



# Why do people post and read personal messages in public? The motivation of using personal blogs and its effects on users' loneliness, belonging, and well-being

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current paper is to develop a theoretical model that identifies why people blog personal content and explains the effects of blogging in “real life.” Data from an online survey are analyzed using maximum likelihood procedures in LISREL 8.75 to test the structural model. Among 531 respondents from *Cyworld*, a popular social network and blogging site in South Korea, a randomly selected group of 251 users was used to develop the model. The other group of 280 users was used to confirm the usefulness of the revised model. Results ( $N = 251$ ;  $N = 280$ ) showed that *impression management* and *voyeuristic surveillance* are two major psychological factors that motivate individuals to post and read messages on personal blogs. Results also showed evidence for blogging's real life consequences, measured by users' perceived social support, loneliness, belonging, and subjective well-being.

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## 1. Introduction

Using weblogs (“Blogging”) has become a very popular activity among Internet users (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Blogging refers to individual activities of adding content to a blog that include *periodically* posting messages/photos about *bloggers' own interests* on the Internet and *receiving comments* about the postings from visitors. According to Pew Internet & American Life Project, blogging is now a “key part of online culture” (Lee, 2005). Its nationally representative telephone survey revealed that 57 million American adults read blogs and twelve million American adults keep a blog (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

Among various types of blogs, personal blogs have become extremely popular. According to Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright (2004), 70% of blogs are personal (see also Stefanone & Jang, 2007). In personal blogs, people post personal stories and photos to share with family, friends, and strangers as they would in their personal diaries. Stories and photos in these blogs often involve private matters, yet they are available for everyone to read. It is interesting to note that people post their personal stories and pictures willingly, knowing that anyone (not only family or friends) can access them. An extreme example would be Jessica's blog where Jessica had been posting her personal stories

anonymously. In it, she detailed her inappropriate sexual relationships with six current sexual partners at her workplace (Witt, 2004). Unlike a personal diary, her new posting was available to many people and spread rapidly. As a result, she was fired from her job by the day following the posting. In spite that this is an extreme case, it shows a good example that the willingness to self disclose in personal blogs violates traditional theories of interpersonal communication, such as social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). What are, then, the psychological factors that may account for these unusual activities on personal blogs? Although the question is very intriguing both academically and practically, few studies have examined the current socio-psychological phenomenon of rapidly increasing personal blog usage theoretically and empirically (see Fullwood, Sheehan, & Nicholls, 2009 for more detailed discussions).

The purpose of the current paper is to develop a theoretical model to explain why people use personal blogs and the “real” (i.e., social) life effects of using personal blogs. There have been relatively few studies that examined both motivations and consequences in one study. Therefore, it is worth investigating two areas of media research that used to be studied separately in one theoretical model. We first identify psychological factors that may account for personal blog use and conceptualize a theoretical model based on three phases: *motivations*, *usage*, and *consequences*, measured by users' perceived social support, loneliness, belonging, and psychological well-being in their social life. Then, we report collected survey data from 531 users of *Cyworld*, a popular Korean site and discuss implications with respect to impression management and perceived social support from using personal blogs.

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## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Motivation

There are two distinctive ways of using personal blogs, namely (1) posting own messages/photos and (2) reading others' messages/photos. Accordingly, two different gratifications or motivations for using personal blogs may also exist (c.f., Uses and Gratifications Theory).

#### 2.1.1. Impression management

According to Goffman (1959), impression management refers to managing one's own impressions in desirable ways because they are related to how a person is evaluated by others and much of social behavior is influenced by the impression others have (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Indeed, self-representation and self-concept are often embedded in relationship schemas, making it essential to get the validation of one's own identity from other people for realizing the self (Baumeister, 1992). In this regard, we define impression management as people's desire to make good impressions to others in our paper.

Using the Internet to develop and strengthen the personal relationship provides individuals with new challenges in terms of self presentation. Although self presentation also takes place offline, online communication environments enable a more active engagement of self-presentation strategies (Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Online self presentation is much more controllable than offline activities because users can easily create, modify, and edit the messages about the self (Burgoon & Walther, 1990). For example, several studies have confirmed that managing impressions through personal home pages is advantageous because the Internet gives individuals greater freedom to express their desired identities through digital stimuli rather than through physical referents (e.g., Papacharissi, 2002; Schau & Gilly, 2003).

