

**“A ROOM OF ONE’S OWN”:  
INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE MEANING  
AND EXPERIENCES OF IRANIAN WOMEN LIFE BLOGGERS**

**by**

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## **DEDICATION**

To whom who devoted her life to the education of her children and never failed to encourage me to pursue my study; Aziz, you are always in my heart, with deepest love.

To Aida (Mahishka): Over the past five years, I spent more of my time looking at this thesis than I have spent looking at you. I impatiently wait for the opportunity to spend more time with you, to teach you and to learn from you.

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**“MEMILIKI RUANG SENDIRI”:  
KAJIAN FENOMENOLOGI INTERPRETIF MENGENAI MAKNA DAN  
PENGALAMAN BLOGGER WANITA IRAN**

**ABSTRAK**

Kemunculan weblog telah membuka jalan baru bagi wanita Iran dalam usaha mereka mencapai kebebasan. Akan tetapi, *blogging* peribadi mereka sering diperhatikan dan dipantau dengan teliti. Tingkahlaku mengekspresi diri sendiri oleh golongan wanita ini dianggap bertentangan dengan *Urf* (adat tradisional) dan *Sharia* (kepercayaan keagamaan) oleh sesetengah ahli pihak berkuasa dan golongan pembaca *blog*. Oleh itu, aktiviti *blogging* peribadi mereka menghadapi cabaran-cabaran kritikal seperti penapisan dan penyekatan, ancaman serta komen-komen yang bersifat menghina. Walaubagaimanapun, *blogging* kekal sebagai saluran utama bagi beberapa *blogger* wanita untuk ekspres diri mereka. Kajian ini adalah satu usaha untuk meneliti sebab di sebalik usaha mereka untuk mengemaskini serta mengekalkan *blog*. Kajian ini meninjau pengalaman hidup wanita-wanita ini dan memahami erti yang diberikan oleh mereka kepada *blogging*. Ia juga meninjau kekangan yang dihadapi oleh penulis *blog* wanita Iran serta meneroka peranan yang dimainkan oleh penulisan *blog* dalam membentuk identiti diri serta mempengaruhi masyarakat. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) telah digunakan sebagai pendekatan penyelidikan untuk mengumpul dan menganalisa data-data yang dikumpul. Seramai 11 orang penulis *blog* wanita Iran yang terlibat dalam penulisan *blog* peribadi selama sekurang-kurangnya dua tahun telah dipilih melalui kaedah persampelan bertujuan. Data primer dikumpul melalui kaedah temu bual yang dijalankan melalui *online chat* dan juga melalui emel. Data sekunder dikumpul melalui entri *blog* para responden. Enam tema utama yang didapati hasil daripada kajian yang mengkaji erti disebalik penulisan *blog* untuk para penulis *blog* wanita ini

adalah kenikmatan menulis, terapi diri, perantara peribadi, presentasi/ekspresi-diri, eksplorasi-diri, komunikasi dan interaksi. Responden juga menghadapi lima jenis kekangan dalam menulis *blog* mereka. Antaranya adalah pandangan *gender bias*, komen-komen yang bersifat hina, sikap saudara-mara, rakan-rakan, dan kenalan, peraturan-peraturan serta halangan diri yang diperoleh. Responden didapati blog tanpa nama, melancarkan blog cermin dan menggunakan analogi dan metafora untuk menangani cabaran yang mereka hadapi. Identiti-diri mereka didapati ditakrif semula melalui penulisan harian serta membaca entri dan komen yang diperoleh dari blog mereka yang diarkib. Proses pembinaan identiti-diri dijalankan melalui reflektiviti-diri diskursif dan reflektiviti interaktif. Secara kukuh, ianya ditetapkan oleh dualiti struktur dan agensi. Kajian ini mencadangkan bahawa Blogosfera Iran tidak kondusif bagi para responden untuk definisi serta redefinisi identiti-diri kerana struktur sosial masyarakat tersebut bersifat membatasi. Walaubagaimanapun, agensi merupakan elemen yang penting bagi mereka untuk membina identiti-diri kerana responden didapati mencapai pencapaian dan pilihan dalam hidup walaupun konteks sosial seolah-olah tidak menyebelahi mereka.

