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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BLOGGING ACTIVISM OF YOUNG EDUCATED AND GLOBAL WOMEN IN TUNISIA AND VIETNAM: A TWO-CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: This article studies the blogging activism of two young, educated women who grew up in societies that emphasize traditional values. Through their blogging activities, these females embody a space for identity creation and recovery, and challenge the obedience to gender norms, authority, and religion in their home cultures. Though coming from two different societies (Tunisia and Vietnam), both subjects identify themselves within a global citizenship framework through their everyday life and blogging that emphasizes connection, harmony, and respect for diversity. The method of this study is a combination of autoethnography, ethnography and blog research, transforming the researcher also into the subject of analysis. Personal experiences and life stories of the author are analysed in conjunction with data provided by the informant. The data includes personal blogs, writings, drawings, interviews and collective discussions, which provide an intimate approach to the inner life of the study subjects. Through our analysis we conclude that the blogging may open new political spaces for culturally oppressed differences and become a practical space for girls to exercise their own control of self-representation. Girls who have difficulties in being heard or acknowledged in their everyday circumstances may create new types of expressions and activism through their blogging activity, where they find new belonging and strengthen their identity formation.

KEYWORDS: Activism, Autoethnography, Girl Blogging, Identity, Presentification

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1. Introduction

Modern-day democracy is intricately tied to the role of online communities and social media. Many studies show that internet freedom provides a platform for netizens to communicate, spread information, and empower political actions (Shirky 2011; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). Social media is also a powerful tool to activate a sense of urgency and expose political oppression across borders (Howard et al. 2011). Constituting an important media platform, blogging as an online journaling activity offers a space for bloggers to express opinions, discuss events, and instantly reach out to other internet-users. This feature creates immense potential for activism.

In Tunisia before 2011, young bloggers had for many years faced one of the most sophisticated cyber-censorship regimes in the world. Their blogs were hacked, shut down, and trailed by secret police, and bloggers who challenged the system were savagely beaten, burgled and jailed. Despite this cyber-censorship, these young bloggers played a key role in spreading ideas and information before and during the Jasmine Revolution that led the president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali flee the country in February 2011. Lina Ben Mhenni, 28-years-old at the time of the revolution, had been blogging since 2009, and was nominated for the Nobel peace prize in 2011 for her blog "A Tunisian Girl" (Ben Mhenni 2012).

In Vietnam, blogging also enables activism, providing a space for netizens to connect and defend human rights by exposing state corruption, police abuse, and discrimination (Civil Rights Defender 2015). According to the International Federation for Human Rights (2013), the public's increasing use of the internet was perceived as a political challenge to the state of Vietnam. Consequently, it led to the monitoring, limiting, and criminalizing of web content that questioned the state's authority. This same report gave a non-exhaustive list of 45 Vietnamese bloggers and netizens who were arrested and sentenced for their 'propaganda' against the state.

According to the estimations of Freedom House's in 2014, in Vietnam there was no freedom of expression, whereas in Tunisia there was. In both countries, blogging activism has a key role in shaping a democratic space not only online but also offline. In this study, we look at the blogging activism of two young girls in Tunisia and Vietnam. Here activism is defined as "becoming aware of the structured circumstances that shape, limit, and enable lives" (Oinas 2015, 124). This means that activism can be about acknowledging the self and others to bring positive changes into the communities, and not necessarily overtly challenging a political government.

Our aim is to focus from the macro level to micropolitics of two women's blogging activities. By micropolitics we mean techniques of the self that these women use in their

blogging activities. Such techniques mix thinking, writing and performing one's memories and emotions (Connolly 2002, 20). Micropolitics operates below the mainstream blogging activities or initiatives, but is well connected with macropolitics. Each macropolitical initiative requires micro-political preparation before it becomes a public issue (Macdonald 2002, 171). Micropolitics underlines the diversity and recognition, and from there providing alternative possibilities to the mainstream macropolitics.

In this article, we first give a brief overview of the research process, followed by an explanation of our methodology. Our study is developed from a feminist methodological tradition which emphasizes research reflexivity and dialogism as strategies between researchers and participants. Informed by this methodology, we analyse in-depth the blogging activism of two girls, coming from Tunisia and Vietnam, to gain a rich understanding of how the act of blogging embeds meanings onto girls' lives and identity formation. We will demonstrate our findings through three subchapters. The first subchapter provides an analysis on the relationship between gender and blogging, and how the weblog is perceived as a home-space for girls to perform identity work. The second subchapter studies how the two subjects, as "undutiful daughters", utilize blogging to express their "respectful resistance" to their home cultures and step out of their comfort zone. The last subchapter looks at the arising of a global identity from both blogs, which promotes a world view of inclusion and respect for diversity. We conclude that blogging is a safe space for girls to perform identity work and participate as cultural producers into the public sphere, where they express their desire to become visible and challenge the mainstream and hegemonic representation of girlhood.

2. The research project

Our research process started in spring 2013 when Sofia met Wiem¹ (b. 1988), a veiled girl, during her fieldwork in Tunis. Wiem was interviewed as she was volunteering for the World Social Forum held in Tunis between March 26 and 30. In the first interview Wiem introduced her blog², which she keeps in English and where she also places her drawings.

¹ Wiem is the name this young Tunisian female uses in her drawings. We agreed with her to use the same name and drawings in this article for copyright reasons. After this decision the authors of this article decided to use their first names in the text.

