

## Oxford Handbooks Online

### **Socially Connecting Through Blogs and Vlogs: A Social Connections Approach to Blogging and Vlogging Motivation**

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The Oxford Handbook of Cyberpsychology

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Subject: Psychology, Social Psychology Online Publication Date: Sep 2018

DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198812746.013.22

### **Abstract and Keywords**

People need to create and maintain social connections, and the ways these connections are made and maintained have broadened with the advent of the Internet. One way that people may attempt to satisfy their need to belong is through online self-expression such as blogging. This chapter examines blogging and its derivations (e.g., microblogging, vlogging) and analyzes current trends and motivations using a social connections lens. The chapter explicates the motivations for blogging using recent literature and extends these findings to include more recently developed, blog-like Internet platforms. Finally, the chapter closes with a discussion of the future of blogging motivations.

Keywords: blogging, vlogging, need to belong, personality, gender, motivation

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## **Introduction**

Modern communication technology norms are moving away from anonymity towards increased personalization (for review, see Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). The Internet is more interactive than traditional forms of mass communication, and the extent to which people are expected to divulge personal information seems to increase with each new technological innovation (Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Statista, 2017). While still possible, maintaining anonymity online has become non-normative. For example, on most media communication platforms there is an expectation for users to provide personal information, such as a profile picture, or to disclose likes and dislikes

and to express personal views on a variety of topics (Taraszow, Aristodemou, Shitta, Laouris, & Arsoy, 2010).

The increased personalization of the Internet has increased the extent to which people use it to socially connect, and it provides unique ways to interact with others that were unavailable prior to its advent. Thus, people are no longer using the Internet simply to find information and, instead, are using it as a place to create and maintain social connections (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002). We argue peoples' use of media is often motivated by a desire to socially connect with others. In this chapter, using a social connection lens, we review the literature on the motivations for expressing oneself online through one such vehicle for online social connection: blogging. We examine factors that predict why people blog, what they choose to blog about, and how these motivations may originate through the fundamental human need to belong.

## **To Be Human is to Seek Belonging**

People are driven by a fundamental need to make and keep social connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Alone in the world, humans historically have encountered problems; relatively speaking, humans are slow, weak, have limited ability to defend themselves (e.g., lack claws and fangs), and have terrible night vision. The need to belong originates from the increased survival potential each individual has when in a group compared to being alone. Thus, humans find comfort and meaning in social connections and have adapted physical and cognitive strategies that serve to maintain their presence in groups (Kurzban & Leary, 2001). For instance, being ostracized (excluded and ignored) activates areas of the brain associated with physical pain, such as the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). This activation effectively "punishes" isolation and motivates behaviors to build or restore social bonds (Eisenberger et al., 2003). Similarly, the brain has developed cognitive strategies to deal with poor social exchange partners (Kurzban & Leary, 2001). For example, humans have cognitive strategies that detect cheaters (i.e., those who take more than they give; Cosmides, 1989; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992), and those who detect poor social exchange partners (e.g., cheaters) are motivated to exclude them (Wesselmann, Wirth, Pryor, Reeder, & Williams, 2013). Therefore, humans have evolved cognitive and behavioral strategies that drive them to join groups and defend their group status.

In addition to causing emotional pain, ostracism has many negative cognitive and physiological consequences. Ostracized people suffer from a lowered sense of belonging, self-esteem, meaningful existence, and control (Williams, 2009). Moreover, a lack of social connections can lead to profound detrimental consequences across many domains, including negative mood, poor health, and physical discomfort (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995, and Williams, 2009 for discussion). Conversely, having (or perceiving that one has) healthy social networks and attachments has been shown to confer assorted benefits,

such as buffering the negative effects of marital stress (Keneski, Neff, & Loving, 2017) and reducing physical pain (Brown, Sheffield, Leary, & Robinson, 2003; Jackson, Iezzi, Chen, Ebnet, & Eglitis, 2005; Master et al., 2009).

