

Chapter 26

Personal Blogging

Individual Differences and Motivations

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ABSTRACT

The present chapter examines current research of blogging practices; it focuses on the personal blog, a blog created and maintained by an individual and not used for financial or occupational gain. The authors maintain that individual difference factors, such as personality and gender, may contribute to differences in likelihood to blog, motivation to blog, and blog content. The authors argue that the same factors that allow for differentiation of individuals in more classic self-expressive communication modalities (e.g., journaling) may also delineate individuals in new modes of online communication and self-expression. However, these factors may manifest themselves differently over more contemporary methods of self-expression and communication. The authors conclude that bloggers and blog readership appear to be steadily growing, making this area of online self-expression increasingly deserving of scientific inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

Current trends in online social interaction have led to an increase in personalization and a decrease in anonymity owing to both technological advances and changing social norms (for a review, see Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). At the forefront of these changing trends are *blogs* (short for *weblogs*), which are personal websites updated

regularly by their creator where journal-like entries or “posts” appear in reverse chronological order (Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005b). Blog topics vary from personal information (e.g., a log of daily activities, information about friendships and relationships) to political opinion to celebrity gossip to high tech news and information. Blogs can be created with little technological savvy as many blogging websites are user-friendly and allow the blog creator to simply choose a template and begin creating posts. Blogs, such as the ones described

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previously, are said to reside in the *blogosphere* -- an online world of conversation among bloggers via heavily interconnected blogs (Herring et al., 2005a). While this is how the blogosphere was originally conceptualized, at the current time blogs are mostly independent of each other. Although it is possible to post links of other blogs (also known as a blogroll) on one's blog, most conversation occurs through a dialogue between the blog creator and readers of a particular blog. That is, each time a creator posts an entry on his or her blog, readers view the entry and have the option to respond with a comment. Blog creators can respond with a reciprocal comment and these comments may impact the content of future entries within the individual blog. However, these conversations have little impact on the content or dialogue of other blogs.

Although reports indicate that the first blog appeared online in 1997 (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004b), the number of blogs available online has only started to increase dramatically in the past few years (Sifry, 2007). The same can be said for research on bloggers' demographics, motivations, personality, and practices. The present chapter examines current research in blogging practices, focusing on a type of blog known as a personal blog, which is created and maintained by an individual and is not used for financial or occupational gain. Specifically, we will review demographics on blogging and then examine two aspects of blogging: how individual differences -- such as personality and gender -- affect blogging practices and what motivates individuals to create and maintain a blog.

BACKGROUND

Research indicates that while blogging is becoming increasingly popular around the globe, many of the world's bloggers reside in the United States (Herring et al., 2005b). Similarly, much of the research on blogging has also been conducted in

the United States. This research indicates that, in the United States, bloggers are younger, better educated, more urban, less likely to be a member of an ethnic minority group, and more likely to shop online compared to the general population of Internet users in the United States (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

Although some research indicates that the adoption rate of blogging in other countries is lower than that of the United States (Herring et al., 2005b; Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmohl, & Sapp, 2006), other research indicates that Japanese is the most commonly used language for writing blogs and is used more by one percent more bloggers than English (Sifry, 2007). Despite this change, relatively little research has been conducted to examine blogging patterns across different countries; however, the research that is available suggests that blogging patterns are similar across countries. For example, research conducted in Britain shows a similar pattern to what has been found in the United States (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007). These results also suggest that research conducted on blogging in the United States should generalize to blogging in other western countries; however, these results should be interpreted with caution until more research is available.

In terms of number of blogs online, statistics on blogging in the United States indicate that 8 million US citizens keep a blog and 57 million US citizens report reading blogs (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). More recent data that examined worldwide blogging trends indicate that across the globe, there are 70 million blogs (as of April, 2007), and that this number is increasing daily by 120,000 (Sifry, 2007). This suggests that there are currently well over 100 million blogs available worldwide. Of all blogs maintained, it is estimated that there are 1.5 million new entries or posts per day (Sifry, 2007). Thus, overall blogging is becoming an increasingly popular online activity, particularly in English-speaking and Japanese-speaking countries.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN BLOGGING

Although the use of blogging as online expression is a relatively understudied phenomenon, a large body of existing literature on the psychological aspects of Internet use may offer insight into the psychological motivations of blogging. Literature on the psychological aspects of Internet usage indicates that individual differences on the Big Five factors of personality are indicative of different types of Internet usage as well as motivations behind these different usage trends. For example, individuals who are low in *extraversion* (defined as being not very sociable) and high in *neuroticism* (defined as being high in nervousness and insecurity) believe that they are better able to express their real-selves in online communication compared to face-to-face contexts (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002). Hamburger and Ben-Artzi (2000) found support for the moderating effect of personality on Internet use; however, the results varied by gender. That is, women high in neuroticism and extraversion tended to use the Internet for social services (e.g., chatting, discussion groups, and people-finder services). However, men high in extraversion used the Internet for leisure services (e.g., websites with sexual content and random web surfing), while those high in neuroticism utilized the Internet for information services (e.g., searching for information needed for work or school projects). Similarly, loneliness has been found to mediate the relationship between neuroticism and Internet use for women, suggesting lonely women may be utilizing the Internet to assuage their loneliness (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003).

