

Writing for Friends and Family: The Interpersonal Nature of Blogs

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Some bloggers publicly broadcast highly personal information across the Internet -- information usually found in personal diaries or private journals. Why do they do this?

An exploratory study published in the January issue of the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* says they are likely to be self-disclosing extraverts who use personal blogs to strengthen and enhance their already large networks of strong social ties.

The study, "Writing for Friends and Family: The Interpersonal Nature of Blogs," was conducted by Michael Stefanone, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Communication in the University at Buffalo's College of Arts and Sciences, and Chyng-Yang Jang, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Texas, Arlington.

"Previous researchers have questioned why people are driven to post content traditionally limited to such personal mediums of expression," Stefanone says, "and they have found evidence that the intention was to maintain close relationships."

Many questions remained, however, as to who is most likely to appropriate the equivalent of a 'broadcasting' model of content delivery for this use and how their personality traits relate to this decision.

Stefanone says the study results support the growing body of literature

that suggests that computer-mediated communication tools facilitate and enhance relationships rather than promote social isolation.

"People have a long history of appropriating technology to fulfill specific goals," he says, "and in the case of Internet technologies, those goals have typically been interpersonal in nature. We can see this in the ubiquity of email and the popularity of social-networking sites.

"Research indicates that a hallmark feature of blogs is content analogous to traditional diaries and journals," he says.

Stefanone and Jang set out to explore the role of individual personality traits in relation to the size and closeness of social network characteristics and the extent to which these are related to the adoption of such blogs for interpersonal goals.

They generated a random sample of 1,000 personal-style blogs that ultimately produced a study sample of 154 personal bloggers from 32 countries.

The participants completed surveys that explored how the personality traits of extraversion and self-disclosure affect the size of an individuals' network of strong social ties and how that network size influences the bloggers' use of their blogs to support it.

Extraverts, the researchers note, are comfortable meeting and being around new people and have an enhanced opportunity to develop relationships with them. None of the characteristics of extraversion, however, suggests that it systematically promotes relationship intensity or depth. Self-disclosure, on the other hand, through a reciprocity effect, encourages a mutual self-disclosure that helps relationships develop and grow in intimacy.

So extraversion alone promotes large -- but not necessarily intimate or strong-tie -- social networks, and self-disclosure alone promotes intimate or strong-tie relationships, but not necessarily a large number of them.

The study found that bloggers who exhibited both traits, tended to have large STNs and to use blogs as an alternative communication channel to support these ties. They use them, in fact, in a way similar to email.

"Perhaps they do this because blogs pose a cheap and convenient way for extroverted self-disclosers to keep in touch with a lot of people in their social networks," Stefanone says, noting that this is something that would have a high value for such individuals.

"Unlike other Internet tools," he points out, "personal journal blogs permit bloggers to present their intimate thoughts to those they trust, although in a relatively public forum, and get feedback about those issues and feelings through public postings and comments."

The researchers found that neither age, nor gender, nor education influence strong-tie network size, blog content or the use of blogs as a relationship maintenance tool

Most of the bloggers in the study did not set access restrictions to their blogs, so postings were available to all readers, Stefanone says.

He says that when it came to personal issues, such as family and romance issues, and regardless of the size of their general audience, the bloggers addressed most postings to members of their STNs.

"This indicates that members of close-tie networks offer important psychological or emotional support not available from casual acquaintances and romantic relationships," Stefanone says.

Source: University at Buffalo

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