Thus, humans are clearly “social animals” and, in order to indulge in the benefits of group membership (e.g., mutual defense, shared resources), have developed cognitive mechanisms that lead them to find social connections rewarding and motivate them to maintain those connections. Conversely, a lack of social connections invites a host of negative consequences, ranging from short-term discomfort to long-term pathologies. Much of the extant research on the benefits of social connection examines traditional face-to-face (FTF) communications; however, the Internet provides novel ways to create and maintain these connections.

## **Satisfying the Need for Social Connection through Media**

Prior to the Internet, barriers such as physical distance limited peoples’ ability to create and maintain social connections (see McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Many of these barriers made social interaction with physically distant others difficult, limiting peoples’ ability to fulfill their need to belong. The Internet, and the platforms it enables, has eliminated some of these barriers and led to new ways people can satisfy their need to belong (e.g., social networking sites, message boards, online forums, personal web sites, and blogs). For example, people can begin and maintain social connections through social media sites such as Facebook.com (Joinson, 2008); as of 2016, 68 percent of the adult population of the United States maintained a Facebook profile, and 76 percent of that group used the site daily (Pew Research Center, 2017). While the Internet has provided powerful new avenues for creating and maintaining social relationships, it also differs from traditional FTF communication in important ways.

## **Face-to-Face versus Online Social Connection**

Scholars who have discussed the similarities and differences between FTF and online communication have adopted different approaches. Early research took an outcomes-based approach, focusing on the psychological consequences (e.g., anonymity, deindividuation) of using different forms of media (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). More recently, scholars have developed an attribute-based approach to understanding the psychological and behavioral outcomes of media use. Okdie et al. (2014) posit that the psychological effects of both classic and emergent media can be predicted by the extent to which media contain a set of attributes, such as interactivity (the possibility of people to elicit responses from media), fidelity (the degree to which a medium is accurate in its

## **Socially Connecting Through Blogs and Vlogs: A Social Connections Approach to Blogging and Vlogging Motivation**

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portrayal of information), and privacy (ability of people to hide information from others). The classic outcomes-based approach to understanding similarities and differences among communication types remains useful, although the value in newer approaches (e.g., the attribute approach) is they can account for emergent media by viewing media types on a continuum, rather than as discrete categories of phenomena.

Regardless of theoretical approach, there appears to be a great deal of overlap between contributing factors and consequences of both FTF and computer-mediated communication (CMC), but they also differ in characteristic and reliable ways. For example, research suggests that people will act online similarly to how they act in FTF interactions (Guadagno, Muscanell, Okdie, Burk, & Ward, 2011) and that both FTF (Okdie, Guadagno, Bernieri, Geers, & McLarney-Vesotski, 2011) and CMC (Walther, 1996) can lead to positive impressions of interaction partners. However, FTF interaction (rather than online) leads to more accurate person perception and greater liking of interaction partners, but it also results in a greater difficulty sustaining these interactions (Okdie et al., 2011). As with any new form of communication, interaction through online channels has both positive and negative effects on human psychology and behavior that depend on context (cf. Zettelmeyer, Morton, & Silva-Risso, 2006). Although emerging communication technologies overlap with traditional FTF communication in some areas and differ in others, they are all forms of communication that serve to socially connect people to each other.

## **Connections Made through Media are Meaningful**

While it is clear that people can, and do, maintain social connections through media, these connections are only likely to satisfy an individual's need to belong to the extent that they are meaningful. In support of this position, recent research indicates that belonging needs predict the likelihood of online relationships, social exclusion motivates the formation and maintenance of online relationships, and exposure to online relationships restores thwarted belonging needs (Knowles, Haycock, & Shaikh, 2015). In addition, these consequences are mediated by many of the same factors that are expected to mediate FTF interactions. For example, individuals high in trait rumination (i.e., repetitive thinking that often occurs about negative emotions) suffer maladaptive thoughts and adjustment problems when remaining "friends" with former romantic partners (Tran & Joormann, 2015), while individuals high in social comparison orientation (i.e., a tendency for people to compare themselves with others on social dimensions) showed lower self-esteem after examining profiles on Facebook (Vogel, Rose, Okdie, Eckles, & Franz, 2015).