² Wiem started her blog *Power of Change* (<https://powerofchanging.wordpress.com>) on 29.10.2011. By 16.01.2016 her blog had altogether 188 posts, 2523 views, 913 visitors and 71 followers. The entire blog is in English and is still active. Wiem has approximately 70 Tunisian friends on Facebook who also keep personal, social or political blogs. She also has a blog on Facebook that often overlaps with her WordPress blog,

In spring 2015, Sofia interviewed Wiem again and examined Wiem's blog more closely for her research. Yên (b. 1991) first came across Wiem's blog in May 2015, when she was working as a research assistant for Sofia with the task of transcribing the interview and organizing the data from Wiem's blog. Both the interview and the blog evoked a feeling of familiarity for Yên, who wrote about the same issues on her blogs³. Later, Yên mentioned her discovery to Sofia, who suggested to Yên that they could co-write an article developed from what she had found, applying autoethnographical methods. Previous studies have recognized autoethnography as a powerful tool for researchers who study human relations in multicultural settings. This choice of method gives Yên, the researcher, a subjective position to insert her personal interpretation into the research process.

A discussion on Facebook was then opened between Sofia, Wiem, and Yên concerning the ideas they could develop for this article. Yên shared her blogs to the group, and discussed potential themes, including social alienation from home cultures, internal conflicts in identity, and the use of blogs as a home-making activity. Prevalent both on Wiem's (the informant) and Yên's (the researcher-informant) blogs, these themes reinforce the existence of a global youth identity that rises above cultural differences. In this article, we focus on the intersection of gender and blogging, and how the two subjects use the weblog to share, discuss, and open up about issues pertinent to their identity as young, educated women coming from societies that enforce constraints upon the female identity. Their blogs and drawings are viewed as a form of respectful resistance to the cultural and religious norms of their societies (see Suurpää, Laine and Ltifi 2016). While resistance, in its traditional usage, points to the reaction of an individual or the collective against the act of oppression of a ruling class, here we consider the dynamics of oppression and resistance in the context of daily concerns, intergenerational encounters and conflicts, and the shaping of a global identity.

displaying more of her drawings and using more Arabic and French. <https://www.facebook.com/PowerOfChangingBlogDeWiem/>

³ This article uses data from Yên's Tumblr public blog (started on 11.09.2009) and her private Facebook blog. Yên's Facebook blog is customized to be viewed only by her close friends. By 01.03.2016 Yên's Tumblr blog, written in Vietnamese and English, has 555 posts, 2205 views, and 19 followers.

3. Methodology: Feminist Research Tradition, Auto-ethnography and Blog Research

This study looks at two cases of girl blogging from two subjects coming from Tunisia and Vietnam. While this is not in any way a representative study of girl blogging in general, our approach to the data offers rich insight into the use of blogging in the construction of two girls' identity. In this chapter, we return to the feminist methodological tradition to explain our choice of methods and data for this study, and how our study, informed by the feminist methodology, approaches the phenomenon of girl blogging through a path that highlights reflexivity and an egalitarian research relationship. The feminist methodological tradition refers to a research framework which challenges the knowledge produced through the marginalization of certain minority voices in society (Warmbui 2013). This tradition warns researchers against the use of hierarchical modes of knowledge in their studies, and promotes research processes that address the power imbalance between the researchers and the participants (Naples 2003). The feminist methodology also takes into account subjective knowledge, emotions, and reflexivity in the construction of the study, emphasizing how research is, indeed, a process that can affect both the researchers and the participants. At the same time, it acknowledges how researchers can in turn affect their own study by the way they approach the data and their relationship with the participants.

In this study, we aim to (partially) resolve the power imbalance between us and our informant, Wiem, in all stages of the research process. Our Facebook message group has been an on-going discussion where we return to Wiem, many times during the writing process, to ask for her reflections on the different versions of the manuscript. The final manuscript therefore has been edited at many remarks based on Wiem's comments. The open dialogue with Wiem serves as a reminder that the informants' voice should continue to shape the study and the knowledge that it produces even after the fieldwork, and this dialogues offers us even more insightful data to develop our cases. For example, we learn how our study affects Wiem's blogging activities and her perception of blogging as a symbolic practice of freedom. In one of her messages to the group, Wiem (16.01.2016) reflects:

The blogging activity [in Tunisia] has considerably increased after 2011 because people feel more free and less fear. [...] Before the revolution I didn't know that we have Tunisian blogger. I didn't even know what a blog is. But after the revolution we started talking about bloggers in media and their role to expose the old system to the world, and by that time I discovered Lina Ben Mhenni [...] and Slim Amemou, and I said to myself I want to create changes too. Actually, now I would say that the revolution changed my personal life drastically [...] after

2011 I became more courageous like a lot of Tunisians – [...] you made me see this, I wasn't conscious about it. I took the revolution for granted and like all Tunisians I'm looking for tangible result. [...] You inspired me to talk about this on my blog.

We utilize auto-ethnography alongside with ethnography and blog research. These methods give us access to data that we may not be able to obtain using other methodological combination. Dialogism between the different methods and actors has formed our analysis and writing process.

Autoethnography is a qualitative method rooted in ethnography, which seeks to understand culture through the analysis of the self (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). Autoethnography transforms the researcher into the subject of their own study, through which they occupy a paradoxical position of being both “too close” to their study and “too far” from the self that they once know. In this article, using autoethnography to study blogging allows the researchers to see both the front-stage and back-stage aspects of this online activity. Having a researcher-informant who studies her own blog lends an intimate view into the back-stage construction of the blog content, such as the social background from which the blog is written, and how the weblog can be used as a space through which girls' identity work is “unveiled”. This takes up a crucial dimension of our analysis.

