however the blogger

[275] Coquette, *Notes to My Future Husband*.

[276] Ibid.

[277] Ibid.

urged followers through her personal Tumblr to help her market the book more effectively.[278] She told them go to other bookstores, or places that sell books like Urban Outfitters or Walmart, and fill out a request for the store to carry the book; if the store did have the book, she asked them to display it with the "cover facing outward" or putting some copies on a "prominent table" where they would stand out.[279] For their efforts, she offered to "find a way to thank [them]."[280] Overall this request shows how The Coquette looks to her fans to perpetuate her brand. She entices them to go beyond just buying the brand, and market it to a larger public.

## Conclusion

In four years, The Coquette persona established an entire online community with thousands of followers around the world, thus achieving micro-celebrity. There is now longevity in the connection she has built with her followers, and followers can see how the blogger has both changed and stayed consistent with the persona over time. Her twitter account alone boasts over 29,000 official followers who subscribe for her witty one-liners.[281] Through her pseudonymity, she creates a stronger message for her audience to interpret, because the persona becomes greater than a specific individual; she can be anything and anyone that the reader

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[278] The Coquette, "'Notes To My Future Husband' Hits the Shelves This..."

[279] Ibid.

[280] Ibid.

[281] The Coquette, "The Coquette @coketweet."

imagines. She holds out the promise for a multidimensional person behind the persona. Her various blogs allow for multiple narratives, but their interconnectedness is apparent. This expansion and brand extensions on Tumblr, Twitter and outside the blogosphere on Pandora represents Henry Jenkins' ideas about transmedia.[282] According to his definition, "Transmedia storytelling describes one logic for thinking about the flow of content across media. We might also think about transmedia branding, transmedia performance, transmedia ritual, transmedia play, transmedia activism, and transmedia spectacle, as other logics."[283] Through her blogs and other online enterprises, The Coquette becomes a transmedia persona through her multi-platform narration, performances, and all-encompassing brand. These different blogs and transmedia extensions allow The Coquette to reach people beyond other Tumblr bloggers.

The Coquette's life perspective presented with her extensive vocabulary creates a distinct voice that displays intelligence and humor surrounding culturally relevant ideas in popular culture. The persona becomes more vivid through her feminine gender performativity offered by all the avatars and images she posts. Her assertive written voice coupled with these feminine images creates the picture of a strong female figure. Her authorship is highly self-conscious and she acknowledges her mediocrity and meaninglessness. She embraces postmodernism with her mixture of highbrow and lowbrow cultures. Besides individual posts that demonstrate this duality, her presence as a talented writer on Tumblr, a blog hub known for being more photograph oriented with silly memes and pornography, also emphasizes the idea of postmodern "pseudo-intellectual American trash culture."[284]

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[282] Jenkins, "Transmedia 202: Further Reflections."

[283] Ibid.

[284] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," March 12, 2013.

Baym writes,

> As people appropriate the possibilities of textual media to convey social cues, create immediacy, entertain, and show off for one another, they build identities for themselves, build interpersonal relationships, and create social contexts…Performing well can bring a person recognition, or at least lead to a sense that there is a real person behind otherwise anonymous text.[285]

The Coquette encompasses all these ideas, and accomplishes creating a sense of the real and achieving micro-celebrity. Pseudonym and an inability to pin the persona to a singular identity draws attention to the blogger's performativity and the intrinsic self-construction involved in blogging. Individual readers must decide for themselves if they believe what The Coquette writes, and they must remember that she is only offering them a representation. Regardless of validity, The Coquette successfully creates this intriguing and complex narrative, establishing a powerful presence in the modern fast paced media world. The influence she has makes people feel closer to her, and the views she presents as her own resonate with other people. Readers derive a vicarious pleasure from the manufactured persona. Earlier this year, The Coquette wrote a post about Anne Hathaway in relation to authenticity saying, "authenticity is as manufactured as anything else we absorb from pop culture. Still, authenticity is what it takes for us to scrape off our protective layer of cynicism and enjoy a genuine emotional response to whatever they're trying to sell us."[286] Her quote applies to her entire Coquette project as well. The blogger constructed this entire persona and became an entertainer for a growing Tumblr audience. As readers felt an emotional response to her work, they became connected to the blogger, forming a lasting relationship that led to the blogger's micro-celebrity.

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[285] Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 62.

[286] The Coquette, "You Probably Hate Anne Hathaway Because of the Economy."

# Chapter 3

## Responses and Recognition

As a social media website, Tumblr encourages people to build connections with one another based on similar interests. These relationships can last for indefinite periods of time, and

they allow sub-communities to develop within the overarching Tumblr community as people exchange opinions, information, and cultural memes. Some of these connections happen randomly, like me finding *The Coquette* through a friend when neither of us had a Tumblr account, but other connections form through the medium's conventions. Bloggers mainly develop relationships within the network by following other blogs. People have several different ways that they can discover other blogs through Tumblr. One method is by searching tags for individual posts or specific blogs, a function provided by the Tumblr dashboard. Individual posts have a notes section, which indicates the post's original source. The notes also include a detailed list of other blogs that re-blogged and/or liked the post. If a blogger re-blogs a post and also writes additional commentary, that information shows up in the notes as well. Posts therefore become both a site for shared enjoyment and potential dialogue.[287] When bloggers peruse a post's notes section, they sometimes explore other blogs included in the notes. If they like other material found on these other blogs, they might decide to follow the blog. On occasion, a blogger might mention what other blogs he or she likes, and suggest that their followers further explore these blogs for themselves. Besides solely attaining followers, bloggers also create a conversation that gives followers a chance to interact with the blogger. The chat post function on the dashboard permits bloggers to open up a discussion question or topic that other people can respond to. Some bloggers provide a link on their page that allows people to contact them directly. As Nancy Baym explains, "People communicating in personal relationships share relational contexts, knowledge, and some history. People in online groups develop rich in-group social environments that those who've participated for any length of time will recognize."[288]

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[287] Marquart, "Microblog Sensation: The Growing Popularity of Tumblr."

[288] Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 9.

Thus longevity plays an important role for community building and emotional bonding online. Over time, people gain an understanding about the community and begin to have certain expectations about the content they engage with.