## **Socially Connecting Through Blogs and Vlogs: A Social Connections Approach to Blogging and Vlogging Motivation**

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It even appears that social media platforms play such a pivotal role in the social lives of some users that the platforms themselves have become meaningful—almost talismanic. For example, simply thinking of being disconnected from a social networking site (SNS; i.e., online services enabling users to create and share information to networks of others) has been shown to cause significant distress (Chiou, Lee, & Liao, 2015). Similarly, recent research suggests that viewing social networking symbols (e.g., the Facebook logo) can reduce physical pain by increasing thoughts of others (Ho, Wu, & Chiou, 2016). So, not only does the presence of social networks alleviate pain (e.g., Brown et al., 2003), but the presence of symbols associated with a social network also helps reduce perceptions of pain. Thus, it is clear that, although online interactions may affect individuals in ways that are unique from traditional FTF communication, interactions that take place online are meaningful and satisfy peoples' need to belong.

## **The Current State of Blogging**

The need to belong is a significant motive for participating in several forms of online communication, including blogging. Blogs (short for weblogs) are personal websites typically maintained by a single author who updates them in reverse chronological order (Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005). The collection of blogs on the Internet is often referred to as the Blogosphere. Additionally, blogs often link to other blogs (called a blogroll) and these links have traditionally allowed blog readers to interact with blog authors (e.g., through comments), although this trend appears to be declining.

Creating and maintaining blogs was difficult when blogs first emerged and often required computer coding experience. Not long after the first appearance of blogs, blogging platforms such as “blogger” and “LiveJournal” made blogging easier by providing blog authors with website templates and removing the need for computer coding knowledge. The simplification of blog production ignited extreme growth in the blogosphere. There perhaps were as few as twenty-three blogs on the Internet in 1999, but by 2008, that number had exploded to fifty million (Arnoldzafrá, 2008). However, recent reports indicate that blog growth has slowed and that most existing blogs are not regularly updated (Arnoldzafrá, 2008). The decline in the number of active blogs can partially be attributed to the emergence of new blog-like media.

The evolution of existing social media sites and the emergence of new forms of online communication make it increasingly difficult to define contemporary blogging. For example, Facebook has added blog-like features, such as the “Notes” feature, that allow users to post material that is the equivalent in length of a typical blog post (Barrett, 2015). Other platforms, such as Tumblr.com, encourage multimedia blog posts. These technologies share features of traditional blogs but are distinct enough to be classified separately. The two main categories of emerging platforms that most closely share the features and functions of traditional blogging are microblogs and vlogs.

### **Microblogging**

Microblogging is a relatively new form of blogging that consists of short blog posts updated more frequently than traditional blogs. The length of microblogs is typically constrained by the media used to create the post. The most widely known microblogging service is Twitter, which has traditionally restricted user's posts to 140 characters but is currently piloting a project that would double that total (Isaac, 2017). Twitter is a popular microblogging site in the United States through which 500 million tweets are posted each day—amounting to 6,000 tweets per second (Twitter, 2017). Sina Weibo (<http://weibo.com/>) is a similarly popular microblogging platform in China, which recently reported a total of 340 million active monthly users (BBC, 2017).

Microblogging has seen dramatic growth in recent years. The rise in microbloggers and microblogging platforms is likely driven by the proliferation of mobile technology (Smith, 2013; Thomasch, 2007) that allows people to access and update microblogs quickly and conveniently. In 2010, the US Census Bureau reported that 63,718,000 people 18 years or older used mobile devices to access the Internet (US Census, 2010). Mobile devices allow individuals to stay abreast of change and respond quickly to news and current events, but by their nature, mobile devices are smaller (and contain smaller input methods) than stationary devices, making it difficult to compose long-form writing. While microblogging differs from traditional blogs—most notably in length—another emerging blog type distinguishes itself by solely relying on video to convey a message.

