Can Blogging Enhance Subjective Well-being Through Self-Disclosure?

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Abstract

Based on the self-disclosure theory and the social capital theory, this study investigates if bloggers' self-disclosure enhances their social capital and if these capitals in turn enhance perception of subjective well-being (SWB). The results reveal that the self-disclosure of bloggers significantly and directly affects a blogger's perception of social integration, bonding social capital, and bridge social capital, which in turn promote bloggers' subjective well-being. It appears that as bloggers share their inner thoughts of their moods/feelings with others through writing, they may gain greater social support and improve their social integration. Therefore, self-disclosure through blogging may serve as the core of building intimate relationships. Furthermore, social capital, built through blogging, may improve a blogger's satisfaction with his/her social contact, interpersonal communication, and overall quality of life.

Keywords: Blog, Self-Disclosure, Social Capital, Subjective Well-being

Introduction

The Internet has become an integral part of daily life in today's Socio-Technical Environment. In the view of Amichai-Hamburger and Furnham, the Internet brings numerous positive benefits to our lives such as improving the quality of life and

well-being of marginal groups, constituting social recognition of individuals, and improving relationships of intergroups.¹ Liu and Kuo also discover that people may enjoy positive effects of Internet by fulfilling interpersonal needs without suffering from harmful Internet abuse.² Thus, proper use of the Internet can help improve the users' quality of life and enhances their perception of well-being.

Indeed, the question concerning the effect of Internet use on well-being has become increasingly critical with the rise of Web2.0 application such as Blogs. Among all types of blogs, personal journals have the most user groups in Taiwan,³ with most of them consisting of students. A personal journal reflects the inner world of a blogger through self-disclosure, a process through which an individual employs to share his/her feelings, thoughts, experiences, or information with others.⁴ Self-disclosure is also a process where an individual gains acquaintance or even develops intimate relationships with others.⁵ Therefore, self-disclosure may help bloggers to both maintain existing human relations and extend their human network,⁶ both of which are considered important to people's social capital.⁷ In addition, many studies have shown that individuals' social capital contributes to their perception of well-being positively.⁸⁻¹⁰ For bloggers, it is likely that the more they disclose themselves in their blogs, the higher the social capital they can build and, eventually, the more well-being they can acquire.

Based on the self-disclosure and the social capital theories, this study investigates how self-disclosure influences users' perceptions of social capital and subjective well-being. Specifically, we study how self-disclosure influences its users in maintaining and building their social capital and how the acquired social capital influences the bloggers' perception of subjective well-being.

Literature review and hypothesis development

Self-Disclosure and Social Capital

Self-disclosure refers to how individuals communicate with others using their own information, including personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences, for the purpose of sharing.⁴ According to Wheelless and Grotz, self-disclosure consists of multiple dimensions, including (a) Intention, (b) Amount, (c) Positive/Negative Matter, (d) Depth, and (e) Honesty and Accuracy.¹¹

Self-disclosure is important to social integration, which refers to the evaluation of one's relationship quality to society and community.¹³ Cohen has pointed out that social integration relies mainly on the diversity of relationships one participates in.¹⁴ When people share their deep thoughts such as feelings of trauma, pressure, and depression with others belonging to the same community, they may acquire social support and improve

their integration with society¹². Niederhoffer and Pennebaker also report that self-disclosure by writing can produce the positive benefits of social integration.¹⁵ The following hypothesis is therefore formulated:

[H1]: The deeper self-disclosure a blogger makes, the higher the level of social integration he/she perceives.

In addition, Putnam views social capital consisting of two non-independent categories: bonding and bridging.⁷ The former exists in groups of individuals who share tightly-knit, intimacy, and reciprocal relationships. These family-like, closely bonded members receive frequent interactions and their relationships are voluntary, supportive, and lasting. Alternatively, the bridge social capital exists in people coming from different networks through which members can share diversified messages and acquire resources from the outside. Because the audience interacting with bloggers includes both existing friends and stranger lurkers,^{6,16} the opportunity to enhance the bloggers' bonding and bridging capital is enhanced. For example, Bortee has found that teenage girls build and maintain their friendships by sharing their thoughts, frustration, disappointment, and occasional despair with friends via blogging.¹⁶ To these blog users, blog writing offers a way not just to maintain the offline friendship but also to broaden their virtual friends.