Over the past four years, The Coquette has created an online destination allowing for communication between her persona and other people. She portrayed followers and readers as a key factor for mobilizing her personal brand. As the previous chapter discussed, she presents reader responses to her work as significant motivation for her expansion into more blogs on Tumblr and her different projects online and in the real world. She constantly expresses her appreciation for everyone who takes the time to participate and contribute to her blog, whether the comments they offer are positive or negative. The most intimate connections The Coquette builds through her site are with the people who enjoy reading her content. Fans, whom she sometimes refers to as her lovers, are more likely to read her material on a regular basis and buy into the brand she created. The content in reader fan responses emphasize how the blogger personally impacts individual followers in positive ways. The Coquette's performed authenticity, especially with her consistent written voice and interrelated components throughout her blogs, allows readers to build a seemingly intimate relationship with the representation over time. Because she creates a plausibly authentic figure, the pseudonym and her secret real world identity are not a hindrance for creating and maintaining this meaningful connection. Instead, the pseudonym becomes an essential element because the emotional bond builds between the online persona, not the person behind the blog, and her readers. After three years of reading her material, I have personally felt connected to The Coquette persona, and I am glad there is a website like this that exists. Though her identity remains unknown, I personally appreciate what

she represents to me as an intelligent, independent, humorous, powerful, postmodern, pseudonymous female figure. The level of participation among fans varies from one individual to the next, and I personally ordered the "stay wild" necklace from her NEIVZ collaborative jewelry line a couple years ago. Other people have interacted with the Coquette in their own chosen ways by reading, writing in, ordering her products, sending her pictures, or any combination of these participatory actions.

In this chapter, I expand on the participatory elements I began mentioning in chapter two. I discuss the community and conversations that arose from the Coquette's blogging projects, and how she built a rapport amongst followers and readers based on entertaining this group of people and sharing her personal stories and beliefs with them. Fan responses, online media recognition, and her opportunities writing for pay indicate her micro-celebrity and how people have a desire to read her material. Marwick and Boyd explain, "we find that celebrity practice involves presenting a seemingly authentic, intimate image of self while meeting fan expectations and maintaining important relationships."[289] The Coquette's persona embodies these practices on a micro-celebrity level; thus her relationship and communication with her audience, particularly her fans, is critical for building her brand.

First, I will expand on how her advice column becomes the main space for written communication between her and readers. When discussing the advice column, I will focus much more on the "A Few Testimonials" section, conversations that carried on for more than one question, and the opinions that arose in the comments section. I will then talk about photographic fan submissions that followers send to the Coquette, which she posts on her own personal blog.

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[289] Marwick and Boyd, "To See and Be Seen," 140.

In some cases, the Coquette instigated people submitting pictures, but in other cases she did not prompt them. Finally I discuss the press her blog received, observing the online media recognizing her work and furthering her micro-celebrity by exposing and expanding her brand to more people. This chapter focuses on an ethnographic qualitative study of reader responses to The Coquette, focusing mainly on her fan community. Essentially, I offer a thematic analysis of fan participation. I look at the types of responses she has received over the years, noting common characteristics in these written exchanges that allow for categorization. I do not attempt to quantify these responses, nor do I examine the nature of her audience. As I mentioned in the introduction, Tumblr accounts do not display follower counts unless the blogger decides to reveal this information. The Coquette does not present this information to her readers. My purpose for analyzing reader responses in this manner is to provide evidence for the different ways individual fans interact and build personal connections with The Coquette.

## I. "Go ahead, be vulnerable."

As I mentioned in chapter two, The Coquette frames *Dear Coquette* as a product of follower participation, explaining that it formed when people continued sending questions to her personal Tumblr page.[290] The button to submit questions anonymously on the advice column tells readers to, "go ahead, be vulnerable." In some of the questions she answers, she addresses her stance on vulnerability, explaining, "vulnerability is not the same thing as weakness."[291] She constantly encourages people not to fear vulnerability, but instead embrace it and own their

[290] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette."

[291] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Vulnerability."

feelings as a means to strengthen their character and experience life[292]. Having this statement connected to sending in questions and comments indicates that the Coquette presents herself as an empathetic character that understands why some people might think their questions are embarrassing, scary, or stupid. The statement also relates to the "raging bitch persona" the Coquette exercises when doling out her "shady advice."[293] Some people might be intimidated by how she sometimes responds to questions and therefore hesitate when deciding if they should send her something. The Coquette frames herself as someone who wants people to overcome their personal apprehensions and write to her about anything they want. In her responses, she claims that writes whatever she wants, thus she gives participants the same freedom when sending her their questions and comments. As I discussed in chapter two, Baym writes about how anonymity can lead to more honesty in self-expression.[294] Their questions and comments may never be addressed, but that is a chance they take.[295] The Coquette therefore presents taking the time to write in a commendable act in her participatory environment.

Ultimately*, Dear Coquette*, is under The Coquette's direct control, thus the participant content that appears in her posts is what she chooses to publish. Positive or negative comments that she engages with in her posts become part of her entire brand and constructed persona. Since she says she receives thousands of questions a month, she claims she does not see all the material that readers submit to her[296]. Therefore she limits the submissions readers see based on what she decides to post. When analyzing reader responses in my study, I know that for the information on

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[292] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Embracing Vulnerability."

[293] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette."

[294] Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 116.

[295] The Coquette, "To Everyone Who's Written in to Dear Coke Talk,".

[296] Ibid.

*Dear Coquette,* I strictly work with what she gives me. She claims she monitors the Disqus comments, deleting posts that are not up to her standards.[297] The Tumblr notes section, however, cannot control.

Most posts have the basic advice column conversation where an individual writes in and the columnist provides and answer thus ending the conversation. On occasion though, the conversation goes further with follow-up questions or comments from the original asker or from someone else. In a post The Coquette titled, "On pimpin' not being easy," a girl wrote in about her relationship problems and asked The Coquette how to handle the dilemma.[298] The girl said:

> I had two friends with benefits going on, and one of them fell for me and asked me to be his girlfriend this weekend. I said yes…but only two days later I find myself bored and missing other friends with benefits guy so much…The boyfriend in the equation is such an average guy and i don't feel stimulated at all. Go with my gut, back out, and break his heart? or stick around for a bit to see if anything changes?[299]

This reader's question addresses a personal relationship issue about whether or not she should remain in her monogamous relationship.[300] The anonymous question asker opens up to The Coquette about her desire have more than one sexual partner at the same time.[301] She also feels comfortable enough explaining her conflicting thoughts to the pseudonymous blogger. The Coquette previously discussed her own relationship views on her personal blog, presenting her position as open to embracing sexual her desires.[302] If the girl is familiar with The Coquette's personal blog, she knows the perspective the blogger has to offer. The Coquette gave the girl

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[297] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Comments."

[298] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Pimpin' Not Being Easy."

[299] Ibid.

[300] Ibid.

[301] Ibid.

[302] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," August 18, 2009.

some advice, and three days later the girl wrote back with a follow up question The Coquette titled "On pimp slap follow through."[303]

> I'm the girl from "pimpin' not being easy." I broke up with the kid. We were only together for 5 days. He got really sad and is now making his aim and facebook statuses depressing shit, obviously so I can see it…It's pissing me off cause it is starting to make me feel like a cold bitch for ending it so fast and him being down is making me sad too. what the fuck? set something straight please.[304]

This second time, the girl consults the blogger on how the situation changed since she received advice from The Coquette. The blogger urged the girl to "go with [her] gut," and the girl's actions coincided with this advice.[305] The girl's decision to contact The Coquette again shows how she wants the blogger's insight throughout the process of ending her relationship with this boy. The dialogue between this girl and The Coquette emphasizes how the blogger occasionally engages in ongoing conversations with an individual follower.