### **Vlogging**

Vlogging (or “video blogging”) is a relatively new form of blogging that contains some of the characteristics of traditional blogs (e.g., long-form presentations of content and comparable update frequency), but uses video to convey the message, rather than text. The first vlogs appeared in the early 2000s and began as videos embedded in traditional text blogs. In most cases, videos are uploaded to a video hosting service, such as YouTube.com (Sinton, 2010), and are regularly updated, similar to traditional blogging web sites. Most vlogs consist of a single individual speaking to the camera (Frobenius, 2011). Some inherently visual social media platforms, such as Snapchat (i.e., a service that enables the sharing of brief photos and videos), were designed in a manner that was conducive to vlogging, while other already existing services, like Facebook and Instagram (i.e., a picture and video sharing service), have incorporated vlogging features into their platforms. While microblogging and vlogging are unique forms of blogging, they share several key features with traditional blogs (e.g., regularly updated user-generated content, typically created by a single author, wide audience, interactivity), and their creators likely also share similar motivations.

## **Characteristics of Blogs and Bloggers**

As the definition of blogging becomes increasingly fragmented, tracking the number and content of blogs has become difficult. In fact, little descriptive research on blogging after 2011 exists, and what statistics do exist vary wildly, depending on how the authors operationalize blogging. Despite this fragmentation of the research, a fair amount of demographic information is available about who was blogging, circa 2011. At that time, some researchers distinguished between different types of bloggers, such as hobbyists (who blog for enjoyment rather than for income) and professional bloggers (who blog to supplement their income). The majority of bloggers are hobbyists, male, and located in the United States (Fullwood, Nicholls, & Makichi, 2015; Fullwood, Sheehan, & Nicholls, 2009; Herring et al., 2005; Technorati, 2011). Most bloggers report blogging about personal experiences (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Okdie, Guadagno, Rempala, & Eno, 2011), are identifiable (Guadagno et al., 2008; Herring, et al., 2005; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Viegas, 2005), and are between 25 and 44 years old (Technorati, 2011).

Existing research has revealed some common characteristics of blogs. Hobbyists most commonly blog about their life, while professional bloggers mostly write about technology (Technorati, 2011). The majority of bloggers post weekly on their blogs (Crestodina, 2017). Although the general trends suggest that the number of people blogging is declining (Crestodina, 2017; Okdie et al., 2011), the length of individual blog posts increased by nearly hundred words from 2014 to 2015, and now stands at approximately 1,000 words per post. Moreover, most bloggers include at least one image in their posts (Crestodina, 2017).

Although prior to 2011 the typical blogger resided in the United States, recent reports indicate an increase in blogs maintained outside of the United States (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007). However, the behavior of bloggers in *and* outside the United States has been found to be similar (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007), which raises the possibility of a universal set of motivations for blogging.

### **Gender and Personality**

Many studies indicate individual difference factors, such as gender and personality, predict who uses the Internet, and how (see Orchard & Fullwood, 2010 for discussion of the relationship between personality and Internet use). Most research examining the relationship between personality traits and general Internet use, including blogging, has focused on broad dimensions of personality, such as the Five Factor Model of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1997). The Five Factor Model of personality is accepted as the predominant taxonomy of personality traits and posits that personality is composed of and varies on five key traits: extraversion (sociability), neuroticism (emotional reactivity), openness to new experience (imaginativeness; open to new ideas), agreeableness (cooperativeness), and conscientiousness (self-control; John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Studies examining personality and general Internet use indicate that people low in extraversion and high in neuroticism report being better able to express their true selves online, which should lead to greater use of online self-expression platforms such as blogging (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002; Rice & Markey, 2009).