However, online impression management cannot be entirely deceptive because of others' comments. In this regard, self-monitoring or metaperceptions (i.e., know how others view oneself) is also an important part of impression management because one learns about oneself and modifies the impression-management strategy accordingly by understanding how others respond (see Cooley, 1902 for the concept of "looking glass self"; see also Zhao, 2005). As such, it is important to note that impression management may be related to not only posting activities, but also reading activities in order to confirm others' validation of the digitally constructed self. For example, one may read comments by visitors on one's own postings in order to get the validation of one's opinions or read others' postings that include information about the one in order to see how other people think of the one.

Taken together, posting and reading activities on personal blogs are likely to be related to strategic impression management because personal blogs are periodically updated by their owners in order to construct desired identities and frequently commented on by visitors as a process of validation by other people. Based on above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 1.** Impression management will be positively associated with (a) message posting; and (b) message reading.

#### 2.1.2. Voyeuristic surveillance

The other psychological factor is more likely to be related to reading activities, often described as voyeurism. Calvert (2000) defines voyeurism in the new media era, as a harmless yet guilty pleasure of peeking into others' apparently real and unguarded lives by anyone with television and the Internet. Recently, various entertainment offerings, including popular television programs,

known as reality TV (e.g., *Survivor*, *Apprentice*, *Big brother*, *The Bachelor*, etc.), have been broadcast through networks, cable channels, or the Internet. Indeed, cultural changes, technological developments, and lax privacy laws may seduce people into having more pleasure with voyeuristic activities without feeling guilty (Metzl, 2004). A study by Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt (2003) indicates that viewers in fact watch reality-based television for those voyeuristic reasons. In particular, regular viewers admitted that they enjoyed getting a peek into other people's lives to some degree.

However, the fundamental difference between voyeurism in the "real" (i.e., the social) world versus through media use is whether or not a violation of privacy exists. Reading blogs, visitors may have the pleasure of voyeurism (peeking into someone's life) when they view personal messages and photos on personal blogs secretly, i.e., without letting the owners know who reads what. Nonetheless, the owners' privacy is not violated because contents on the personal blog are intentionally posted by the owners, and exposure to anonymous visitors is expected. In this regard, reading messages and photos on personal blogs is more similar to the surveillance of other people and yet provides readers with some degree of voyeuristic pleasure.

Taken together, we define voyeuristic surveillance as individual tendency to pay attention to other people *with the pleasure of voyeurism* (i.e., peeking into their lives secretly) and *without being guilty of violating other people's privacy* (i.e., being allowed to have a peek). Therefore, voyeuristic surveillance should be strongly related to the number of messages/photos that people read on personal blogs. Based on above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 2.** Voyeuristic surveillance will be positively associated with message reading.

#### 2.1.3. Social comparison

Two psychological factors discussed above (i.e., impression management and voyeuristic surveillance) are context dependent. That is, we could discuss impression management and voyeuristic surveillance only within the context of personal blogs or computer mediated environments. With respect to a more fundamental motivation, social comparison may be the reason why individuals have desires for and are actively participating in impression management and voyeuristic surveillance in personal blogs. Social comparison theory posits that individuals have a "drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities" by comparing themselves with other people (Festinger, 1954; p. 117). Although individual differences exist in the extent to which people engage in social comparison processes, it is believed that the desire or tendency for social comparison is universal (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Having said that, reading activities on blogs can provide bloggers with opportunities to compare themselves with others, either by reading original content posted by others or by reading specific replies or comments on their own content. Posting activities, on the other hand, can be a learning process by distinguishing themselves from others through expressing their uniqueness and values in these postings. Those individuals who tend to compare themselves with others more frequently are likely to express their uniqueness (Pavitt, 1994).

It is important to note that social comparison is a general state, whereas impression management and voyeuristic surveillance are task specific. In this regard, the general state of social comparison that can be applied to various contexts is likely to influence impression management and voyeuristic surveillance in the particular context of personal blogs. Thus, we hypothesize that the path would be from social comparison to impression management and voyeuristic surveillance rather than the other way around. Based on above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

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