Sometimes when people submit questions and the Coquette answers, other people will join the conversation and ask their own follow-up questions. Back in February 2011, a girl wrote in saying she was having suicidal thoughts about slitting her wrists.[306] She explained,

> I called a suicide hot line tonight. It was difficult because the man spoke English as a second language. I hung up after about five minutes because my roommate came home and I didn't want her to hear the conversation. I've been on medication for 10 years and I've been hospitalized twice. I've experienced happiness, and it's nice and all, but I'm so sick of always slipping back into depression (manic depression and psychosis). It's a real piss off, and I feel… tired. And pathetic. And I can't get the image of slitting my wrists out of my head. No question, I guess. I just needed to let that out.[307]

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[303] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Pimp Slap Follow-through."

[304] Ibid.

[305] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Pimpin' Not Being Easy."

[306] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Not Killing Yourself."

[307] Ibid.

Since calling the suicide hotline did not help, this questioner used *Dear Coquette* as a place to write down what was going on in her mind and her history with depressive thoughts.[308] This girl felt comfortable writing to The Coquette about an incredibly serious issue, in a desperate attempt to quell the depressive thoughts inside her head. The Coquette was responsive to this girl's cry for help, urging the girl not to give up on pursuing happiness, and to call other hotlines until she found someone to talk to.[309] The post received 551 notes and twelve comments that showed support for the girl and praised The Coquette's advice.[310] The next day, another reader asked the Coquette how the girl was doing, and mentioned, "there are a lot of us out there hoping for the best."[311] The Coquette responded that the girl got help and appreciated other readers' concern for the girl's wellbeing.[312] The blogger also thanked these other readers for reaching out about the girl, emphasizing the girl's appreciation for the community's support.[313] This follow-up post got 284 notes, which were mostly likes, and three comments praising the girl for choosing life.[314] These questions and answers demonstrate that the Coquette represents a trusted and understanding figure who wants to help people when they desperately need it. This girl felt comfortable writing in when she was contemplating about taking her own life and did not know what else to do.[315] The Coquette delivered an informed and positive response that gave the girl

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[308] Ibid.

[309] Ibid.

[310] Ibid.

[311] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On the Day after."

[312] Ibid.

[313] Ibid.

[314] Ibid.

[315] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Not Killing Yourself."

more resources to get help for her depression.[316] The reader outreach to find out if the girl was okay emphasizes that the followers have a community. Because this girl wrote in with a very serious issue, the community reached out, offering her their support.

Other follow up questions involve people asking the Coquette for clarification with the ideas she expresses, or for her to expand on her previous thoughts and statements. This allows for ongoing dialogue about certain topics. Usually if there is an ongoing discussion or redundant questions, the blogger links back to earlier posts so that readers can follow along with the conversation. In the post titled, "On not getting used," a college girl wrote to The Coquette asking about a concern in her casual relationship.[317] She explained,

> Now. I just don't want to get used, I feel like the whole "let's not spread this around" kind of thing could potentially enable him to go out and sleep with other girls as well (which I suppose is okay, he and I aren't officially dating or anything). I would rather know what's going on with him and his potential other girls, because quite frankly I do not want to waste my time with him, if I'm just one of 15 girls. You know? So, I want to find a way to bring it up, without being awkward, as I have to work with him, and I still like the guy. Any ideas of how to bring it up? Or any key phrases to say/AVOID saying? Thank you!! [318]

Like the girl from "On pimpin' not being easy," the girl from "On not getting used" seeks The Coquette's views on relationship issues, but this particular post focuses more on language use in an interpersonal relationship context. This girl wants advice for delivering her point in a manner that will not lead the boy to misinterpret her intentions for addressing her concerns.[319] Throughout the blog, The Coquette presents her word choice as strong and straightforward, thus the college girl is looking for the blogger's opinion on how to phrase her own future discussion

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[316] Ibid.

[317] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Not Getting Used."

[318] Ibid.

[319] Ibid.

with the boy. In the response, The Coquette told the girl, "If you don't want to get used, then be present in the relationship and accept personal responsibility for the decisions you make with your own body. Do that, and he won't be able to use you. At worst, all he'll be able to do is lie to you."[320] Another reader later asked The Coquette to elaborate on what the blogger meant by this specific quote.[321] In the post called, "On How Not To Get Used," the reader copies the quotation and asks, "Can you just explain that a bit more? I love it, but I'm having a hard time grasping it in those words…Anyway, I'd just like more of an explanation."[322] With this reaction, the reader expresses enjoyment for The Coquette's position on girls "getting used" by a man. The reader agrees with the blogger's standpoint, and wants to gain a fuller perspective for how the blogger frames her ideas.[323] This exchange shows that some readers take the time to internalize what the Coquette says, and that they are questioning her thinking and not passively absorbing everything she writes. The Coquette supplied this person with a detailed answer that explored her personal take on the female mentality in relation to cultural ideas surrounding sex.[324] The Coquette therefore becomes a figure who is willing to expand on her ideas if readers are curious about her thought process.

On some occasions, the Coquette posts comments from people who express their negative feelings towards her persona and what her persona represents. Since she makes strong statements, sometimes about controversial topics, not everyone agrees with everything she says. Several insults posted on *Dear Coquette* are simply stand-alone comments that do not situate

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[320] Ibid.

[321] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On How Not to Get Used |."

[322] Ibid.

[323] Ibid.

[324] Ibid.

themselves in response to specific posts. Thus in my observation, I contextualize them as oppositional responses to the general tones and themes that the persona projects to readers. The Coquette positions herself as welcoming these opposing viewpoints and insults from the people who despise her opinions. People will write in comments that make statements like, "dear raging bitch, ur answers take way too long to read in relation to how few laughs i get from reading them. if ur goal with this shit is comedy u r teh fale. less is more. ps: eat a dick."[325] Because submissions are anonymous, people writing in strong negative remarks that curse her out and/or criticize her representation and her stated beliefs are common occurrences. Like the people who write in about anything else, anonymity preserves the submitters' identities and their real world selves have no repercussions for the hostile commentary they send to the pseudonymous blogger. The Coquette refers to this outspoken divergent group as "haters," and on April 1, 2010 she dedicated an entire day to their questions calling it "hater day."[326] On hater day, someone wrote in saying "you are so cliché," to which the blogger responded, "Not nearly as cliched as the kind of asshole who uses the phrase, 'you are so cliché.' Don't bother coming at me with ironic detachment. I've got you beat every time."[327] The commenter submitted a simple insult, and in this case, she turned the insult back on the commenter. Another person on hater day asked, "why are your answers so bitchy and rude?"[328] The blogger then countered with, "Better question, why are you so thin skinned and prissy? Even better question, what makes you think I don't wear my impudence like a fucking badge?" putting the questioner on the defensive.[329] The Coquette says

[325] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On My Lovers and Haters."

