



Why do women write personal blogs? Satisfying needs for self-disclosure and affiliation tell part of the story

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ABSTRACT

Hierarchical OLS regression of survey results from a random sample of 312 women bloggers reveals a statistically significant positive relationship between need for self-disclosure and seeing blogging as a way to express one's own voice, mediated by need for affiliation and time spent blogging. In essence, women with a strong need to self-disclose information about themselves are more likely than other women to say they blog to express their own voice in the blogosphere, compared with blogging to connect with other people or to gain influence in the blogosphere. In contrast, for women who blog to connect with other people or gain influence in the blogosphere, the strongest predictors is time spent blogging, not needs that motivated them to blog. Results are discussed in relation to need theory.

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1. Introduction

Since blogging began in the late 1990s, millions of people have started blogs with millions more reading them. Much of the research on this burgeoning medium has focused on political blogs or blogs that filter news content, formats more frequently employed by male bloggers (Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2005; Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, & Wright, 2006; Lopez, 2009). The small amount of research that has focused on the more popular personal blogs – which are more likely to be written by women – has dealt with general motivations for blogging. These include women's desire to express themselves, document their lives, and find community with other people through blogging (Huang, Shen, Lin, & Chang, 2007; Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004).

This current study builds on this foundation in two ways. First, I used motivations for women bloggers identified in earlier research and formalized them into theoretical models of gratifications women derive from blogging. Secondly, I used the classic psychological theory of needs (Maslow, 1943, 1967, 1968, 1987; Murray, 1953) to show underlying – and perhaps unconscious needs – that drive women to blog and meet these gratifications. This offers new knowledge, as earlier studies have focused on why women blog simply by asking them. My premise is that people do not always know why they do what they do, so this study aimed to get at a deeper explanation of why women blog. To do so, it examined three psychological needs that women might not consciously realize spur them to blog: needs for self-disclosure, affiliation, and achievement.

I proposed that individual women bloggers seek to fill each of these needs to varying degrees, but one need predominates over the others for an individual woman. The need that predominates will predict what type of gratifying experience that woman gets from blogging. I assert there is not one answer to the question: Why do women blog? The question has multiple answers, based on what need is most deficient in her.

1.1. Study goals

This study had three main goals. The first was to fill a gap in blogging research by proposing models that explains both the needs that drive women to blog and how these needs link to specific gratifications women get out of blogging. I predicted that women with a high need to self-disclose, defined as revealing information about the self (Derlega & Chaikin, 1976; Wheelless & Grotz, 1976), will see blogging as a way to express their own voice. Women who have a high need to affiliate or interact socially with others (Heckert et al., 1999), will see blogging as a way to connect with people through an informal type of camaraderie explained by Granovetter's (1973) concept of weak ties between individuals. Women who have a high need to achieve, defined as a desire to excel and improve on past performance, will see blogging as a way to have influence in the blogosphere. The second goal of this study was to explain how these needs fit together, and how time spent blogging mediates the relationship between particular needs and specific gratifications. Finally, my goal was to extend the classic psychological theory of needs to the computer-mediated domain of blogging.

First, I offer a brief history of the female blogosphere. Then I explore the theoretical support for the models I propose. Finally, I

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outline how the models were tested and explain how the results fit into existing research and expand knowledge of why women blog.

1.2. Women bloggers

Blogging started in the late 1990s when a handful of web designers and software engineers came up with the format, then called a weblog, as a way to share interesting links to other web pages with their friends (Blood, 2002; Rosenberg, 2009). In those early days, men dominated the web (Bimber, 2000; Consalvo & Paasonen, 2002; Fallows, 2005; Herring, 1996, 2000), and women's voices were as limited there as they had been for years from the public discourse (Herring, Johnson, & DiBenedetto, 1998). Blogging grew in popularity, spurred by free build-your-own-weblog tools, such as Blogger, a blogging platform that made creating and updating a blog easier, even for those without computer coding expertise. The number of bloggers surged, and the web's gender gap narrowed until women younger than 30 had outpaced men online (Consalvo & Paasonen, 2002; Fallows, 2005). As time went on, women were blogging in roughly equal numbers to men (Lenhart & Fox, 2006), and by 2009, 8 million American women were blogging (Wright & Page, 2009). The blogosphere had grown from what Rosenberg (2009) calls "a handful of enthusiasts on the fringes of the technology industry into a dominant media form online" (p. 2).