Researchers have also discovered significant gender differences in Internet use. For example, when comparing blogs of males and females, men's blogs are less likely to focus on their personal lives (Fullwood, Melrose, Morris, & Floyd, 2013). A study of British bloggers found that men were generally less social when blogging and less likely to post creative work, instead choosing to post about opinions, politics, and technical aspects of the Internet (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007).

Perhaps the most compelling findings about individual difference on Internet use come from analyzing the interaction between personality and gender. For example, women high in extraversion and neuroticism are more likely to use the Internet for services that connect them socially with others, allowing them to create and maintain social relationships (Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000). Some researchers suggested that women high in neuroticism may blog for social connectedness (Guadagno et al., 2008). This idea was corroborated by research showing that loneliness mediates the relation between neuroticism and Internet use for women (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003) as well as that women (compared to men) are more likely to blog for social connection (Clarke & van Amerom, 2008; Pedersen & Macafee, 2007). Additionally, women high in neuroticism and openness to new experience are more likely to blog (Guadagno et al., 2008; Okdie et al., 2011). Thus, women who are high in neuroticism and openness to new experience may use the Internet to socially connect with others and are likely to be more open to using new methods to accomplish this goal (such as Blogging).

A different pattern of results emerges when examining the predictors of Internet use among men. For example, men high in extraversion are more likely to use the Internet for leisure and those high in neuroticism are less likely to use the Internet for information services (Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000).



### **Blogging Motivations**

While descriptive data are informative and provide a picture of who is populating the blogosphere, they fail to answer the question of why millions of people spend their limited time and energy on such a labor-intensive activity like blogging. In the early days of researching blogging behavior, most scholars focused their investigations on peoples' motivations for general Internet use (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003; Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000). Those early scholars identified several individual difference factors that predicted an individual's motivation to use the Internet, including the aforementioned personality traits (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002; Yee, Harris, Jabon, & Bailenson, 2011) and gender (see Li & Kirkup, 2007 for discussion), as well as chronic emotional states (e.g., loneliness and anxiety; McKenna & Bargh, 2000) and stigmatized identities (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). However, the Internet continues to evolve at a profound rate, and compared to just a few years ago, it has become more personalized with a greater variety of opportunities for social interaction. So, while these initial investigations provide a baseline for understanding what factors motivate Internet behavior, a more thorough analysis is needed to understand what factors motivate any one type of Internet use. For example, blogging typically involves labor-intensive, solitary personal expression that is much more regimented and regular than casual Internet use. Thus, the expectation is that a particular set of motivations would apply to this particular behavior.

### **Intrinsic Benefits: Blogging and Mental Health**

Roughly one in four bloggers do so with the goal of full-time income (Collamer, 2015), which means that the other three blog for non-monetary reasons. Even if a blogger's primary motivation is income, there are other, less-precarious methods for making a living than maintaining a blog. This section presents some common intrinsic blogging motivations.

#### **Blogging for the Self**

In general, sharing personal experiences facilitates memory retention by allowing for rehearsal and contextualization of the event (Wang, Lee, & Hou, 2017). Social sharing of personal events has additional benefits when the event is distressing (Pennebaker & O'Heeron, 1984). Pennebaker (1997) found that writing in a journal about upsetting events forces the writer to categorize that event, which makes it more manageable and allows for a more beneficial re-categorization later.