Thus, although there is a growing body of evidence on individual differences in Internet use (Amichai-Hamburger and Ben-Artzi, 2003; Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000), little research has examined whether these findings generalize to this specific type of Internet activity: namely, blogging. To examine this gap in the literature,

Guadagno, Okdie, and Eno (2008) investigated the relationship between gender, personality, and creating and maintaining a blog by using the Big Five factor model (McCrae & Costa, 1986) and gender to predict propensity to create and maintain a blog. The Big Five factor model of personality posits that individuals' personalities may be broken down into five components: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (McCrae & Costa, 1986). Neuroticism is positively correlated with emotional instability (anxious, insecure, and self-pitying) and negatively correlated with emotional stability (calm, security, and self-satisfying). Extraversion is positively correlated with being outgoing (sociable, fun-loving, and affectionate) and negatively correlated with being introverted (retiring, sober, and reserved). Openness is positively correlated with being imaginative, preferring variety, and being independent and negatively correlated with being down to earth, preferring routine, and a tendency to conform. Agreeableness is positively correlated with being soft-hearted, trusting, and helpful and negatively correlated with being ruthless, suspicious, and uncooperative. Finally, conscientiousness is positively correlated with being well-organized, careful, and self-disciplined, and negatively correlated with being disorganized, careless, and weak-willed. These five factors are considered to be temporally stable (Digman, 1989), independent of age, and not culturally determined (McCrae & Costa, 1997).

To examine how these core dimensions predicted who would blog, Guadagno, Okdie, and Eno (2008) surveyed two samples of undergraduates—a group of advanced students in a classroom setting and a group on Introductory Psychology students in an online setting. The research examined how well participant's gender and personality characteristics differentiated those who kept a blog from those who did not blog. Based on prior research findings (Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000), the authors predicted that bloggers and non-bloggers, as well as males and females, would differ on some of

the Big Five dimensions, particularly neuroticism. More specifically, highly neurotic women were expected to be more likely to maintain a blog than those low in neuroticism.

Across two samples, researchers (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008) asked participants to report their experiences with writing and reading blogs. Those who reported writing a blog also reported the following: number of blogs written, use of real name or screen name, and content of the blog written. Finally, participants provided demographic information and completed the Big Five Inventory-Short Form (Benet-Martinez & John, 1998). Twenty-five percent of participants in the first sample and 16 percent of participants in the second sample reported keeping a blog. Consistent with prior research (Lenhart & Fox, 2006), most blogs had a single author and contained information about personal experiences (e.g., about oneself, relationships, friends, families, daily experiences).

When asked how they identified themselves, the majority of bloggers in these two samples reported using their real name as opposed to a screen name, thus making their blogs more identifiable. In terms of individual differences, results indicated that openness to new experience and neuroticism predicted blogging. Specifically, individuals high in openness to new experiences and individuals high in neuroticism were more likely to blog. Furthermore, after collapsing across the two samples, an examination of the data for gender differences indicated that neuroticism was a significant predictor of blogging for women, but not for men. These results are consistent with prior research on gender and personality differences in Internet usage (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003), which also showed that women high in neuroticism had different Internet usage patterns than did men or women low in neuroticism.

The results of the study (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008) indicate that gender, openness to new experience, and neuroticism predict likelihood of maintaining a blog. Since blogging is a new form

of online self-expression, it stands to reason that creative individuals, such as those high in openness to new experience who are willing to try new things are more likely to blog. This also suggests that it may be the case that individuals who are high in openness to new experience are also likely to be the first to adopt new technology. Additionally, these results indicate that individuals high in neuroticism—characterized by anxiety, worry, emotional reactivity, and nervousness (John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1986)—may use blogging to assuage loneliness or in an effort to reach out and form social connections. These findings were also moderated by gender. Specifically, women who were high in neuroticism were more likely to maintain a blog than were women low in neuroticism while there was no difference in blogging rates for men based on their level of neuroticism. Finally, results also replicate prior findings supporting the notion that bloggers disclose identifying, personal information in their blogs (Herring et al., 2005b; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Viegas, 2005).