[326] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On My Motif."

[327] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Being Soooo Cool."

[328] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On a Better Question."

[329] Ibid.

she likes "fucking with [her] haters."[330] Responding to their insults with witty rebuttals enforces her "raging bitch persona" and presents a humorous exchange that people who appreciate her sense of humor and share her views will enjoy. Thus the people in her community who enjoy the blogger's comebacks to these negative comments all share in the experience and humor. Essentially, The Coquette takes the negative aspects of flaming culture and highlights them in order to signpost her space. By doing so, she confronts both her antagonists and the negative aspects of anonymous participatory culture.

On various occasions, the Coquette's "lovers" come to her defense and ask her not to bother with the haters. As one person asked, "just one tiny tiny favor? could you stop addressing the haters? it detracts from the focus of the fabulousness that is dear coke talk. although it is important to put them in their place, there are bigger fish to fry!"[331] This fan supports the blogger's persona and the ideas that she promotes throughout *Dear Coquette*. While the fan also enjoys The Coquette's responses to the haters, the fan feels that other aspects that the blogger covers in posts are more important to the blog as a whole. Another reader wrote in suggesting The Coquette should make a testimonials section where other people could see the appraisals and thank you notes that readers submit.[332] This fan said, "Tell these haters to quit sipping on that haterade; make a testimonials page. I know that I've sent in thank-you notes when your advice worked for me, and other people must have too. It'd just be interesting to see the outcomes of some of these stories…"[333] This desire for fans to see one another's positive feedback highlights

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[330] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Hater Day."

[331] Ibid.

[332] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On My Lovers and Haters."

[333] Ibid.

the sense of community and shared experiences that *Dear Coquette* offers. The Coquette took this person's suggestion and made it a reality. "A Few Testimonials" contains an outpouring of compliments and gratitude from several readers and followers that show how The Coquette persona has personally impacted their lives.[334] This space emphasizes the Coquette's fan community as a group with shared experiences, and they have a common interest and appreciation for the perspective she offers and what they feel is her entertaining wit.

Some responses in the testimonials are from people who previously wrote in and had their specific questions answered in posted material on the column. One man originally wrote in explaining how his long distance girlfriend would get angry when he masturbated to porn.[335] Not knowing how to handle the situation, he turned to the blogger for advice. After the Coquette responded, he wrote back saying, "I talked to my girlfriend about it and that little slap of a response made her think she's really been a bitch. and that has made all the difference in the world. Thanks for doing what you do."[336] He was thankful that the blogger took the time addressed the personal question he directly wrote to her about. The Coquette's advice is also applicable to other people besides the individual who submitted the question. The thoughts or predicaments an individual will mention in their questions is sometimes similar to feelings and/or experiences that other people have. One woman told the Coquette, "Thanks for confirming/validating my feelings in "On Finding Yourself in an Affair". I went to your site to discuss that very point—I too unwittingly fell into an affair. And how nice, it's already there. You're pretty

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[334] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - A Few Testimonials."

[335] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Spanking It to Porn."

[336] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - A Few Testimonials."

alright."[337] Therefore, at times people beyond the individual questioner can take solace in the response that The Coquette provides. This response reinforces that people reading the column have comparable real world experiences, and bring these commonalities to the media text. For groups of people relating to certain questions, shared experience goes beyond simply enjoying the blog and extends to situations they encounter offline. As Baym mentions in her book, *Tune In Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, participants in online communities bring their offline experiences to the group discussions.[338] Through *Dear Coquette*, readers in the blogger's community can relate posted questions to their own personal experiences in the real world, simultaneously noting the similarities they have with other readers and applying the blogger's answers to their own situations.

The Coquette responds to questions that cover a vast array of topics, meaning that different people can relate to one or more posts. "A Few Testimonials" also includes more general responses to how *Dear Coquette* and the persona as an entity affect individuals. The emotional and heartfelt praises showcases people's appreciation on an individual level and how they feel an intimate connection towards what the Coquette represents. One person wrote, "I love you. When I started reading you, I was a virgin. Now I'm having orgies in Paris. In wild solidarity, sister."[339] This response implies the effect that reading The Coquette's material had on this person's sexual awakening. Not only is this person now sexually active, but in addition, he or she engages in multiple partner sexual interactions. Mentioning orgies relates to The Coquette's presentation as someone who participates in group sex. This person therefore

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[337] Ibid.

[338] Baym, *Tune In, Log On*, 200.

[339] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - A Few Testimonials."

recognizes that The Coquette had an influence on these new experiences he or she chose to have. Another person said, "You're unlike anything I have ever read before. It's like finding a religion. Ok yeah you have to stay anonymous."[340] While attributing uniqueness to The Coquette's writing, this person also brings up religion.[341] Throughout the blog, The Coquette's beliefs are decidedly non-religious. Comparing her work to finding religion therefore becomes ironic, and connects to the cult references from "Spaceships and Kool-Aid" discussed in chapter two. This reader also acknowledges that The Coquette's pseudonymity is an important element in the blog.[342] The Coquette also featured a statement from someone saying, "I'm a mental health counselor, your advice is amazing. You are solving in 4 paragraphs or less what it takes up to 5 sessions to work through…Thanks for what you do, it is much appreciated."[343] This person's position as a mental health counselor affirms The Coquette's advice from a professional standpoint. The final comment I chose said, "I just want to say that I love your blog and somehow you being a raging bitch makes it so much more credible. Thanks for laying out some truth."[344] Focusing on The Coquette's written voice, this reader agrees with and validates the voice in his or her own opinion. "A Few Testimonials" contains several other reader responses, each as sincere and receptive as the ones mentioned here.[345] The Coquette thus frames herself as an entity that has connected with many people on an individual level.

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[340] Ibid.

[341] Ibid.

[342] Ibid.

[343] Ibid.

[344] Ibid.

[345] Ibid.

## II. Pictures From Fans

In 2010, The Coquette suggested that readers dress up like the Coke Talk Britney Spears avatar for Halloween and send her pictures of their costumes.[346] She presented the situation as her friend telling her to wear the costume because it was ironic and funny, but explained to readers, "it's a shame I couldn't get away with it really, because it's a hilarious fucking costume idea."[347] To further entice her followers, she talked about reaching out to participants with a personal thank you if they decided to partake in what she referred to as the "Coke Talk Halloween Costume Challenge."[348] The day after Halloween, The Coquette posted ten pictures of different fans that went with the Coke Talk costume idea.[349]

Image 36

Each adorned in trucker hats, sunglasses, and a red hoodie, the fans posed for the pictures they sent to The Coquette, which she then posted on her personal blog (Image 36).[350] This costume challenge shows how participation in The Coquette's online community can move offline into the real world. Though the avatar is actually a picture of Britney Spears, The Coquette's personal blog recontextualizes the image so that it stands for the mystery real world person behind the

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[346] The Coquette, "Coke Talk Halloween Costume Challenge."