A non-conventional and relatively new method, autoethnography has been challenged and characterized as emotional, self-absorbed, and hedonistic by many scholars (Atkinson 1997; Ellis 2007; Wall 2006). The personalized nature of auto-ethnography poses the question of whether it can be considered as a legitimate form of research or just simply fiction (Walford 2004). Since an autoethnographical study manifests under the form of an autobiographical story, researchers may question the authenticity of its data as well as the ethical norms involving human consent that it may fail to obtain (Ellis 2007; Wall 2006; Walford 2004). However, the study of the self is never exclusive to studying the social reality that shapes, reproduces, and organizes the self in a framework of meanings. Here, the claim that auto-ethnography is too personal and therefore, detached from social contexts can be challenged as “no individual voice speaks apart from a societal framework of co-constructed meaning” (Wall 2006, 9). As a form of ethnography, autoethnography acknowledges the constant presence of an inner compass, a term Alsop (2002) uses to describe the disposition of the researchers through which their interpretation of reality is developed. This, in turn, contests to the positivist notion that objectivity in knowledge can be achieved. Such acknowledgement leads the researchers to adapt to, instead of ignoring, the existence of emotions and subjectivity in their study (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011).

In this study, we have many times reflected upon our own inner compass to acknowledge how our social positions contribute to the analysis of this research. Reflexivity is a key element that remains in all research stages. Yên was born and grew up in Vietnam; however, she attended university programs and spent most of her adolescence in the United States and Finland. This cultural background grants her access to understand and become a part of different kinds of society, yet her educational view is strongly shaped by hegemonic Western knowledge and therefore affects how she perceives her home society. In the process of writing this article, Yên becomes more aware of the dominant discourses that view her home culture as “unadvanced” or “oppressive”, an orientalist assumption easily made when the East and the West are positioned as dichotomous. Sofia (b. 1977) belongs to earlier generation than Wiem and Yên, evident on her actions of keeping the old-fashion diary instead of a virtual one⁴. Born and grew up in Finland, but actively travelled globally and lived in California for one year (when she was 17) is the ground for her cosmopolitanism and transnational research on young generations. In her multi-sited global ethnographical studies (Jabberi and Laine 2015) and in her other profession as a dance-movement therapist, she has followed the thoughts of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2008; 2005), which tries to create “contact zone” environments where people coming from different cultural backgrounds can start deep dialogues and reflections with each other, and from there fruitful new processes and outcomes may flourish. In this method, the focus is more on what we as human beings have in common than what separates us. Sofia has tried to support this ethos in this article’s writing process as well. Reflecting upon our social privileges, we pay close attention to our use of discourses to avoid imposing Western knowledge and ideologies upon our representation of non-Western cultures in this article. Autoethnography is used in conjunction with blog research in our study. From the perspective of performance studies, blog research can stand for documenting the process of blogging. Blogs produce performances in themselves, where the bloggers perform through their actions and publications. Therefore, keeping a blog is also a performative, productive action. Keeping a blog mixes life and art, private and public, everyday life and its record, social interaction and imagined interaction (Arlander 2015, 207). Blogs, therefore, provide a unique set of data for research. Similar to diaries, they offer an intimate view into the everyday life of the writer yet, unlike diaries, it is usually written for an intended group of audiences and

⁴ Traditional diary book is a secret one without audience or possibilities of dialogism with others. When leaving to California, Sofia gave her diary to her closest friend to read and comment (1994-1995, time when the blogs were not founded yet), an action that can be viewed as earlier generations’ ‘private blogging’ with controlled audience.

opening a space for the exchange of ideas and emotions (Hookway 2008). Social researchers can make use of this interactive feature of blogs to develop collaborative ethnographical studies, where blog writers and commentators collaborate, consult, and evaluate their shared ideas. Murthy (2008, 847) refers to this potential as “democratizing forces”, emphasizing the power of communication and collaborative reflection in ethnographic research.

Since the blog offers a narrative space through which writers actively reflect their understanding of reality through past experiences, it is a promising source of data to study “presentification”. Presentification refers to “our construction of the context and the meaning of the present moment within our personal history”, a process through which the interpretation of reality is constructed upon a unified understanding of past, present, and future (Van der Hart et al. 2006, 157). The weblog features not only the subject’s personal interpretation of events but also the chronological development of such interpretations, providing meaningful data when studying identity formation and activism. In this study, presentification is achieved not only through the writing and reflection of the present but also through artistic works with multiple layers of self-expression and interpretations.

4. Analysis chapter: Blogging as home-making for girls

In girlhood studies, where the focus has been on girls’ own spaces, virtual spaces have been recognized as extensions of girls’ private rooms. We agree with Reid-Welsh and Mitchell (2004, 174-175) that a personal website represents a “virtual room” for girls, and as semiprivate spaces that allow girls to express creativity and sociality. As social and parental controls restrict girls’ space and actions, personal webpages become girls’ own “virtual streets” and an extension of girls’ bedroom culture. They therefore become ideal spaces where girls embrace and negotiate their identity work, as well as finding their own communities (Stern 1999). For both subjects of our study, the weblog opens a space outside generational dialogues and conflicts, a sphere of expressions which their parents and relatives cannot control, observe or reach. This allows them to freely discuss issues essential to their identity formation, and express their desire to find the connections and belonging that they may lack in their physical realities.