Thus, the following two hypotheses are formulated:

[H2]: The deeper self-disclosure a blogger makes, the greater the social bonding he/she perceives.

[H3]: The deeper self-disclosure a blogger makes, the stronger the social bridging he/she perceives.

Social Capital and Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being is defined as people's consciousness and feelings about their lives, including pleasure perception, positive emotions, and higher satisfaction.¹⁷ Many studies have shown that social capital may influence an individual's health and subjective well-being. For example, Leung and Lee have demonstrated a positive correlation between social support and quality of living.⁹ This is consistent with the finding of Contarello and Sarrica who show a positive correlation between social integration and social well-being.¹⁸ The study by Sirgy also indicates that the Internet can help users both strengthening connection with close friends and increasing information accessibility related to their interests and communities to which they belong, thus contributing to the improvement of a user's subjective well-being.¹⁰ Thus, social integration, bonding, and bridging are connected with subjective well-being. Therefore, this study proposes the

fourth, fifth, and sixth hypotheses:

[H4]: The higher level of social integration a blogger perceives, the greater the subjective well-being he/she perceives.

[H5]: The greater social bonding a blogger perceives, the greater the subjective well-being he/she perceives.

[H6]: The stronger social bridging a blogger perceives, the greater the subjective well-being he/she perceives.

Research Methodology

Materials and Methods

This study targets the student groups that comprise the majority of journal blog users in Taiwan.³ We have employed a questionnaire to collect data, which were then analyzed by using the method of structural equation modeling (SEM). All items selected for the constructs (see Table 1) have been adapted from prior research to ensure content validity, the last of which consisted of 43 self-reported items. A pre-test and a pilot test were also conducted to validate the instrument further test the feasibility of this research.

(Insert Table 1 here)

Results

Demographics Analysis

Data for this study were collected in a convenience sample consisting of 751 students with blogging experiences. 59 questionnaires were discarded due to many missing data. This resulted in a final sample of 692 respondents, of whom 70.91% were female, 94 % were between the ages of 16-22 years old, 68.89 % were undergraduate students, and 86.25 % were in the personal journal category. Because our study focuses on journal blogging experiences, only 596 subjects were used for the following structure model testing analysis eventually.

Analysis of Factors and Validity

In this study, Exploratory Factor Analysis was used to examine the construct validity using SPSS 13.0. The principal-components analysis was used as extraction method and varimax rotation was used to extract the components. As a result, the depth and breadth of self-disclosure were merged into one element, labeled as 'extent of self-disclosure.' Table 1 shows that the measurements meet the reliability,¹⁹ converge,²⁰ and discriminant validity²⁰ requirement.

Structural Model Results

We have employed the SmartPLS 2.0 to perform Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach for model testing. As in structural equation modeling (SEM), the PLS approach allows researchers to assess measurement model parameters and structural path coefficients simultaneously. As advised by Chin, we used a PLS bootstrapping technique with 500.²⁰ Figure 1 shows the results, indicating self-disclosure is a significant predictor of social bonding ($\beta=0.45$, $p<0.001$, $R^2=0.21$), social integration ($\beta=0.41$, $p<0.001$, $R^2=0.17$), and social bridging ($\beta=0.32$, $p<0.001$, $R^2=0.10$). This supports H1, H2, and H3. Also, the blogger's perception of subjective well-being is significantly predicted by bloggers' perception of social integration ($\beta=0.34$, $p<0.001$), social bonding ($\beta=0.25$, $p<0.001$), and social bridging ($\beta=0.11$, $p<0.01$). H4, H5, and H6, are therefore supported. Overall, the research model explains 34 % ($R^2=0.34$) of the variance in subjective well-being perceived by bloggers.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

Discussion

Based on the self-disclosure theory and social capital theory, this study aims to discuss how the journal bloggers' self-disclosure behavior influences their social capital,

and how social capital influences their subjective well-being in the Socio-Technical Environment. The results reveal that the self-disclosure behavior of bloggers significantly and directly affects a blogger's perception of social integration, bonding social capital, and bridge social capital, which in turn promote bloggers' subjective well-being.