[347] Ibid.

[348] Ibid.

[349] The Coquette, "The Coke Talk Halloween Costume Gallery. Here's A..."

[350] Ibid.

blog. To non-readers, the costume is a replication of a Britney Spears look, but in The Coquette's community, participants have a shared understanding that this particular Spears picture represents The Coquette. Thus the costume challenge offers reciprocally masked identities, with both the Coquette costume wearer and blogger masquerading through Britney Spears' image.

When the online boutique opened in 2011, fans sent in pictures that showed off their purchases, expressing how much they enjoyed her merchandise. In every instance, The Coquette replied writing back that she loved her fans and how appreciated that everyone enjoyed the jewelry, bags, and/or book. Besides showing how happy these customers were with their new consumer products, the captions these fans included exposed some buyers subscribing to similar mentalities that The Coquette intertwines with her personal brand. Fans presented scenarios they felt that the blogger would find humorous and enjoy reading, indicating the shared sense of humor that circulates within The Coquette's online community. Some consumers expressed how they ascribed personal meanings to the items, and how the items provided a personal connection to the pseudonymous blogger and what she symbolizes for them on an individual level. One of the first pictures came from a young woman (Image 37) who wrote, "I just had a threesome to christen my Stay Wild necklace. Thought you'd like to know how I broke it in. Fuck yeah."[351] In this post, the fan expresses her own sexual liberation and emphasizes that she personally relates to The Coquette's presentation of a sexually explorative nature.[352] Her choice to use the word "christen" also juxtaposes religious connotations with the sexually explicit content she describes. Another woman wrote in about how her sugar daddy bought her and her best friend matching Honey Cunt necklaces, and she thanked The Coquette for the extra condoms and candies that the

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[351] ""I Just Had a Threesome to Christen My Stay Wild..."

[352] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," August 18, 2009.

blogger included as bonus gifts in the package (Image 38).[353] In *Dear Coquette*, the blogger addressed sugar baby and sugar daddy relationships as a form of prostitution, but she explained she personally is not judgmental towards women who work in any part the sex industry.[354] Intentionally mentioning that she is a sugar baby reflects this girl's understanding about The Coquette's position on accepting sex workers and being non-judgmental towards their chosen occupation.

Image 37

Image 38

Image 39

[353] ""I Hinted to My Sugar Daddy That My Best..."

[354] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Sugar Babies. |."

Another photographic submission that featured jewelry from the NEIVZ collaboration included a fellow Tumblr blogger sent a picture and wrote, "I was so psyched when I opened my package from you today and saw the Cunt ring… I just broke up with my fiancée last weekend so this is the perfect replacement for my engagement ring," expressing her own sense of humor about her unfortunate situation, and providing a joke aligned with type of humor The Coquette provides (Image 39).[355] Asserting herself as the person who broke up with her fiancé appropriates the "cunt" ring in the context of her relationship and ending her engagement. The pictures the three women sent to The Coquette had a striking resemblance to the images the blogger used to market her jewelry line. The photos focused entirely on the products, and the two pictures that had people had faceless bodies and detached hands. Thus these women perform for The Coquette the same way the blogger performs for her audience.

Blogger Chuck McCarthy bought four Floozy bags and subsequently posted a picture of himself with his new items on his own blog (Image 40). He posed in a lavishly decorated room as he lounged across an animal print carpet. He wore nothing and sat with the bags positioned in

[355] Kate Hates Rules!, ""I Was so Psyched When I Opened My Package From..."

front of him so that they looked like a giant penis, noting their "sassy everyday use."[356] His reappropriation of the bags demonstrates his own creativity and humor that he exercises with his online persona. His commentary shows he is familiar with The Coquette's blog and her persona. He understands her sense of humor and intertwines his own performance with her brand. The Coquette's representation across her blogs involves overt female sexuality, and Chuck recontextualizes the feminine handbags as a comic representation of overt male sexuality.

Image 40

Image 41

With The Coquette's book, two fans sent a picture (Image 41) showing how they placed *Notes To My Future Husband* on a religion shelf at Barnes and Noble before purchasing it. They

[356] McCarthy, "When I Found Out That CokeTalk, A.k.a. Coquette,..."

told her, "it's better than everything else on it (and less dogmatic / more liberating)."[357] As previously mentioned, The Coquette presents herself as rejecting organized religion, so including a book she wrote on the religious shelf sets up an interesting comparison. This also shows how The Coquette's messages resonate with these fans. One of the more sentimental submissions came from a person who wrote about wearing their W.W.C.T.D. bracelet to his or her college graduation ceremony (Image 42).[358] The Coquette had a tremendous impact on this person, thus wearing the bracelet on this milestone occasion became an emotional experience for the fan. The person said,

> Thinking about it now, it's quite fitting I chose yesterday to wear my CT bracelet because consciously or not, I've lived the last four years doing what I assume you'd do. I've made some bad choices, some good choices and some REALLY good choices. I've expanded my brain educationally and psychotropic-ally. But most importantly I've done it all with a shit ton of style and class. And I did it damn well.[359]

Image 42

The Coquette therefore presents these particular consumers as familiar with her personal brand and the non-consumer aspects to her blog. While some might be cynical about the relationships forged through commodity purchases, these consumers claim to enjoy the good they purchase intrinsically and instill their own emotions within it. Therefore, the consumers ascribe personal meanings to their purchases from The Coquette. The item also represents a direct connection they share with the pseudonymous blogger and how her persona impacts them personally. Fans choose to buy into her brand because they like

[357] "Homochurch."

[358] ""Thought I'd Send You This Picture I Snapped..."

[359] Ibid.

her products and appreciate what her brand stands for. So far, no one has posted pictures of himself or herself modeling The Coquette's pricier bags. These bags are not overtly tied to the persona in their outward appearance, thus they are less bound up in the shared identity that the persona offers fans.

In 2011, one couple asked The Coquette if she would write their wedding vows for their "non-traditional non-religious ceremony."[360] After exchanging some emails and having them fill out a questionnaire on *The Knot* wedding blog, The Coquette created custom vows that she eventually posted for all her readers to see.[361] According to the blogger, the couple told her the vow recital was "an amazingly beautiful moment that we will remember for the rest of our lives…we were so overcome with emotion we could barely get the words out."[362]

Image 43 Image 44

[360] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Custom Wedding Vows. |."

[361] The Coquette, "Custom Coke Talk Wedding Vows."

[362] The Coquette, "How Awesome Is This?".