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**ABSTRACT**

The emergence of weblogs has opened a new path for Iranian women in their quest to freedom. However, their personal blogging activities are closely observed and monitored. Women’s self-expression in their life blog is considered to oppose *Urf* (conventional mores) and *Sharia* (religious beliefs) by some of the readers and the authorities. Thus, their personal blogging face critical challenges such as through censorship and blocking, threats and derogatory comments. Yet blogging remained the main avenue of self-expression for some of the Iranian women bloggers. This study was an attempt to scrutinise the reason behind their attempt to maintain and update blog. Therefore, this study explored these women’s lived experiences and understood the meaning they gave to blogging. This study also explored the constraints Iranian women bloggers experience and explored the role of the women’s blog-writing play in shaping their self-identity and influencing the society. This study applied Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a research approach to collect and analyse the data. A total of 11 Iranian women bloggers who were engaged in personal blog writing for at least two years were selected through purposive sampling method. Primary data was collected through interviews conducted online via text chat as well as through emails. Secondary data was collected through the respondents’ blog entries. Six main themes that emerged from the study which looked at the meaning of blog writing for the women bloggers are pleasure of writing, self-therapy, personal medium, self-presentation/expression, self-exploration, and communication and interaction. Respondents reported to face five types of constraints to their blog writing. They are gender-biased views, derogatory

comments, relatives, friends and acquaintances' attitudes, rules and regulations, and self-derived barriers. Respondents blog anonymously, launched mirror blogs and employed analogy and metaphor to cope with the challenges they face. Their self-identity was found to be redefined through daily writing and reading their blog's archived entries and comments. The process of self-identity was constructed through discursive self-reflexivity and interactive reflexivity. It is strongly determined by duality of structure and agency. This study suggests that Iranian blogosphere is not conducive for the respondents to define and redefine their self-identity due to the restrictive social structure. However, their agency is a key element for constructing their self-identity as the respondents were found to achieve relatively some unachievable advantages and choices in real life despite their seemingly unfavourable social context.



## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of the Study

Two billion people were estimated to use the internet throughout the world constituting nearly 34.3% of its population<sup>1</sup>. Weblogs, which evolved in 1997 has its number and viewership to increase ever since. The Weblog / blog can be defined as “a frequently updated web page with a series of archived posts, typically in reverse-chronological order” (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 1). Meanwhile, blogosphere refers to a personal websites and blogs, which are written by a group of writers. As of November 2011, over 176 million public blogs were found to be operating world-wide<sup>2</sup>. Iran was one of the countries that witnessed a rapid proliferation of internet users. It was estimated that the country has at least 250,000 internet users in 2000 and 33.2 million in 2011<sup>3</sup>. In Iran, the term *Weblogestan* is commonly used to refer to “the collectivity of weblogs on the Internet but often [it] connotes specifically the Persian-language blogging community” (Doostdar, 2004, p. 660). *Weblogestan* has been popularly known as one of the largest and most active blogospheres in the world (Sifry, 2007). Although it was difficult to quantify the exact figures of blogger population in Iran (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2009), it has been reported that the active blogs virtually stood at 60,000 (Kelly & Etling, 2008). However, this number remained uncorroborated as some studies continued to challenge it (Hendelman-Baavur, 2007; Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010). Based on this data of blogger population in Iran, 40% of them were reported to be women (Halavi, 2006). The advent of weblog writing in the country dates back to September 2001 (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008a). Shortly after, three young, educated women launched their

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<sup>1,3</sup>Internet world stats: usage and population statistics. Retrieved from <http://www.internetworldstats.com>, on June 30, 2012.

<sup>2</sup>Blogs statistics. Retrieved from <http://www.blogpulse.com>, on Nov 11, 2011.

own blogs in November 2001, etching their name as early women bloggers in the Iranian blogosphere.

Impact of the internet on women recently has drawn the attention of many researchers and spurred a series of emerging researches. Nonetheless, a great deal of research focuses on the impact of the internet on the formation of virtual identity (Turkle, 1994). Its implication as well as consequences on women were investigated (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001), and the extent to which it produced changes in women's state in societies (McKenna & Bargh, 2000) was a part of their focus. The studies on internet later expanded their focus on bloggers, examining the influence and impact of blog on bloggers' public and private life after the rise of weblog in 1997.

Generally, studies on women bloggers and identity formation have focused mainly on four core areas : Self presentation and expression (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2004 & 2008a; Garcia-Gomez, 2009; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Mazur & Kozarian, 2009; Moinian, 2004; Noraie-Simone, 2005; Norani, 2009; Papacharissi, 2002; Stern, 1999 & 2004; Sveningsson Elm, 2009; Van Doorn, Van Zoonen & Wyatt, 2007), self-exploration (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2004; Noraie-Simone, 2005), making communication and diffusing information (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2009 & 2008a; Moinian, 2004), and transgression of conventional norms, challenging adult and patriarchy dominance rules (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008b; Moinian, 2004; Elm, 2009; Noraei-Simone, 2005).