## **Socially Connecting Through Blogs and Vlogs: A Social Connections Approach to Blogging and Vlogging Motivation**

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Many blogs involve sharing personal events and effectively act as public diaries for the blogger (see Baker & Moore, 2008 for examples of this characterization). To the extent that blogging functions similarly to journaling, the positive effects of journaling should also exist for bloggers, and much research supports this proposition. The social sharing that takes place via personal blogs increases perceptions of subjective well-being and social integration for the blogger (Baker & Moore, 2008; Ko & Kuo, 2009). Moreover, blogging about distressing events (e.g., emotional difficulties) significantly reduces their impact (Boniel-Nissim & Barak, 2013). In many cases, benefits experienced by the blogger appear to be driven by audience participation or awareness (Boniel-Nissim & Barak, 2013; Chen, Liu, Shih, Wu, & Yuan, 2011). Thus, it is likely that blogging provides a positive impact on the self-esteem and well-being of the blogger to the extent that bloggers make or perceive social connections that satisfy their need to belong and provide avenues for social support.

### **Writing for Social Support**

Unlike traditional diaries, most blogs are publicly accessible, making it possible for others to provide social support to the author. Garnering social support is associated with several positive physiological (e.g., increased immune function, decreased blood pressure; Uchino, 2004) and psychological outcomes (Smith, Fernengel, Holcroft, Gerald, & Marien, 1994). Social support for bloggers typically comes in the form of comments from blog readers on individual blog posts, although support via other methods of communication also occurs (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004). While negative social feedback from blog readers is possible, it is not the norm (see Herring et al., 2005 for discussion).

Because blogs provide social support, and that social support has meaningful effects on blog author's subjective well-being and health (Rains & Keating, 2011), the social support garnered by blogging may be particularly useful for those suffering from health conditions. Blogging can provide those who suffer from health issues a supportive community in which to self-disclose and vent frustrations, accountability, and validation of their health successes (Sanford, 2010). Similarly, Berry et al. (2017), a recent thematic analysis of mental-health-related tweets, determined that people often discussed mental health issues on Twitter "to express themselves ... and reflect back on the tweets to recognize their thoughts and feelings over time." Other reasons mentioned include providing a sense of community and a coping mechanism, as well as combatting stereotypes and self-expression.

### **Blogging for Social Connection**

Research suggests blogging (and microblogging) can fulfill thwarted belonging and affiliation needs (Chen, 2011; Knowles et al., 2015). Bloggers often note a desire for social connection as a reason for starting and maintaining their blog (Miura & Yamashita,

## **Socially Connecting Through Blogs and Vlogs: A Social Connections Approach to Blogging and Vlogging Motivation**

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2007). For example, bloggers often cite “to share my expertise and feelings with others” and “to meet and connect with like-minded people” as common blogging motivations (Technorati, 2011). Research on blogger motivations supports this self-report data. Fullwood et al. (2009) showed that blogging may fulfil an emotional need, such as validation for one’s self-expression. Hollenbaugh (2011) noted seven motives for maintaining a blog, and the majority of these motives related to making social connections. Some research has shown that bloggers (compared to non-bloggers) scored lower on social integration and satisfaction with their number of friends (Baker & Moore, 2008). Additionally, studies report that bloggers are motivated to continue updating their blogs when they are aware others are reading what they have written (Nardi et al., 2004). Thus, motivation for maintaining a blog decreases when there is less chance that bloggers will satisfy their need to belong.

In a similar vein, vlogging has been described as a “participatory culture” (Snelson, 2015), which is characterized by the following (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006):

- 1) Low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement;
- 2) Strong support for creating and sharing with others;
- 3) Informal mentorships by which expert knowledge is transmitted to novices;
- 4) A belief that an individual’s contribution matters; and
- 5) A perceived social connection between members.

In fact, Snelson (2015) identified several vlogger motivations directly related to social connection: “because friends were doing it,” to “share information,” and to “connect with others” (along with to “alleviate boredom,” “for fun,” to “build confidence or improve their speaking skills,” and to “document their experiences”). Due to the rich personal form of communication that video offers (Warmbrodt, Sheng, Hall, & Cao, 2010), the motivation for social connection may be even stronger among vloggers than among bloggers because of the method used.