They sent her a picture of their hands, one with the "fuck" ring and the other with the "yeah" ring they purchased from The Coquette's online boutique (Image 43). The statement jewelry was positioned on their left pinkies next to their wedding bands, and the couple wore these statement rings during the ceremony.[363] After the wedding, they also sent the blogger a picture of their dog wearing the "honey cunt" necklace (Image 44).[364] This couple sought out The Coquette and incorporated her and her brand into their wedding. Though their wedding was non-traditional, wedding ceremonies are generally considered an important occasion for couples. Having a pseudonymous blogger play an instrumental role by constructing the vows emphasizes how much they enjoy her persona, written voice and brand.

Some fans shared content with The Coquette that did not involve buying merchandise from her. In 2010 and 2011, some fans created their own drawings of The Coquette's avatars and sent them to her (Images 45, 46, and 47).[365]

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[363] Ibid.

[364] The Coquette, "The Wedding Vow Couple Also Sent Me a Pic of Their..."

[365] Cerena, "Look What Cerena Sketched for Me! I Love It!"; Cerena, "Thank You, Cerena. This Is Fabulous, and Your..."; Mazzy, "Holy Shit, Mazzy. What Is This Ridiculous..."

Image 45

Image 46

Image 47

Image 48

One reader tattooed the quote "I am the empress of my own happiness" from The Coquette's advice column entry titled "on someone out there" and sent the blogger a picture (Image 48).[366] The tattoo signifies this fan's enjoyment for The Coquette's writing and the message that the persona perpetuates. The reader applies these words to her own life and feels confident in their meaning. Her willingness to permanently place these words on her skin emphasizes her appreciation for the message that the blogger projects. Someone else wrote to The Coquette through the advice column saying, "I'm about to get "WWCTD" tattooed right on the front of my right wrist...I just thought I would let you know that you are literally someone I consider a

[366] The Coquette, "One of My Badass Readers Tattooed a Little..."

close friend."[367] The friendship this reader writes about offers an explicit example of the emotional connection this person shares with the persona.

Image 49 Image 50 Image 51

Besides tattoos, readers have sent in pictures of graffiti that features some of The Coquette's phrases. Along a bridge on a highway somewhere, someone wrote, "We are tiny specks of talking meat on a wet ball in the middle of nowhere… - coke talk… enjoy yourself…" from her post "on wisdom" (Image 49).[368] This particular quote responds to the blogger's existential nihilist position she readily discusses throughout her blogs. Choosing this statement to graffiti indicates that the graffiti artist liked The Coquette's message about this topic. A high school student from the Pacific Palisades sent a picture of graffiti in the girl's bathroom that said "stop

[367] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Fun-sized Advice," February 21, 2013

[368] The Coquette, ""We Are Tiny Specks of Talking Meat on a Wet Ball..."; The Coquette, "Dear Coke Talk," August 2, 2009.

slut shaming" and someone else adding "thank you" and writing the web address for *Dear Coquette* (Image 50 and 51).[369] Incorporating this message shows how The Coquette's views on embracing sexuality and not judging others translate into a high school setting. The blogger defines a slut someone who "openly enjoys their sexuality," and she describes herself as someone who works to "re-appropriate the term."[370] Her representation thus reflects someone who encourages female empowerment, especially involving sexual desires. The bathroom graffiti shows the blogger's stance on powerful female figures reaches an adolescent audience. The girl who added the website for *Dear Coquette* wants to spread The Coquette's message to other girls at the high school. Other images people submitted include someone writing, "stay wild" on a chalkboard (Image 52) and another person writing "honey cunt" in graffiti on a dumpster (Image 53).[371] These messages appear throughout the blog and in The Coquette's consumer products.

Image 52

Image 53

Overall, these fan submissions reflect the intimate connection they personally have with The Coquette. As Baym explains, "Our playful conventions and in-jokes may create insider symbols that help groups to cohere. These phenomena are only enhanced by the additional cues

[369] The Coquette, "This Is Fucking Priceless. One of My Readers Just..."

[370] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette - On Sluts, Whores, and Lesbians."

[371] The Coquette, "Ouiser—-boudreaux"; The Coquette, "'Honey Cunt' Graffiti."

found in shared video, photography, sound, and other multimedia means of online interaction that have developed over time."[372] Throughout the years, people have engaged in the community surrounding the pseudonymous blogger, contributing their own content as they interacted with the persona. When reading her blogs, fans share enjoyment for certain phrases and humor that arise in her writing. By commodifying her brand, the blogger seized an opportunity to make a profit, but also gave consumers a chance to further their involvement in her brand. Fan submissions show how The Coquette's online community transitions to the real world and impacts individuals in an offline environment.

## III. Online Recognition

On The Coquette's main blog hub, she includes a press section that links to some places where her blogs have been recognized over the years.[373] In 2010, The Coquette did her first interview with fellow Tumblr blogger Ned Hepburn for Guest of a Guest Los Angeles edition. Hepburn wrote the introduction for the interview, addressing the pseudonymous blogger's microcelebrity by referring to her "gigantic following," and setting the scene with a description of the woman who is supposedly behind the pseudonym.[374]

> I sat down with Coke Talk in a dark room with a single, flickering light bulb - her face obscured by the shadow of a wide brimmed hat. She was wearing an elegant pant suit, hemmed, it seemed, by the hand of God himself. I gasped in amazement - the very force

[372] Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age,* 62.

[373] The Coquette, "The Coquette Press Mentions."

[374] Hepburn, "Rare Interview With Anonymous Blogger, 'Coke Talk'."

> of her presence and weepingly powerful perfume knocking me clear into the wall. After I peeled myself off, I wobbled penguin-like towards the table, started my reel-to-reel tape recorder, and asked her a series of questions. I would call it: "INTERVIEW WITH VAMP; ALSO, IRE."[375]

Hepburn constructs a dramatic vision of a woman that coincides with the representation available on The Coquette's blog. Well dressed and poised, the woman he describes reflects the professional and classy vibe that The Coquette presents to readers as her public everyday life. Along with the Hepburn interview, The Coquette wrote a piece for BlackBook online titled "Drinking Diary: A Week in the Life of L.A.'s Coke Talk."[376] The diary noted her whereabouts for a week broken down by time, and concentrated mostly on her partying.[377] At the end of the piece, there was a running tally of all the sex, drugs, and alcohol she and some of her friends had during that week.[378] This article essentially aligned itself with her representation on her personal blog, going into slightly more detail with the specific times for the events that took place week. In 2013, The Coquette also comprised a BuzzFeed list called "20 Guys You Should Break Up With Right Now."[379] Her microcelebrity as an Internet advice columnist and author for *Notes To My Future Husband* made her an appropriate figure to craft the humorous list. Besides being recognized as an intriguing persona by these online publications, The Coquette's advice column and *Notes To My Future Husband* received some Internet buzz. Time Magazine Online named *Dear Coquette* one of the "30 Must See Tumblr Blogs" and the Huffington Post called the advice

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[375] Ibid.

[376] The Coquette, "Drinking Diary."

[377] Ibid.