For girls who live in cultures that enforce physical and social restriction upon the female identity, the weblog is especially empowering as it allows girls’ voice to reach out to the public sphere. Studying the use of blog by Muslim women, Ahmed (2016) shows that through the weblog, Muslim women can express emotions, desires, and thoughts

about their lives, and thus become visible. While the norms of Islamic society limit the access of women to public space as well as their visibility and mobility, the weblog provides these women a public sphere through which the stereotypes of the silent, passive, victimized Muslim women can be challenged and replaced by alternative images and voices that transgress conservative norms (Ahmed 2016; Skalli 2006). The weblog also enables activism by providing a platform for discussion and connecting like-minded individuals and alliances. Skalli (2006) asserts that especially for educated women who live in a constrained environment (whether politically or religiously), the weblog empowers them to transgress and challenge their societal norms, and participate in activism. However, in order to express their thoughts and show their “unveiled” selves, most female bloggers rely on the use of pseudonym to protect their identity, safety, and relationships with their family (Ahmed 2016; Amir-Ebrahimi 2008). It is therefore the ability for users to take on a mask inside the virtual space which allows the “unveiling” of identity to happen.

In our study, the weblog has a similar double-effect of “masking” and “unveiling” to help the two girls do identity work. Wiem’s blog is open to the public and does not leave enough information for her to be identified, allowing her to reveal personal thoughts on topics that she would not otherwise discuss with her family, such as sciences and religion. Yên’s public blog also does not leave much personal information and therefore serves as a shield of protection for her to write comfortably and honestly about her life experiences. Both females write in detailed levels about their emotions, feelings, and the struggles they face in real life, and use the blog to work through their problems and find their inner balance. The blog then becomes a space of safety to vent out during periods of depression and cycles of existential crises, and to note down lessons to remember. In many ways these blogs function similarly to journaling and diaries, which hold the power to “combat the silencing effects of girlhood” (Vickery 2010, 183). On her blog, Wiem expressed how writing became a part of her identity despite the negative reaction she received from the people around for sharing her thoughts:

Lately I discovered that my friends and family dislike these posts [that I shared on Facebook].

And now I feel depressed. Why I’m writing if my idea doesn’t interest anyone.

I start getting silent for a few weeks. Now I just write because writing is a need, just like eating. I’m writing in my blog, only I stopped the Facebook sharing. It’s only hard to find out that people don’t accept you the way you are.

Writing and expressing are part of who I am. (Wiem’s blog, 29.04.2013)

Vickery (2010) notes that blogging is chosen by girls because of their desire to raise their voice and be heard. Because the blog occupies a public sphere, girls can blog to communicate with a large community of audience, even on a global level. This kind of communication is something that many girls are not able to do in their physical reality. In an article, Vickery (2010) used the case studies of three adolescent girls to show how the blog is a space for these girls to negotiate their identities and give representations self that challenge hegemonic values and mainstream representations of girlhood, and to establish a support community. This is similar to Wiem's case, as an emphasis on both the personal and social aspects of blogging can be found on her blogging activities. Unable to find the acceptance and understanding from the people in her physical life, Wiem turns to the blog first to express herself and negotiate her identity, and second to reach out to her public audiences, most of whom she has never met in real life. Here, the act of writing and sharing of experiences related to identity formation and the presence of a sense of belonging have together led to the creation of a virtual community (Lister et al. 2003). In a message of the Facebook group created between Wiem and the authors of this article, Wiem wrote that as we read her blog and shared her feelings, it "gives me faith on myself and pushes me to continue" (Wiem, 02.08.2016). While Wiem experienced a lack of support from her friends and family and kept the blog to express herself and connect with others, Yên started her public blog in 2009 when she was studying abroad in California and living far away from her community of support. In this blog she wrote about the challenges of living on her own in a new country, and the pressure to achieve a good academic record while working and studying at the same time. The blog then became a mobile bedroom, a home, where she could keep a record of her deepest emotions and life struggles. In the post below, Yên wrote about her feelings after coming back to California from a short visit to her hometown:

As if it were an instinct, the moment you landed in California, you began to think about the money you would receive every month for tutoring, and the money you would spend on grocery, housing, bus tickets. You began to remember about your bus routes, your responsibilities, your schedule, your students. You are tired and desperate, but you have already stopped dreaming about a sweet home land. Any sweet moments in your life will pass, you know that [...].

Tomorrow will come, you know that right? Tomorrow will come, and you will have to keep on living. That's how you grow – as you stop thinking about the past. As you search for the person you truly want to become. You will cry when you feel depressed, and you will wipe away your tears and get back on your feet. Can you do that?

Growing up is a painful process. But at one point, you will realize you have gone through all of it. (Yên's public blog, 03.01.2010, translated into English from Vietnamese)

Yên referred to herself using the second-pronoun “you”, showing how the blog can be used as a space for embodying a self-dialogue. Through this kind of dialogue, a person can negotiate their identity and manage different self-positions and social roles. As Yên reread these blog notes, she found that the blog carries a therapeutic effect which may last long into the future. She could resonate with the writings composed years ago, which helped her see clearly the person she used to be and how she grew from her past experiences. This is an instance that shows how the blog is a powerful source to study presentification, as it is a space to look inward and keep track of experiences, changes, and personal reflections. This offers the rich data to help researchers define, construct, and reconstruct the self through a timeline process.