Further analyzing the blogging experience, we find that among all categories of articles that have been published by bloggers, "Moods/Feelings Expression" appears most frequently. In addition, 93 % of the subjects mention that they express their feelings of pressure in their blogs, indicating subjects may share their inhibition, pressure, and depression with others in their writing. These results are consistent with those of Pennebaker's research that shows when people share their inner thoughts of their moods/feelings with others through writing, they may gain greater social support and improve their social integration.¹² Moreover, self-disclosure through blogging may also serve as the core of building intimate relationships.⁵ In other words, the more the bloggers disclose, the closer and tightly-knit they will be.

In addition, the result shows that for journal bloggers, most audiences come from their classmates and friends in real life (Classmates 88.76 %, Friends 77.68 %), indicating that journal bloggers' self-disclosure may help them improve existing relations

in real life. In other words, blogging does not diminish substantial relations in real life but, on the contrary, helps to enhance bloggers' existing relations through social bonding.

In addition, audiences interacting with bloggers include lurking strangers (32.55 %) and online friends (38.76 %), suggesting that self-disclosure behavior can help people turn latent relations into weak ties and expand their social networks. As shown in our study results, self-disclosure is a predictor of bridging social capital. Blogs may therefore become a viable for seeking emotional support from others, strengthening their sense of belonging, and improving intimacy and connection with others.

Finally, our results also validate that, by sharing their experiences, thoughts, and moods through self-disclosure, the heightened social capital (social integration, social bonding, and social bridge) in turn predict subjective well-being. The point is that social capital, built through blogging, may improve a blogger's satisfaction with his/her social contact, interpersonal communication, and overall quality of life. Thus, as the journal blog becomes merged into the users' daily life, it can bring forth many positive benefits through extension of substantial relations, building relations with others, and emotional expression.

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note: * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 2 Structural Model Test Results

Table 1 Mean, Standard Deviation, Correlation Coefficient, AVE, and CR of the Construct against Square Root of AVE

	Operational Definition	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's α	AVE	CR	Self-disclosure	Social Bonding	Social Integration	Social Bridging	Subjective Well-being
Self-disclosure ²¹	A second-order latent variable consisting of two first-order constructs: honesty and accuracy, amount and depth: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Honesty and accuracy: used to measure the honesty and accuracy of a blogger in describing his/her personal feelings, emotions, behaviors, or experiences. ● Amount and Depth: refers to the volume of information, degree and completeness of intimacy disclosed in a blog. 	5.17	0.88	0.87	0.76	0.87	0.87				
Social Bonding ²²	A blogger perceives social support such as care, love, and empathy from the audiences and receives advices, suggestions, or feedbacks for the purpose of problem-solving.	4.89	1.04	0.80	0.64	0.92	0.45**	0.80			
Social Integration ¹³	A blogger perceives that he/she possesses something similar to the relatives and friends in the circle of life, which confirms his/her sense of belonging to a certain community or society.	4.98	1.05	0.93	0.68	0.94	0.38**	0.55**	0.82		
Social Bridging ²²	A blogger perceives the extension of his/her human relations and the acquisition of information from the sources other than his/her circle.	4.99	0.90	0.85	0.57	0.89	0.28**	0.44**	0.41**	0.76	
Subjective Well-being ²³	The evaluation made by a blogger on his/her social contact, human relations, and self-satisfaction after blogging.	4.86	0.99	0.94	0.78	0.95	0.38**	0.49**	0.51**	0.36**	0.88
<p>Note:</p> <p>(1) * The significant level of correlation coefficient reaches 0.05. ** The significant level of correlation coefficient reaches 0.01.</p> <p>(2) AVE: stands for Average Variance Extracted; CR: stands for Composite Reliability.</p> <p>(3) Bold-line values on the diagonal indicate the square roots of AVE.</p>											

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