1.3. Personal blogs

This study focuses exclusively on women who write personal blogs because personal blogs far outnumber so-called filter blogs (Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Herring et al., 2005, 2006; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Lopez, 2009). Filter blogs link to other sites to filter web content (Herring & Paolillo, 2006), while people write about their experiences and feelings on personal blogs (Hartelius, 2005; Herring et al., 2005; Li, 2007). Understanding personal blogs is important because women are more likely than men to write them, so examining only filter blogs can tend to focus almost exclusively on male bloggers (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright, 2004), creating research that assumes the male blog as the norm and can leave women's blogging experience out of the conversation.

Earlier studies have found women write personal blogs for many of the same reasons they seek social outlets offline: to seek others' opinions, express emotions, and release tension (Huang et al., 2007; Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). Women blog to express deeply held emotions, articulate ideas, form and maintain community forums, provide commentary, and document their lives (Huang et al., 2007; Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). Pedersen and Macafee (2007) reported that British women tended to describe themselves as most interested in the social aspects of blogging, compared with men, who favor information and opinion. Women also have been found to be more likely to blog to pass the time and write about internal topics, such as hobbies, friends and relatives, and personal experiences, while men see blogging as a more instrumental activity and are more attuned to covering external topics, such as science and technology (Li, 2007). Because these studies and other research (e.g. Knobloch-Westerwick & Alter, 2006) have found that men and women have different motivations for using media content and derive divergent gratifications from that use, focusing solely on women's personal blogs was a way to control for this variance. In addition, much of the research on personal blogging motivations (Huang et al., 2007; Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004) that I used to propose my theoretical models has focused on women. Therefore, it is likely blogging motivations would be different for men, whether they write per-

sonal or filter blogs, so these motivations are outside the scope of this current study.

2. Theory

2.1. Psychological needs

This study proposed that women blog to meet needs or deficits in themselves. This premise relied in Maslow's (1943, 1967, 1968, 1987) classic motivational theory based on a hierarchy of needs, which grew out of Murray's (1953) earlier writings. While theorized decades long ago, Maslow's work has been a major and enduring contribution to explaining human behavior (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). It continues to have relevance today because of decades of support, as it has been tested in varied domains, such as health care and business (e.g. Cangemi, 2009; Herbst, 2006). More recently, the concept of needs has been applied to blogging (Detenber, Wijaya, & Goh, 2008). I believe there is merit in extending this classic theory to the female blogosphere because it offers a way to examine underlying needs that drive women to blog, rather than relying on why women think they blog, as earlier research has done (Huang et al., 2007; Li, 2007; Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). Using need theory also supports formation of theoretical models to explain how women's underlying needs link to specific blogging experiences.

In essence, need theory proposes that needs are forces that push people to gratify these needs to reach a state of homeostasis or equilibrium (Maslow, 1943, 1967, 1968, 1987; Murray, 1953). In this way, needs motivate behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2008). People sort their needs into a hierarchy and satisfy the physiological ones, such as hunger or thirst, first. Once these primary needs are met, people focus on secondary needs, such as self-disclosure, affiliation, or achievement. These needs grow out of people's self-concepts, so one person may feel a need more deeply than another person does (Cantor, Markus, Niedenthal, & Nurius, 1986). People are most motivated to fill needs they feel most deeply. These needs may be unconscious, or people may be aware they have the need but not necessarily understand how that need drives their behavior. For example, a person who eats a doughnut after an argument with a spouse may not be fully aware he or she is filling a need for love, not hunger. I suggest that the psychological needs examined in this study operate in a similar fashion, such that a woman might be aware she has a need for self-disclosure, affiliation, or achievement, but she may not realize whether that need motivates her to blog. If asked why she blogs, she is unlikely to say she blogs to meet a need to self-disclose, achieve, or affiliate. However, I proposed that by linking her strongest need to her reason for blogging, we can reveal the underlying motivation for blogging. For this reason, I surveyed women about their psychological needs in a general sense, unrelated to blogging, and then questioned them about gratifications they may gain through blogging.

2.2. Need theory applied to women's personal blogs

When applied to women bloggers, this theory explains that women who feel the greatest need to self-disclose will be more disposed toward filling that need through blogging. These women with a strong need to self-disclose will be more likely to see blogging as a means to express their own voice, compared to women who are motivated by other needs, such as affiliation or achievement. Similarly, women who feel the strongest need to affiliate, will be more likely to report that blogging enables them to form connections with other people, versus other gratifications. Finally, women with the strongest drive to achieve will be more likely to report blogging to feel powerful or influential. Therefore, when

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