Based on a study conducted to investigate the American male and female teenagers' use of weblogs on identity construction and self-expression process, Huffaker and Calvert (2005) found there had been no gender difference among them in their disclosure of personal information and half of them actively engaged in forging sexual identity and love relationship such as boyfriend-girlfriend

relationships. The authors realized that blog is a continuation and not separate of real life, that has been employed by teenage bloggers to self-narrate about what effects their real life (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005).

Van Doorn, Van Zoonen and Wyatt (2007) reported Dutch and Flemish weblog writers present their gender identity through narratives of everyday life that related closely to the binary of gender system. It further revealed the fact that bloggers have deployed various ways of self-expression and have presented diverse forms of masculinity and femininity.

In a study conducted on British and Spanish teenagers' blogs, Garcia-Gomez (2009) found teenage female bloggers' narration of their love life in personal blogs enabled them to continue to re-define boundaries of gender. The author reported a persistent confrontation between the conventional feminine practices and new arising cross-gender practices in both societies.

Sveningsson Elm (2009) on the other hand explained how Swedish teenage girls used their understanding of femininity through fashion and make-up as a constructive force against patriarchy. The work revealed how the teenage girls mimic and masquerade aspects of femininity and traditional gender roles. The girls, presented themselves without any 'mask', but they exposed themselves warily and projected a less radical form of femininity that could be viewed as being moderate and acceptable by their viewers. American young and adult women bloggers use personal blog to convey their idea by enclosing their personal information (Chen, 2012).

Mazor and Kozarian (2010) found many adolescents and emerging adult bloggers of projecting themselves in both accordance and contrary to the expectations of the society. In a way to excite or shock their viewers, they share their

‘forbidden’ experiences of everyday life in a culturally unacceptable manner. They also highlighted that male bloggers were more likely to write about society, persons outside the family and peer groups, while their female counterparts paid attention increasingly to family and non-romantic relationships. It also explained a relatively unrecognized difference between gender and age in self-presentation and blog interaction.

Papacharissi (2002) shed some light over how bloggers employed direct and indirect expression elements through their home page layouts, which contain images, hyperlinks, colours and font types to build up “front of a performance” as according to Goffman (1959). Furthermore, Stern (1999) found internet and personal home pages to be the venues for girls to express themselves, as they were, how they wished to become and how they wanted to be seen by others. Internet was perceived as a safe and secure space by girls to unveil their ambitions and concerns. They also viewed it as a mean to be heard by others. They used internet to challenge their situation of being passive in their life in order to be an active agent of their own change. In a different study, Stern (2004) explained how personal home page offered adolescents a space to talk about their lived experiences and their feelings with possibly a great number of readers. In Sweden, children were found to adhere to weblogs to have a regular communication forging either friendly, unfriendly or love relations with their peer community (Moinian, 2004).

In the Asian context, Malaysian women bloggers were still able anonymously and fearlessly share their personal details and to be heard and understood (Hashim, 2007). Blogging provided space for them to construct themselves beyond the gender boundary, because there was no certain or strict ground rules in blogosphere for them to follow. This scenario exhibits the changing nature of rules in cyber culture

allowing to fade the clear demarcation of pre-existing gender boundaries (Norani, 2009). Personal blog is a possibility for South Korean bloggers to evaluate and validate themselves through readers' comments (Jung, Song, & Vorderer, 2012). In the Iranian context, blogosphere was the most important tool utilized by people to interconnect on a larger scale in order to foster an effective exchange of views, thoughts and opinions among people irrespective of their gender and age. As a result, *weblogestan* was seen as a powerful vehicle contributing to the self-expression, its re/construction, communication and creation of new social movement (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2009).

The blogosphere had a decisive influence on religious communities too, especially in enabling them to establish interaction beyond their existing norms in Iran. It was common among religious people in Iran's Muslim's community that a communication between people who are not related by blood or marriage (*non-mahram*) was limited. However, recent years have seen these people communicate and interact with each other. It was a noted effect caused by the waves of Iranian *Weblogestan* bloggers (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008a).

Challenging existing rules and socio cultural norms was another aspect of blogging. In their bid to build the 'self', many young people have challenged and even resisted a set of deep-seated conventional, ethical, cultural rules, norms and notions in their community (Moinian, 2004). The notion is highly applicable to the Iranian context. Iranian women have attempted to lift the constraints off their life due to the triple standard sets: *urf*, *sharia* and modernity which was effectively implemented (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008b) and maintained till date in the country. *Urf* and *Sharia* are Arabic terms. The former refers to the custom, general opinions and code of conduct in a given society (Glenn, 2010) whereas latter refers to moral code

and religious law of Islam (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008b). These standards are inextricably interwoven with patriarchies' mores, and determine women's personal and social life. For instance, for decades Iranian women's presence had been confined to private space (family or blood related family) or women's religious meeting called *jalaseh*.