The evidence indicates that these efforts to forge a social connection are reciprocated by blog consumers. Blog consumers can seek out topics of interest among the blogs available and further differentiate among the available blogs based on traditional indicators of liking, such as attractiveness and perceived similarity (Lee & Watkins, 2016). They often feel as though they know the blogger and that a “relationship” has been established (Lee & Watkins, 2016); this relationship between a media personality and media users has been described as a “para-social interaction” (e.g., Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012). Bloggers also appear responsive when blog readers reciprocate the social connection, as those whose readers communicate with them are more likely to continue blogging (Kawaura, Yamashita, Kawakami, 1999; Liao, Liu, & Pi, 2011), creating and maintaining a cycle of social connectivity.

## **Self-Presentation**

## **Socially Connecting Through Blogs and Vlogs: A Social Connections Approach to Blogging and Vlogging Motivation**

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Self-presentation involves the image an individual presents to the public (Goffman, 1978), and the person's goals can dictate the content of the presentation (e.g., economic or social gain, self-esteem, identity maintenance; Leary & Kowalski, 1995).

A blog provides a blogger with a means of publicly stating an opinion on an issue, and thus, provides an opportunity to control one's self-presentation. For instance, such a public stance could have either social-adjustive or self-expressive motivations behind it (DeBono, 2006). A social-adjustive motivation involves the act of "fitting in," the desire to appear socially normal, and to hold a popular opinion for the social rewards that that opinion entails. This motivation is more prominent in individuals who are high self-monitors (i.e., those who spend increased amounts of time reflecting on how their behaviors impact on others; DeBono, Leavitt, & Backus, 2003). Conversely, value-expressive motivation involves authenticity, a desire to show the "true self," and to establish consistency between a public behavior and a privately held opinion (DeBono et al., 2003).

Harnish and Bridges (2016) recently applied this paradigm to so-called "mall haul vlogs," where a YouTube celebrity creates a short video discussing the relative merits of a consumer good (e.g., a cosmetic, a luxury handbag). They found that, compared to low self-monitors, high-self monitors were more likely to create mall haul vlogs, and when they did, they tended to mention fewer products and provide more positive assessments. A similar dynamic would be expected with non-consumer opinion blogs as well (e.g., a political blogger who is a high self-monitor would be unlikely to disparage a candidate admired by the blog's readers).

Twitter also acts as a self-presentation platform (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). However, the nature of tweeting provides an additional complication: tweets are short, which can eliminate much of the context and nuance in a communication (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012). Tweets also have the potential to involve a large, broad audience, so if the presenter's ultimate goal is popularity, the individual is required to manage the presentation so that it appeals to the broadest swath of the audience (the so-called "lowest common denominator"), and, as a result, the posted message can be quite shallow (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

## **Extrinsic Benefits of Blogging: Exploiting the Social Connection**

The major extrinsic motivation for some bloggers is the opportunity to earn a living, working at home, discussing a topic of interest. Approximately 25 percent of bloggers operate their blogs in effort to obtain income equivalent to a full-time job (Collamer, 2015). However, most fail to do so. Although some bloggers can gain employment from established media outlets, obtain consulting work, or receive substantial ad revenue, the majority (57 percent) earned less than \$2,500 in 2015, and only 11 percent earn more than \$30,000 per year (Collamer, 2015). For popular bloggers, whether it's due to niche, talent, or celebrity status, blogs can be quite lucrative. Even if a blog did not begin as a commercial venture, popular blogs have the potential to evolve into one. By the same token, even commercial blogs contain social elements, such as comments sections, that serve to fill the need to belong.