Other research on gender differences in blogging practices is also consistent with the prior work on gender differences in general Internet use. More specifically, this research indicated that in Britain—as in the US—women use blogs as a social outlet while men use blogs as an informational or opinion outlet (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007).

Although men and women are equally represented in the blogosphere (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Pedersen & Macafee, 2007), the content of their blogs vary. For instance, in a comparison of blogs written by depressed men and women, Clarke and van Amerom (2008) found that men's posts tended to be focused more on news whereas women's posts tended to be focused more on relationships. Herring, Krouper, Scheidt, and Wright (2004) reported that women are more likely to maintain a personal blog than are men. Finally, Pedersen and Macafee (2007) reported that women bloggers were more interested in the social aspects of blogging, such as the knowledge that others

would share their experiences, whereas men were more interested in expressing opinions and reporting information. Overall, the results of the research on individual differences, such as gender and personality, suggest that these factors have a tremendous impact on who blogs and what he or she blogs about.

MOTIVATIONS FOR BLOGGING

As reviewed above, there are notable gender and personality differences in blogging behavior. Individual differences are predictive of who blogs and what they blog about, but what motivates people to create a blog? Ethnographic studies on motivations for blogging in US samples have revealed that people blog for a number of reasons. Blogs allow users to update others on their whereabouts and activities. Blogs enable users to express their opinions with the intention of influencing others. Moreover, they can be used to seek feedback and the opinions of others. Some bloggers use their blogs in the writing process, affording them the opportunity to think through their thoughts in a public forum. Finally, some bloggers use their blogs as an outlet for relieving emotional tension (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004a; Nardi et al. 2004b; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004c). These results are similar to survey results from data collected in a Korean sample indicating that participants reported maintaining their blog because it was entertaining and facilitated self-expression (Jung, Youn, & McClung, 2007).

Other survey data indicate that certain motivations to blog predict blogging behavior. For instance, one such study revealed that the desire for self-expression predicts frequency of blogging indicating that individuals with a high desire for self-expression post to their blogs more frequently than those with a low desire for self-expression (Huang, Shen, Lin, & Chang, 2007). Additionally, Baker and Moore (2008) surveyed MySpace users and reported that individuals who intended to blog

were higher in psychological distress, self-blame, venting, were less socially integrated, and less satisfied with the number of online and offline friendships they had. These results were interpreted as suggesting that another motivation for blogging may be to relieve psychological distress. Overall, the results on the research on motivations for blogging indicate that individuals report a wide variety of reasons for engaging in this form of online expression and that self-expression appears to be one such consistent motivation.

FUTURE TRENDS

There are several future directions that research on personal blogs could take especially given the relative paucity of studies on the topic. In the future, we recommend that research on the motivations for blogging and characteristics of bloggers should examine the interaction of these two areas of research. Specifically, future research should aim to examine whether men and women or individuals who vary on certain personality dimensions, such as the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1997), also vary in terms of their motivations for creating and maintaining a blog. For instance, it may be that self-expression is a more important motivation for blogging for individuals high in neuroticism than for individuals low in neuroticism. Or, it may be that individuals high in neuroticism experience greater relief from psychological distress from blogging. Along these same lines, it may be that relative to those low in openness to new experience, bloggers who are high in openness to new experience may blog to form new social connections or to influence others. Additionally, women may blog more for self-expression and to assuage negative emotions while men may blog more to disseminate and obtain factual information or news. Moreover, research on personality and Internet use suggests that there are other personality characteristics (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002) that may moderate motivations for blog-

ging. For example, need for closure (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983), locus of control (Rotter, 1966, 1982), and risk taking (Levenson, 1990) may be useful in further differentiating bloggers from nonbloggers. Given that this is a relatively new area of research on online behavior, much remains to be discovered.

As the software for blogging becomes easier to use, more novice Internet users may begin to create and maintain blogs. This potential change in blogging trends may have an impact on the demographics and personality characteristics of bloggers as well as the motivations for creating a personal blog. Therefore, we recommend future research examine Internet usage as a potential moderator for these aspects of blogging. Also, given that the majority of the research reported in this chapter reports on blogging in English-speaking countries, there is a strong need for more cross-cultural research on blogging. Specifically, it would be interesting to examine whether blogging practices are similar in cultures that are dissimilar to the United States and other Western cultures. We may find that countries with more collectivist views will show less emphasis on self-expression than Western countries with more individualistic views leading to differences in motivations for keeping and maintaining blogs.