[378] Ibid.

[379] The Coquette, "20 Guys You Should Break Up With Right Now."

column one of "The 23 Funniest Tumblr Blogs That Will Make You LOL."[380] College Candy also included some of the Coquette's advice in their article "29 More Sex Tips From Sexperts."[381] The Guardian, Glamour Magazine, and the Awl all recognized *Notes To My Future Husband* for its humor and battle of the sexes rebuttal to *To My Wife*.[382]

Fan feedback on *Notes To My Future Husband*, though limited, has been generally positive on Amazon and GoodReads. On Amazon there are seven customer reviews averaging 4.7 stars out of 5 stars.[383] One reviewer named Allyse01 called it "Funny and Knowledgeable" saying, "Smart thinking with funny tips. Highly recommend this book to anyone. Not just women, men would love it too. Buy it so you'll have it when you will need it."[384] The other comments echo this response, praising the book for its humor and recognizing The Coquette's microcelebrity as an internet personality. On GoodReads, the book circulated among 117 people who either added it to their "must read" list or rated it.[385] Out of the 19 people who rated it, the book averaged 3.68 stars out of 5 stars.[386]

Online recognition outside The Coquette's own directly controlled blogs reinforces her microcelebrity on the web. Receiving acknowledgment demonstrates that posts from her blog circulated a substantial amount and gained popularity before she reached microcelebrity status. Publicity her blogging projects receive also increases The Coquette's exposure to a larger

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[380] Townsend, "30 Must-See Tumblr Blogs"; Palis, "The 23 Funniest Tumblr Blogs That Will Make You LOL."

[381] Candy, "29 More Sex Tips From Sexperts."

[382] Sicha, "To My Husband"; Meltzer, "The 10 Funniest Tumblrs"; Brennan, "Hilarious Must-Follow Blog."

[383] "Customer Reviews: Notes to My Future Husband: A Bitch's Guide to Happily Ever After."

[384] Ibid.

[385] "Notes to My Future Husband Community Reviews."

[386] Ibid.

audience because there are more sources informing people about her work. With accessibility to the community expanding, more people have more opportunities to become readers and interact with her brand.

## Conclusion

Baym writes about constructing online personas and the relationship that emerges between the writer and audience saying,

> As people appropriate the possibilities of textual media to convey social cues, create immediacy, entertain, and show off for one another, they build identities for themselves, build interpersonal relationships, and create social contexts…Performing well can bring a person recognition, or at least lead to a sense that there is a real person behind otherwise anonymous text. Our expressions of emotions and immediacy show others that we are real, available, and that we like them, as does our willingness to entertain them.[387]

As I was writing on April 21st, I refreshed the page for The Coquette's personal blog and saw that she posted something new. "I'm hurting pretty badly right now. I've been dealing with the 10th anniversary of a traumatic event, one that fucked me up and dramatically altered the course of my life," she wrote.[388] The blogger went on describing her mixture of emotions, feeling sad, angry, weak, and broken.[389] The same negative feelings she tries to ameliorate for other people in her advice column are feelings that she herself possessed at this moment. Her words in this post humanize the persona, constructing herself as susceptible to these negative emotions despite her rational reasoning that she is "supposed to be stronger than this [and] supposed to be

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[387] Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 62.

[388] The Coquette, "It's Good to Type This Shit Out."

[389] Ibid.

over this already."[390] She presents herself as being emotionally honest with her audience. In this case she is the vulnerable one.

The notes section for this post features other Tumblr bloggers who reblogged the post and offered their words of support to The Coquette, in what she presents as a difficult time. Unicornfandancing said, "Fuck questions of weakness. There is strength in recognizing your vulnerability, putting it on for a second and then shaking it off, like an old pair of pants."[391] Glamsoda offered, "I'm sorry you're hurting. *hugs* Don't be ashamed of your feelings though. We all got 'em. XOXO."[392] Catbattles told her, "we're all here rooting for you," and Mouseymeow referred to The Coquette "warrior princess."[393] With multiple bloggers reaching out and offering their words of encouragement to The Coquette, interpersonal relationships are clearly visible. The emotions and sense of realness from The Coquette and these other bloggers magnifies the intimacy that exists in this online space. Two days later, The Coquette posted a thank you to all the bloggers who expressed concern about how she was doing.[394] The community reflects intimacy as they support one another and have shared experiences over long periods of time. As Marwick and Boyd explain, "Celebrity practice requires constant interaction with fans to preserve the power differentials intrinsic to the performed 'celebrity' and 'fan' personas."[395] This interaction The Coquette has with her fans show the decentralized power

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[390] Ibid.

[391] Ibid.

[392] Ibid.

[393] Ibid.

[394] The Coquette, "Thanks for All the Kind Words, You Guys."

[395] Marwick and boyd, "To See and Be Seen," 145.

shifts that occurs when she presents herself as going through a difficult time. She empowers fans to lend their voices to support her, and she graciously accepts their kind words.

Fans are somewhat vulnerable in relation to following The Coquette. Readers do not know who she is, and they cannot validate her stories. Fans open up to her regardless, taking in her narrative or engaging with her persona in a more active participatory way. Having an emotional response to her is possible because she has maintained an authentic performance for the past four years, bolstering her credibility in the process. In this performance, she reveals her vulnerability too, whether she delves into her "secret life" or expresses her feelings difficult times like the one mentioned above. Her pseudonym allows her to explore these feelings differently than how she would approach them if her audience knew her identity. Being online, she receives an immediate response from her followers. Thus The Coquette and her fan audience can have this intimate and emotional connection with one another, personally impacting one another's lives. The relationship The Coquette and her audience have with one another exemplifies pseudonymous authorship on Tumblr eventually creating lasting emotional connections with readers.

# Conclusion

On July 23, 2011 columnist Tim Adams wrote an article for The Guradian called, "How the Internet Created an Age of Rage" arguing that anonymity and pseudonyms spread negativity

in online forums and therefore create a hostile environment.[396] He talks about how separating a concrete self from an online representation affects digital culture explaining,

> [S]ocial norms are withdrawn because identities are concealed…And it's why under the cover of an alias or an avatar on a website or a blog – surrounded by virtual strangers – conventionally restrained individuals might be moved to suggest a comedian should suffer all manner of violent torture because they don't like his jokes, or his face.[397]

Adams notes detaching online identity from real-world identity results in no accountability for material produced anonymously or pseudonymously.[398] The hidden identity allows people to write anything without facing repercussions for the content they post. Thus "trolls" are free to move about sharing their strongly worded, hateful responses.[399] These responses include harassment, with trolls attacking and sometimes even threatening other people through vicious comments.[400] Adams argues that since people generally do not behave this way in face-to-face interactions, anonymity and pseudonyms used in an online context create an outlet for rage-filled emotional outbursts and do not produce a cohesive environment.[401]

Though Adams frames anonymity and pseudonyms as decidedly toxic for online interactions, I argue in my study that the intense emotional expression that identity concealment allows for is often positive. Anonymous posting can serve as a vital outlet for the performance of authentic thoughts and feelings. Nancy Baym argues that anonymity can foster more honest commentary than face-to-face interactions.[402] Anonymity and pseudonyms enable people to

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[396] Adams, "How the Internet Created an Age of Rage."