In this study, we find that the blog functions as a space for homemaking, which gives girls the space where they find their sense of belonging and reflect upon their identity work. Young (2005) sees the home as a space that offers safety and can therefore enable creativity, renewal, and a sense of political agency. Home is a space where nurture can take place and accordingly it allows for the nurturing of principles and even of suppressed values. The weblog satisfies the four normative values of home which Young (2005) describes. First, it offers safety, as a space where girls’ opinions can be voiced without fear of rejection or threat. Second, the customization features of the weblogs entail individuation, giving a sense of meaningful ownership and identity reflection. Third, and central to the notion of home, the weblog provides privacy for girls outside their families or hegemonic cultures. And last, it is a space for preservation, where girls’ identity can be constructed and reconstructed. What’s different in the use of blogs between Wiem and Yên is how they channel the sociality of this home space. Wiem seems to be more open as she expressed a strong desire to connect with her audiences, evidenced in her first post:

I want to say hello to everyone who opened this page and read this blog and give some of his time to take a look. And I wish this makes a difference and gives you fresh ideas. [...]

I believe that the greatest thing in this life is to know other people, to be open. Never close yourself in a box [...] Get to know new people, new opinions are the greatest thing, it makes you feel good and it can open other doors in front of you. (Wiem’s blog, 29.10.2011)

Wiem mentioned that she was inspired by someone and therefore felt the need to inspire others through her blog. Wiem aimed at making a positive difference to the community through voicing her opinions on feminism, science, religion, and a planetary citizenship. She also promoted her blog through another media channel (Facebook), an act that showed her insistence and desire to be heard; however, she later stopped sharing

on Facebook because she wanted to keep the blog away from her family. Wiem's blog therefore truly seeks for an "audience of strangers" rather than "a circle of friends" (Vickery 2010, 189). On the opposite, Yê'n's blogs are comparatively more private. In this article we study both Yê'n's public blog on Tumblr and her private blog where she customized the viewing for only her "circle of friends". While her Tumblr blog is public and is also followed by "audience of strangers", Yê'n has not done anything to promote the blog. To put in comparison, while Wiem's blog resembles an open home where most people are welcomed, Yê'n's blog looks more like a bedroom with a closed door. Yet, despite this main difference, the act of blogging means the same for both subjects: it is a safe space to negotiate their identity, tell their stories, and connect with others. Through blogging, the two subjects fight against the "silencing effect of girlhood" and create themselves a space of home to shelter their emotions, opinions, and reflections of life struggles.

5. Analysis chapter: "Undutiful daughters" and their "respectful resistance"

"Undutiful daughters", as Margeauz Feldan (2016) argues, have become an integral figure in third-wave feminism, although, as Gunkel (2012) notes, the strategies to become "undutiful" vary and are not limited to any universal way of being and doing. For Rosi Braidotti (2012), becoming "undutiful" requires from the subjects "a radical repositioning" of the self through different forms of productive, creative, and imaginative disobedience. In this transformative process, the subjects dis-identify and dis-familiarize themselves from the values, habits, and self-representation that they were once accustomed to. It therefore means to leave behind the comfort zone of old habits and culture, and to step into a new uncertainty, a move that Braidotti (2012, xii) describes as "neither self-evident nor free of pain". Blogging, as a practice, constitutes one dimension of the many possibilities for girls to imagine and become "undutiful": the blog opens a space for this transformative process to take place, wherein girls can transgress and resist the cultural norms imposed upon the female identities, leave behind their "comfort zone", and enter the new zone of disobedience and dis-identification.

In our two-case study, the difficulty and uncertainty of this transforming process is accounted through the presence of strong internal conflicts in the subjects' telling of surrounding events. The two blogs both detail questions about growing up, the meaning of adulthood and identity, the roles of girls in society, and an unsettling relationship with their family members. We look at the family of the two girls as the representation of the "comfort zone" which constitutes old values and duties that they want to break away

from: becoming “undutiful” then, for both subjects, means to challenge the values imposed upon their girlhood by their family’s older generations. In both blogs, the subjects’ girlhood was characterized through the desire to break free from or challenge family expectations:

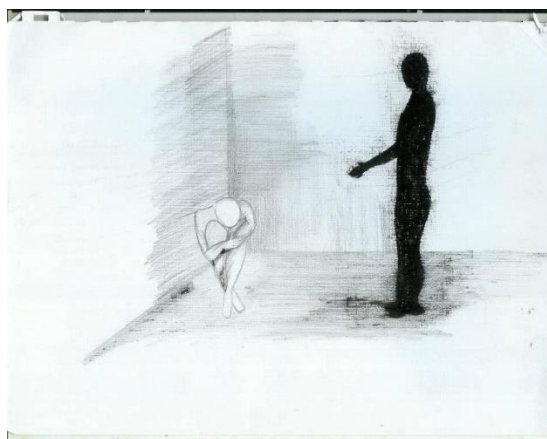
I was struggling for a long time as I tried a lot to make everyone love me. I tried to be perfect [...] Instead of becoming the ideal girl I became the lost girl.

[I]n the middle of that, [I found] my ability to create a third world, different and full of creation, independent from everything else. I was the scientist, the creator, the painter [...] I discovered the greatness of science and of art.