Moreover, future research should also examine whether the results reported in this chapter generalize to other forms of online expression, which are similar to blogs. With the growth of social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and MySpace), most of which incorporate blogging capabilities in their networking platforms, there will likely be a further shift in the make-up of the blogging population. That is, there may be significant demographic and motivational differences between individuals who blog using stand-alone blogging platforms (e.g., Blogger, Wordpress, or Typepad) and individuals who blog using services offered as perks on social networking sites. Individuals using social networking sites to manage their blogs are likely to be younger and have more identifying

information available to their readers via their associated social networking profiles – a feature not typically associated with other stand-alone blogging software. In addition, individuals who blog using social networking sites are likely to feel as though their blog readership is smaller, more intimate, and more connected owing to the nature of using a social networking site as a blogging platform. In other words, there is greater likelihood that individual's using social networking sites to create and maintain blogs may have a greater sense of privacy thus making them more likely to use identifying information as well as engage in discussions of a personal nature in their personal blogs. Thus, the above distinction between the use of stand-alone versus blogging software embedded in other contexts may be a small but necessary disparity that should be addressed in future research likely leading to fruitful scientific gains.

Additionally, future research should examine how these blogs with less anonymity are utilized to see if the patterns discussed in this review hold true when the users are more easily identified by readers and also feel a greater sense of privacy as well as a more intimate readership of their blogs. Other forms of online expression should also be examined. One such example is twitter.com, a website that facilitates communication among friends and family by allowing individuals to communicate via short messages posted in reverse chronological order that all answer the question: "what are you doing?" and is designed to allow individuals create blog entries from other forms of digital technology, such as cell phones. Once again these posts are more identifiable and users are likely to create more concise entries, which presumably can be accessed from any location. Future research should examine how these dynamics change the function of blogs and motivation for blogging.

Finally, future scholars should examine the interplay between blog authors and blog readers. Current research on blogging takes a uni-

directional approach to examining blogs in which the blogger is disseminating content to the reader. However, this is not typically the case. Most blogs allow users to comment on blog content, which the blog author can then read and respond to. This interplay between blog users and blog readers creates a bi-directional dynamic relationship that may change individual's future motivations for creating and maintaining blogs as well as affect future blog content. Thus, the consideration of the interaction between blog authors and their readers may necessitate a shift in our current conception of the blogosphere. That is, moving away from a static approach and towards a dynamic one.

Overall, as an Internet activity, blogging differs in noteworthy ways from other types of Internet use and this warrants further examination. These differences may make conducting future psychological research on blogging particularly beneficial. For example, the literature reviewed suggests that individuals treat blogs as private journals while providing identifiable information. Guadagno and colleagues (2008) found that bloggers are writing mostly about personal issues and that the majority of bloggers are using their real names, as opposed to screen names, on their blogs. And, this tendency is further exacerbated when individuals know members of their audience (Qian & Scott, 2007). Bloggers' propensity to employ their real names in their blogs raises questions about changing trends in privacy online. Future research should examine the psychological consequences of this self-disclosing behavior and examine perceived anonymity of bloggers to determine their level of awareness about their own self-disclosure.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presents an overview of the most recent research on blogging, focusing primarily on individual differences in likelihood of maintaining a personal blog and motivations for blogging. Overall, research indicates that most individuals

use blogs in much the same way as other online resources (such as chat rooms, websites, bulletin boards, etc.). For instance, women utilize mostly the social aspects of blogging, while men tend to use blogs for information gathering and opinion dissemination (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007). Also, the studies reviewed indicate that individual differences, such as personality and gender, can predict, to a certain degree, whether individuals are likely to utilize specific services of the Internet (Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000) and maintain a blog (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008). Finally, the literature on motivations for blogging indicates that self-expression is one of the reasons why individuals blog but that there are other reasons as well (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004a; Nardi, et al. 2004b; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004c; Huang, Shen, Lin, & Chang, 2007; Jung, Youn, & McClung, 2007).

More generally, the research literature analyzed in this chapter suggests that individual differences may play a greater role than once thought in forms of online self-expression. More specifically, individual difference factors, such as personality and gender, may contribute to differences in likelihood to blog, motivation to blog, and blog content. It may be the case that the same factors that allow for differentiation of individuals in more classic self-expressive communication modalities (e.g., journaling) may also delineate individuals in new modes of online communication and self-expression. However, these factors may manifest themselves differently over more contemporary methods of self-expression and communication. In the end, bloggers and blog readership appear to be steadily growing, making this area of online self-expression increasingly deserving of scientific study and inquiry.

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