[397] Ibid.

[398] Ibid.

[399] Ibid.

[400] Ibid.

[401] Ibid.

[402] Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 116.

present a part of themselves online that they would normally not show in the real world, regardless of what their posts are. Taking the time and energy to record emotionally charged comments shows the relation between the physical person and the online representation, even in the extreme troll cases Adam mentions in his article. Also, writing thoughts and feelings in a public online forum indicates the anonymous or pseudonymous performer's desire to share information with an audience, even if the audience is anonymous. The audience may include participants who agree with the commenter and others who disagree. Even people who present their ideas with extremely negative words may forge a connection with other people who share similar sentiments.

The Coquette offers a counterargument to Adam's position, creating a multidimensional persona layered with all different emotions. She navigates the blogosphere using a pseudonym, and her surface performance relies on her "sharp tongue" and "raging bitch persona."[403] She describes herself as a Batman and Carrie Bradshaw hybrid, blending two iconic popular culture characters to create a pseudonymous figure who is extremely powerful, sexually savvy, and graced with a vibrant social life.[404] The Coquette's profanity and sexually explicit language bolster the shameless "in your face attitude" she commands on her blogs; thus she reclaims the term "bitch" and exploits it as a source of power when constructing her persona. The language she chooses frame her personal narrative and comment on popular culture allows The Coquette to present herself as someone who speaks her mind on the Internet and offline. The blogger also infuses humor into her writing as a means to entertain readers and align followers with her persona. Through her personal blog and advice column especially, The Coquette constructs a

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[403] The Coquette, "Dear Coquette -."; The Coquette, "The Coquette."

[404] Hepburn, "Rare Interview With Anonymous Blogger, 'Coke Talk'."

forthright female figure who owns both her sexuality and her beliefs. Because The Coquette's beliefs and opinions are controversial, she does receive strong and sometimes disrespectful opposition from the people she refers to as "haters." Her own pseudonymous identity protects her, allowing her to fire back at the haters, directly confronting their attacks and insulting them in return. Thus she projects a persona that is not afraid to verbally retaliate when provoked. She engages with this flame war culture, unleashing her verbal wrath on anonymous participants when she feels they deserve it. Fans often support her when she harshly responds to her haters. The Coquette frames herself as not worrying about criticism from the haters. She presents a positive spin when addressing trolling in online culture:

> Where did the anonymous masses aim all their misdirected rage before the internet had a comments section…I want to believe that the sum total of physical and emotional trauma out there in the world has somehow been softened by the fact that people get to convert all that poison into harmless threads of online afterthought. Not by much, maybe just a notch or two.[405]

The Coquette argues that using the Internet as an outlet for rage might be beneficial, because it sometimes helps to ease people's suffering offline.[406] Because she presents herself as personally not taking these comments to heart, she asserts this verbal "poison" might be a healthy tension release for people who feel compelled to rant on the Internet. While Adams claims anonymity causes flame wars, which are bad and counterproductive to online forums, The Coquette offers an alternative perspective suggesting that angry written responses contain negative content, but enable positive outlets for participants.

The Coquette frames herself as using her blog as her own personal outlet for processing her emotions. She writes, "This [blog] kept me sane at all the funerals, and it kept me centered

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[405] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Day," February 23, 2012.

[406] Ibid.

when friends started getting locked up or drifting away."[407] Expressing her feelings pseudonymously on the Tumblr platform allows her to instantly share her intense emotions with an audience. Unlike anonymous trolls though, The Coquette's pseudonymous personal blog more than an outlet for negativity; it is an outlet for sadness, love, and joy, as well.

Over the past four years, The Coquette has performed authenticity in her online persona with hundreds of posts and several different blogs, consistently employing her written voice and entertaining people with the material she posts. She cultivated a growing fan base, achieved micro-celebrity, and garnered attention from online publications that broadened the potential for audience interaction with her brand. Fan's celebratory reactions to The Coquette and her various projects enhance her representation as a compelling figure. Their participation on her blogs and constant engagement with the pseudonymous blogger emphasizes how she connects with individual people. Commenters are eager to interact with her, which is why they submit questions, comments, and pictures to her. Sometimes people buy into her brand, purchasing the consumer goods available through her boutique, as a further way of forging a relationship with her. The comments section on The Coquette's blogs is not only a toxic space for the trolls, but a place where fans can express their appreciation for her material. The participants who directly communicate with the pseudonymous persona clearly derive personal meaning from the exchange, since they feel strongly enough about the representation that they desire to contribute to the conversation. Participation thus reflects more polarized fan reactions that are definitively positive or negative.

Since discovering The Coquette in 2010, I have become a fan who has watched as her

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[407] The Coquette, "Coke Talk of the Year."

blog evolved into her personal brand and business. I deeply respect The Coquette's pseudonymous constructed persona and the thoughts and feelings on which it is built. I believe that her commitment to remaining pseudonymous is commendable. The media text she has created shows the potential that Tumblr holds for building new types of intimate connections that are enabled, not disabled by pseudonymity. As a fan, I do not know her identity, and I do not have a burning desire to know. I take her blog at face value, understanding that it is a constructed representation. The Coquette's persona is entertaining, and she offers a unique and valuable perspective on a variety of topics. Some of her views have resonated with me personally, inspiring me to look within myself and question who I am, what I want, and what I believe.

For centuries, people have developed ways to communicate with one another and build interpersonal relationships. Though the technologies through which people interact constantly evolve and thus create new mediums for engagement, the desire to express oneself to others and gain an inside perspective into someone else's life remains constant. On Tumblr, constructing digital representations and building connections with other people that can last indefinitely is a main part of interacting on the interface. With all forms of digital communication, this idea of intimacy is questioned when people compare the physical proximity in face-to-face interactions with more physically distanced written communication. Instead of separating these two ideas, Baym describes digital media as "an additional tool people use to connect, one which can only be understood as deeply embedded in and influenced by the daily realities of embodied life."[408] Tumblr encourages relationships that do not always reflect physical relationships in the real world, thus profiles remain available for public access unless the blogger adjusts the privacy

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[408] Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 152.

settings. Strangers can gain access to these new perspectives that the blogger offers, allowing new relationships to form if the reader likes what the blogger posts. Pseudonyms allow bloggers to reveal more private details about their lives in an openly public forum, and the blogger's performance over time reflects how effectively he or she constructs authenticity. This deeper level of honesty can foster an intimate emotional connection between bloggers and readers, suggesting new and complex interpersonal relationships people encounter in the digital age.

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