I waited from [big family] to love me and to accept me [...] I was wasting my time.
(Wiem’s blog, 17.05.2012)

Wiem’s relationship with her family is depicted in one of the drawings she posted on her blog, titled “Help or Judgment”. In an interview with Sofia, Wiem noted that the drawing was a manifestation of how she felt about her family members: “When I was really depressed and tired, they tried to help [...] but what they’re really doing is really different than to help me because they were judging me.” (interview in March 2015 in Tunis)

Figure 1 - Help or judgement (Wiem's drawing, 23.10.2012)



Wiem’s desire to become the “ideal girl” and her struggle to seek acceptance from her family was also shared by Yên. In many of her posts, Yên wrote about the pressure that she received from her family and her internalized need to fulfill those expectations:

Yesterday my mom and I took a cab home together. On the way she was talking about her brother [...] She said she really can't make sense of what he's doing, that she thinks he's too selfish for putting his happiness ahead of his mother's (my grandma). And suddenly I found myself looking for reasons to defend my uncle. I think I'm not much different from him anyway: I still have too much I want to explore, and I'm afraid to be tied up with familial responsibilities right now. It doesn't make me feel any less guilty every time my mom talks about my brother though [...] it is undeniable that I have to take care of him, both intellectually and financially, now that she's about to retire. At one point during our conversation she said to me: "You have to stop thinking with a Western mind. You are an Asian after all." (Yên's private blog, 08.07.2014)

In the same blog note, Yên went on to detail what it meant to be "an Asian", giving off the image of a collectivist culture where a person who only tends to their own needs will be considered selfish and disloyal to their family. Although Yên expressed objection to this notion, at the same time she internalized the responsibility to take care of her younger brother. Her narrative became a dichotomous negotiation between what she wanted and what she felt compelled to do. This internal conflict is well explained by the concept "nice girl", coined by Fox (1977), referring to a social construct used to exercise control over women. This construct is achieved through different strategies, one of which is normative restriction through internalization. In both blogs, the expectation for being the "nice girl" was present. Wiem wanted to please her family members, while Yên felt the pressure to become the caretaker of the family. Here, the "nice girl" is expected to stay loyal to her family whether by sharing values or taking different forms of responsibilities. Wiem's choice to express her own opinions is seen as breaking free from the loyalty expected of her, causing estrangement with her relatives:

Figure 2 - The first human came from Kilimanjaro (Wiem's drawing, published on Facebook blog 02.07.2012.)



Wiem: [this picture is about] evolution and creation [...] my brother when he sees it he says this is devil [...] also, a friend of my mom, when she comes she always says “take off this picture”[...] I put it on the wall [in my room]. The mountain, its name is Kilimanjaro, it’s in Tanzania, in the scientific history they say that the first human being starts in Tanzania, in the Kilimanjaro⁵. According to evolution. (interview in March 2015 in Tunis)

Wiem becomes the “undutiful daughter” when she chooses to challenge the religious belief about life’s origin shared among her families and relatives. Her decision to hang the picture on the wall is a statement of her dis-identification with the family, an act of “respectful resistance” which seems harmless yet assertive. As visible in Figure 2, Wiem has placed different theories of humankind origins to the picture, from an evolutionary and religious perspective to the theory that there is life outside our planet. These alternative theories are in harmony in the drawing, showing Wiem’s motivation to balance, harmonize and respect diversity of opinions around her. She wants her family to recognize this attitude when hanging the picture on her wall. Wiem continues to write about science and expresses her belief in evolution and astronomy on her weblog, a space that she keeps away from her relatives. With these blog notes she hopes that someone else will read her writings and perhaps reply in a supportive and reflective manner. The blog becomes a site for her to reach out to others without having to stay “loyal” and “dutiful” to her family on the virtual space.

⁵ Later Wiem became aware of a new scientific finding, which showed that the first human was found in Ethiopia.

Similarly, Yên uses the blog to express thoughts that she knows will not be accepted by her family. Yên wrote about her experiences of returning to Vietnam and how she was treated as a young girl in need of protection from men and sexuality:

This evening while [my close male-friend and I] were in my room, I got a text message from my mom: “You two shouldn't be alone in your room. That's too intimate.” [...]

My mom later walked into my room. I'm sure this was to check up on me and him. She saw that we were just talking, so she said some random thing and went back to her room. (Yên's private blog, 18.07.2014)

At one point, one of my aunts was making a somewhat dirty joke, and I saw my grandma looking at me and frowned. ‘Nonsense,’ she said, with her worried eyes landing on me. And I knew right away: she's afraid those jokes would invade my innocence. I thought to myself: she really has no idea how many dirty stories I've told people during the year. [...] I think the fact that I haven't changed much (physically) makes them feel safe. As if it gives them the secure feeling that I'm still the same princess they've known their whole life, and that this appearance of mine perfectly reflects what's kept inside. (Yên's private blog, 15.06.2014)

These blog notes were written when Yên was 23-year-old and had already lived and studied abroad on her own for six years. In 2014, she returned home for a period of six months to conduct research interviews for her master thesis. During this long visit, Yên lived in her parents' house, where she felt trapped by many gender norms and roles. Yên wrote a lot in this period about her bewilderment of returning to her home culture and yet feeling like a stranger. Yên's resistance to the family norms and the wider culture that regulates the behavior of young women is expressed quietly through her own observations and recordings of events on her weblog. During this time, the blog became her sacred space to share her thoughts and interpretation of the normative restrictions imposed on her, whereas in social life she continued to be the dutiful “nice girl”. The blog then becomes the space for imagining, creating, and affirming a new identity outside of the “comfort zone” and restriction of the old home culture. Through these blogs Yên not only told her stories and analyzed her experiences in a feminist voice, but also reaffirmed a girlhood identity that challenges gender boundaries and restrictions. With a joking tone she exposes how obsolete these restrictions have become when they attempt to ground her identity. In a similar way to Wiem, the weblog allows Yên to strengthen her voice and identity, as it is a space which her family cannot reach. With its semi-public space, the blog makes it possible for both subjects to develop their individual identity without the fear of being rejected, criticized, or attacked, while finding a sense of belonging and acceptance from like-minded followers. The weblog, then, becomes

the tool for “undutiful daughters” to become and remain “undutiful”, and to express their “respectful resistance” to their home cultures while at the same time building up a new identity amidst the uncertainty and insecurity of leaving the old, obedient self behind.