The social connection between blog consumers and blog owners has a potential for exploitation. One of the "para-social" elements of such a relationship is that many media users will view the relationship as a "friendship" and respond to the advice of the media personality as though it were coming from a friend (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Compared to past forms of media, blogging in its various derivations involves some level of interactivity (or at least, perceived interactivity) between the blogger and his or her audience, and can allow a media personality to expand his or her audience while ultimately still controlling the relationship (Stever & Lawson, 2013). For this reason, so-called "brand managers" have chosen online personalities, such as bloggers and vloggers, to act as "brand ambassadors" for their products and exploit what is perceived as a trust relationship (Lee & Watkins, 2016). As discussed, the "mall haul" YouTube celebrity vloggers extoll the merits of particular brands of consumer products (Harnish & Bridges, 2016); as with any endorsement, the opinion may be inauthentic or legitimately held, but in many cases, the video or the insertion of the product into the video is unlikely to have occurred organically. This appears to be an effective strategy, as consumers appear to trust these types of testimonials more than conventional TV ads (Nielson, 2012).

Thus, even when the motivations behind a blog are commercial in nature, social connection elements persist. They are present for the blogger, who seldom receives an adequate return on investment from a purely economic perspective. They exist for the blog consumer, as well, who feels connected to the blogger enough to trust the blogger above and beyond the blogger's status as a "media personality."

## **Conclusions and Implications**

## **Socially Connecting Through Blogs and Vlogs: A Social Connections Approach to Blogging and Vlogging Motivation**

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People have a need to maintain positive social connections with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and the Internet has enabled people to fill this need through novel and unique channels, such as blogging. Although there are many blogging motivations, we argue that, to varying degrees, the fundamental need to belong pervades virtually all blogging enterprises. Given this, blogging has the potential to play an important role in the lives of people who feel less able to connect to others via FTF interactions, or who perhaps feel that they are better able to express their “true self” online. The literature reviewed here corroborates this statement by highlighting the many psychological benefits from keeping a blog, such as increasing subjective well-being (Ko & Kuo, 2009), decreasing emotional difficulties (Boniel-Nissim & Barak, 2013), and dealing with stigmatizing identities adaptively (Sanford, 2010). These benefits are driven by interactions with others, either through self-expression or interactions with blog consumers.

While traditional blogging has seen a decrease in recent years (Okdie et al., 2011), it largely has been supplanted by derivations of blogging (e.g., tweeting, vlogging). Economist Paul Krugman, a popular columnist and blogger for the New York Times, recently rationalized tweeting more and blogging less:

In some ways, it's a step backwards: 140 characters instead of little essays that can run to hundreds or even thousands of words. Some innovations like tweetstorms—a series of linked tweets telling a longer story—are arguably just awkward ways to imperfectly replicate blog posts. But the fact is that a lot more people read a tweetstorm than read a blog post. Also, the logistics turn out to be easier for technical reasons – I can tweet very quickly in response to an event, where blogging, thanks in part to (much needed) Times security features, is a more laborious process

(Krugman, 2016).

Thus, the same justifications for choosing to communicate via blog in the first place (e.g., convenience, reach) may be driving individuals to find an even more effective and efficient way of communicating. By extension, the same principles that apply to blogging motivations should apply to its derivations, if not to an even greater extent. After all, blogging is, at its heart, a more-or-less authentic personal statement about a particular issue. Making the statement more spontaneous (as with microblogging) or more personal (as with vlogging) would only seem to intensify the essential elements.

While the presence of traditional (lengthy, text-only) posts is shrinking, newer, more immediate forms of online self-expression are emerging and growing rapidly. Empirical studies featuring these newer forms of blogging have produced results that effectively parallel results uncovered by over a decade's worth of blogging research. Both bloggers and neobloggers appear to share the same motivations (e.g., the need to belong) and produce the similar psychological outcomes, making them equally meaningful. Newer forms of blogging, such as microblogging, also bring with them increased accessibility. For example, microblogging platforms are predominantly used on mobile devices that

## **Socially Connecting Through Blogs and Vlogs: A Social Connections Approach to Blogging and Vlogging Motivation**

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allow constant access to self-expression and receipt of social interaction. The future of blogging appears to be shorter multimedia messages delivered more frequently to a broad audience that expedites the satisfaction of the individual's need to belong.

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