Iranian women bloggers have used blog writing to present their self-narration in which some of them avoid their expression being in line with the ideas of the triple standard sets. In urbanized Iranian setting, weblogs brought various meanings to Iranian women and youth. They used blogs to build and re-invent their 'self' as well as to forge a relationship in a free virtual space (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2004). Cyberspace at times was interpreted as a territory for the liberation of educated women. They have used weblog as a weapon to fight their alleged traditional and cultural hurdles. In the Iranian society which is heavily influenced by tradition, culture and religion, cyberspace offered a space for its young women to re-develop their self-identity, project themselves and contact outside world at will (Nourai-Simone, 2005).

To understand Iranian women's current situation and status, an understanding of their socio-historical background in which they lived is pertinent. The first initiative to create awareness on women's 'self' identity in the Iranian society was the Constitutional Movement, which started in the year 1905 and ended in 1911. While the country's constitution which was ratified in 1911 had enshrined "the equality of all citizens before law" regardless of their gender affiliation, some of the politically and religiously powerful leaders and even many of influential male constitutionalists of the country have not recognised women as a citizen by obviously ignoring this constitutionally protected equality of women (Mahdi, 2004). However, during the *Pahlavis*<sup>4</sup> years in Iran, women's status in family law and education had

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<sup>4</sup> The Pahlavi dynasty consisted of two Iranian monarchs, father and son, which started in 1925 and interrupted in 1979 by an Islamic Revolution.

essentially improved, upon recognizing their suffrage and the significant role they play in various fields of public services (Afkhani, 2004; Mahdi, 2004; Shahidian, 2002). Yet, many of religious and traditional families kept their female members (wives, siblings and daughters) away from participating in public sphere because of their strong concern and negative perception on modernization and westernization in the society (Sadeghi, 2008). Nevertheless, the rise of women's awareness and their significant presence in public sphere produced an opportunity for them to realize their position in their family and society (Paidar, 1995).

The 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran saw women's status in the private and public sphere to be transformed dramatically. Unlike the *pahlavis'* era, women felt that they were no longer sexual objects but political agents (Sadeghi, 2008). However, women were "major losers of the revolution", because they lost many of their legal position and social status under the guise of religious revival (Moghaddam, 2004). Though the revolution opened a new space for women's political participation, it forced them to return to their routine and conventional roles of being homemakers and unpaid family workers in post-revolution context (Sadeghi, 2008). On the other hand, women partly witnessed some progress in the fields of education and healthcare in this context (Moruzzi & Sadeghi, 2006).

There was an argument that every phenomenon of the society was structured by structures (Bourdieu, 1977). This was applicable to the Iranian context when women's identity in society was structured by the structures of *sharia*, *urf*, and modernization (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2009). Women's needs remain largely unmet and unaddressed. They experience various barriers in cross-gender interaction in their public sphere. The emergence of blog and its massive expansion among youth and women was a response to these hurdles (Alavi, 2005). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in Iran,

some sort of significant progress occurred in women's lives, for instance, the provision of secondary and tertiary education, reduction of fertility rate, and the increase in marital age. In conjunction with these developments, the extension of new technology-based infrastructures in the country and an application of new communication and information technologies by women served the development of their consciousness further (Khiabany & Sreberny, 2007). As a result, women who turned beneficiaries of these developments began to redefine their self-identity, through which they tried to deliver a new meaning to their lives in another word, thinking over the question of "who am I", exploring new milieu for reflecting their reflexive self-identity and seeking a new medium for self-presentation. Hence, they found themselves as an agent to redefine their self- identity (Giddens, 1991).

Iranian young and educated women have always sought the paths to practice their lives and present themselves at will. Unlike the young men who continued to be supported by patriarchal values, who enjoyed a degree of freedom in the public and private spaces, young women's rights were always abused and ignored by the institutional and family's patriarchal system in both public and private spaces. Expansion and application of new information technology particularly within the middle-class families have provided some sort of freedom for women. Therefore, while they were dealing with the triple sets of standards (Air-Ebrahimi, 2008b), they received an opportunity to follow their own choices as well. Virtual space, which was possible due to the new technologies, was a platform for them to be adhered to their own perception of life, values and thoughts; where they felt that they were partly away from these triple sets of standards' dominance. "In the society in which women do not have public presence and no possibility to express themselves, writing became an act of unveiling, a way of making themselves publicly visible, expressive,