6. Analysis chapter: Enabling a global identity through blogging

Muslim people tell you when you think about things like that “it’s just the devil who [wants] to take you away from the right direction, try to put him away from your mind and don’t think about it. Call god for help and you will be safe.” Personally I can’t do that, I think it’s better to find an explanation than avoid thinking, to avoid thinking it’s like [to stop] using your brain which is the most special thing in a human being and which is what God make us special for. (Wiem’s blog, 25.05.2012)

In Wiem’s blog, religion is mentioned in several posts where she challenged the obedience to religion from the people around her. What troubled Wiem was how religious obedience kept people away from thinking critically and being open to new ideas. Wiem’s blog raised many discussions on how religion became a tool to separate mankind and create wars and sorrows (as demonstrated in the previous subchapter, Wiem’s relationship with her family also suffered from their different perspectives in religion). From these blog notes it is evident that Wiem talks about religion not simply as a personal issue but rather as a global phenomenon and moral responsibilities:

[...] the longest, most furious and cruel wars in the whole mankind history started in the name of god. I wish people would understand that believing is your choice, don’t oblige me to follow just because it’s written in a book that you believe in [...] I wish that the whole mankind could live in peace. (Wiem’s blog, 03.05.2013)

Cosmopolitanism as an ethical theory considers all human beings to belong to one moral realm or domain and, in principle, all human beings then have obligations towards one another across that domain (Dower and Williams 2002, xx). The etymological meaning of cosmopolitanism as the idea that we are citizens of the universe is strongly emphasized in Wiem’s worldview. In her blog, a global identity slowly emerged as she made many emphases on human moral obligations toward others and the planet:

When I feel tired, hungry, thirsty, cold or hot and I start complaining, I feel shame on me because I remember that after all I have a home in which I will find food, water, shower, and

a clean bed waiting for me [...] Some thousand people and children die every second around the world because they don't have any of these things, and we call ourselves human! (Wiem's blog, 10.09.2012)

Cosmopolitan ideals have been put forward since antiquity. Already then the motivating idea to act like 'a citizen of the world' was to help human beings (O'Neill 2002, 1-2). In Yên's blog, this ideal is discussed in connection with her sociology education, where she expressed a sense of purpose in her study:

While reading an article tonight, something came back to my mind. It was just a brief moment back to the time when I was still living in California. There was one evening I walked back home from the bus stop, and I saw the neighbor kid dancing in his front yard. The boy was around 7 or 8, and he was gently swaying around the yard like a tiny ballet dancer. It was an amateurish sort of dance, but at the same time his passion and purity made each of the movements so charming to the eyes. Until now I still remember that moment quite vividly. I also remember what I thought to myself then. I wanted to save that dance. I wanted that little boy to grow up being able to express himself fully as he wishes, without the fear of being bullied or stigmatized. (Yên's public blog, 30.01.2014)

Many times in her blog, Yên analyzed daily events through a sociological perspective and expressed her desire to reach out to minority groups in society. Yên used her sociological background to reach an understanding of privileges and oppression, and aimed for social change through advancing her own education. In some blog notes she also criticized herself for being unable to detect and tackle social oppression on her daily encounters. Both Yên and Wiem pondered on solutions that would have a long-lasting effect, and sometimes there was a feeling of helplessness in their writing about the world:

I just feel afraid about me, about the future, about peace, about humanity, about freedom and peace in this world. Humanity should grow up, should find another alternative, more peaceful [...], should increase conscience and morality more than just telling to you what to do and what not to do. I hope to be able to live in peace. (Wiem's blog, 06.05.2013)

Then I got overwhelmed with emotions again, when Prof. Kennedy talked about the ideal world called utopia. The answer popped up right on my mind: "there'll never be such a world." Sociologists prove that crime and deviance vary from cultures to cultures. That means, to create a utopia is to eliminate any deviation from the universal culture, which is impossible because even the deviation contributes to shape that particular culture. [...] But we may come

close to a similar version of utopia, on the expense of a particular minority group, whom people would regard as “scapegoat.” How fair it would be if such a society does exist? Maybe it does already. (Yên’s public blog, 04.05.2011)

While both subjects look for moral solutions to inequalities in the world, Wiem expresses more explicitly how she wants her blog readers to act for change. For Wiem global citizenship points to a fundamental fact about who one is, a human being sharing the essential characteristics of humanity with all other likeminded human beings across the planet. This generates ties of identity, loyalty and commitment transnationally (O’Neill 2002, 2). For Yên the global ties of identity, loyalty and commitment are intertwined with her sociology studies and her student friends. What is striking is that their global citizenship and even their moral thoughts do not include any institutionalized thoughts or desires of world government of any kind. This absence leads us to ask whether this is related to these two girls’ backgrounds in their home countries, in societies that were controlled by the strong authority of the state during their adolescence. In earlier studies it has been shown that the desire for global government is now decreasing when compared to that of the twentieth century (O’Neill 2002, 5). Still, it is remarkable how weak the concept of citizenship (in terms of rights and responsibilities) is in the blog writings of these two females and how the ‘global’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ opens alternatives possibilities for their self-identity, and for their activism and resistance, that would be more easily silenced if only expressed in their nation-state environment.

Not all cosmopolitanism is moral cosmopolitanism that tries to build universal human rights and world peace among the citizens of the world. Nor do all cosmopolitans search for global forms of democracy and governance. Another kind of cosmopolitanism is promoted by the capitalist globalisation of ‘free’ trade in terms of the freedom of global movement (Massey 1999). Both Wiem and Yên enjoy this freedom of movement and the global flow of wired information as it helps them connect with people from all around the world. This is especially in the case of Yên, who travelled to study in the United States for five years and continued her journey to Finland to study further:

I've soon grown fond of [Helsinki] and of all the friends I've met in the REMS program [...] Since we all come from different parts of the world, there will always be new things we can teach and learn from each other. I remember putting in the REMS application something like: "I want to study in an international environment", and now looking around it's just so clear that I've gotten what I asked for. I'm in it, always in it. When I went to Sweden last weekend, at one point I was stuffed in a cabin with 10 other people from all around this planet. Someone was trying to count how many nationalities we had there, and I swear I heard John Lennon singing "Imagine" in my head. No boundaries. (Yên’s public blog, 02.02.2014)

A global citizen is a member of the wider community, the world or a similar whole, that is wider than that of a nation-state or other political community of which we are normally thought to be citizens (O'Neil 2002, 1). For Yên this wider community is formed by her international colleagues. For Wiem, her global experience is more attributed to her blogging activity and by being a part of today's global and wired generation. Edmunds and Turner (2005) define the global generation as beginning between 1990 and 2000 (including people whose transition from childhood to adulthood took place during that time) and highlight electronic communication technology as the primary characteristic of this generation. Through the weblog, Wiem communicates with people from different cultures, which helps her shape a global view on the human identity:

Human being is human being wherever and whenever he lives. I learned that when I started getting friends from all over the world, sharing experiences and attitudes with them. [...] It was great for me to discover that me in Tunisia and my friend in China we lived almost the same experience in love and in life, we learned after all the same lesson and we come out with the same wisdom. (Wiem's blog, 26.12.2011)

Villiina Hellsten (2005 54) has emphasized the significance of viewing the practical cosmopolitan resources of the informants. She terms these resources a psychological cosmopolitan readiness, defined as having knowledge of foreign languages, higher education, the possibility to travel abroad, having international friends, and acting internationally in organizations. The ability to handle new technologies properly, such as the Internet, chat and other forms of e-communication and means of spreading information electronically is also a necessity. From these perspectives Wiem's and Yên's cosmopolitanism, or global citizenship, looks different. Yên has better resources to travel around the world and therefore she has met more international friends face-to-face. Wiem has met international friends in Tunisia as well as through her blog. Wiem has travelled abroad for the purpose of her hobby (astronomy club), Yên because of her studies. Yên knows English very well, whereas for Wiem the action of keeping a blog is also a way to practice her English skills. They both are clearly part of the wired generation, fluent with ICT and keeping blogs. Both practice cosmopolitanism through blogs and friendships that cross national borders.

It seems that the action of keeping a blog in English and sharing it is already a cosmopolitan activity and supports one's cosmopolitan identity. At the same time, it is distant from the nation-state, duties and responsibilities. Communication without boundaries is a necessity for a global citizen, underlying its moral criterion of being transcendent and libertarian (Haste 2010, 168). The World Wide Web and blogs create a 'global village'

where you can meet people from different corners of the world and start exchanging thoughts and ideas. This “blurs psychological boundaries of identity framed within nation state, as well as civic obligations defined by such boundaries” (Haste 2010, 169). The World Wide Web also redefines the notion of ‘closeness’, which now extends to those located in different parts of the world and with whom we feel emotionally or rationally connected to as soulmates, friends, or a likeminded community.

7. Conclusion

In this article, we have looked at girls’ weblogs as identity constructing activities, creative processes of expression, community creations and recovery through the blogging activities of two females from Tunisia and Vietnam. We find that the weblogs hold immense potential to empower under-represented or misrepresented groups, such as young females, by giving them a voice in the public sphere, and aiding their process of constructing and reaffirming identities. Blogs are processes of production and consumption, a form of knowledge, communication and leisure activity, adopted and used in everyday life. Through studying the weblog, we gain a deeper understanding of girls’ participatory culture and civic involvement. Our analyses show that the weblog offers girls the freedom and safety to construct their own home-space where they can express their desires, embody their “undutifulness” and respectful resistance, and enable a global and planetary identity.

Our study utilizes feminist methodology and a combination of methods that highlight reflexivity and an egalitarian research relationship. Through this process we acknowledge the inner compass that positions our perspectives, and achieve a transparent process wherein our informant can continue to construct the data throughout the research. Our approach casts light on girls as active cultural producers rather than passive receivers of mainstream and hegemonic representation of girlhood, as the act of blogging allows both Wiem and Yên to exercise their own control and reconstruct meanings through their writings and drawings. At the same time, studying these two cases from a micropolitical perspective offers insights into the relationship between different forms of activism, ranging from the respectful resistance to authority, gender roles, and religious obedience, to the act of overly challenging political entities. It is within these interpretations, acknowledgement, and presentification of daily events that the seeds for social changes are planted and nurtured. We, therefore, argue that the weblog is a practical political space for these daily activities of identity construction, activism, sociality, and presentification, to take place.

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