Understanding Opinion Leadership and Motivations to Blog: Implications for Public Relations Practice

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UNDERSTANDING OPINION LEADERSHIP AND MOTIVATIONS TO BLOG

Abstract

As the blogosphere continues to grow, understanding the characteristics and motivations of key players is invaluable for public relations practitioners and communicators who deal with message strategy and media outreach. This study investigates opinion leadership among bloggers and blog readers and their motivations to blog. Survey data were obtained from a sample of 552 bloggers and readers, empirically measuring opinion leadership as a trait and as a motivation to blog. The findings suggest that bloggers tend to be opinion leaders, which can help guide the public relations practice in the way it builds relationships with these influentials. These opinion leaders are different from their readers in the motivations that drive their blogging activity. Communication for leadership and entertainment motives appeared to be the strongest motivations for bloggers, while entertainment and information-seeking motivated blog readers. Significant differences were found between bloggers and blog readers with respect to opinion leadership and five out of the six motivational factors studied. Theoretical and managerial implications are further discussed.

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Introduction

The blogosphere is a powerful arena for public relations and brand promotion. The potential of blogs as a strategic communication tool stems from recent data that show reading blogs is becoming popular among the general population, so by the year 2014, blog audiences will account for more than 70 percent of Internet users (Universal McCann, 2010). The blogosphere provides a lively forum for consumers' exchange of opinions about brands and products (Universal McCann, 2010), and a recent Technorati survey (2010) showed that 42% of bloggers surveyed reported they blog about brands they love or hate. Further, the informal conversational style of blogs makes the communication on this platform Word-of-Mouth (WOM) (Kavanaugh et al., 2006; Kaye, 2010), which is considered the most effective means for social influence (Song, Chi, Hino, & Tseng, 2007). Blogs allow for a symmetrical two-way communication with the blogging community (Marken, 2005; Porter, Sweetser, Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007), in which public relations professionals can take an active role in shaping the way their clients or organizations may be perceived by their publics (Smith, 2011). Similarly, other public relations research has confirmed that the interactive nature of blogs allows for two-way symmetrical communication between organizations and their publics (Grunig 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2009). Blogs facilitate listening, research and dialogue to cultivate the relationships required for authentic symmetrical communication (Grunig, 2001).

The importance of studying blogs as a public relations tool has been widely recognized (e.g., Kent, 2008; Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009; Smith, 2011; Wright & Hinson, 2010, 2012; Xifra & Huertas, 2008). A seven-year tracking of public relations practitioners' use of social media showed that time spent with blogs and other social media in the workplace has been steadily increasing. In a recent study, over a third (35%) of respondents spent 25 percent of their workday communicating through these media and 15 percent engage in blog communications more than half of their day (Wright & Hinson, 2012). Researchers argue that blogs possess several characteristics that make them a powerful strategic communication tool, but of primary importance is the fact that blogs form communities of coherent groups

of individuals and professionals with shared common interests (Kent, 2008). As blogs are highly contextual and usually focused on one area of interest, they reach audiences who are very engaged in a specific topic and already come with information and views of their own (Fitzgerald, 2007; Kent, 2008). These audiences who have special interest in an issue tend to be relatively homogenous, which is translated into greater engagement and involvement with the blog (Kent, 2008). As such, they read others' comments or posts on a given issue and have the ability to comment on it, making the medium very participative and dialogic. Lastly, some studies found that audiences perceive blogs as a credible source of information because they are viewed as independent from corporate-controlled media (Andrews, 2003; Regan, 2003, Singer 2006) and are therefore free to discuss issues more openly allowing for different perspectives to be presented (Burns, 2006; Cristol, 2002; Wall, 2006). Specifically, public relations practitioners begin to vire blogs and social media as more independent that in the past, and less influenced by the agenda of traditional mainstream (Wright & Hinson, 2012).

Public relations professionals are responsible for an array of array of practices in their organizations (Toth, Serini, Wright & Emig, 1998). Blogs can play an important role in many of these practices including WOM communication surveillance (Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009), research, environmental scanning, issue monitoring (Hallett, 2008; Kent, 2008), information gathering about specific publics (Kelleher & Miller, 2006), and targeting blogs as media outlets for strategic communication (Porter et al., 2007; Rand & Rodriguez, 2007). The latter represents an opportunity to actively approach bloggers from a media relations perspective (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008) and pitch stories that can be featured or discussed on a particular blog (Barbaro, 2006; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005).

Because bloggers play a key role in this one-to-many communication method, there is a need for public relations practitioners to build and maintain relationships with power bloggers as potential target audiences, much like they have done historically with journalists (Park, Jeong, and Han, 2008). Wright and Hinson (2009) suggest that blogs have updated the relevance of several traditional communication theories, such as Katz and Lazarfeld's (1955) two-step-flow model as many bloggers are becoming *influentials* or opinion leaders. The importance of bloggers in the information dissemination process stems not only from the unique characteristics of the medium, but also from their personal traits and motivations. In order to understand the extent of blogs' influence, it is essential to examine the content generators of

blogs and how their online opinion leadership is established and implemented (Jin & Fisher-Liu, 2010). Thus, understanding bloggers and their motivations to blog can provide public relations professionals with insight on how to work with bloggers more effectively.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications in a Changing Media Environment

The uses and gratifications framework of media use assumes that audience members are active and goal-oriented when they choose among their media options (McLeod & Becker, 1981; Meyrowitz, 2002; Rubin, 2002). In fact, the choice to use media at all is intended to satisfy a need or to seek gratification (McLeod & Becker, 1981). Audience members choose to use or not use a medium based on their general motivations and specific goals for media use. These motivations are influenced by immediate context, but also by social psychological factors that determined a person's needs, values and beliefs (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985).

Uses and gratification research is more concerned with how people use media than how media affects people (Blumler & Katz, 1974). There is an assumption that audience members are able to evaluate different types of functions the media can serve to fulfill different types of gratifications, and will actively seek out media that will satisfy their personal wants and needs (McLeod & Becker, 1981; Rubin, 2002). Studies based on traditional one-way mass media, determined that media served four primary functions that satisfied human gratifications: surveillance, personal identity, personal relationships/social utility, and diversion/entertainment (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972; Wenner, 1985). However, with the advent of interactive two-way and multi-way online media platforms, the audience is not limited to content consumption, but can also participate in the creation and distribution of content (Kaye & Medoff, 2001; Kim & Sawhney, 2002). This has led researchers to re-examine the functions of different media channels and their content, as well as the gratifications they fulfill (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Kaye & Johnson, 2004; Lin, 2001; Lo & Leung, 2009; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade (2004) argue that the uses and gratifications approach is especially well suited to study Internet media use, because it proposes a user-level of analysis rather than a mass society – mass exposure perspective. They proposed three general types of gratifications for media use: the gratifications derived from the content, the gratifications derived from the process of experiencing the medium, and social gratification, which is derived from its interactivity capabilities.

Uses and Gratification Applied to Blog Use. The uses and gratifications approach has been primarily used to research why people read blog content. For example, Kaye and Johnson (2006) reported three main motives for using political blogs during an election: information seeking, convenience, and entertainment. A study of blog readers identified six primary motivations for using blogs: information seeking, convenience, personal fulfillment, political surveillance, social surveillance, and expression/affiliation (Kaye, 2005). A study of blog use among college students found the primary motivations to be guidance, sociability, entertainment, surveillance and convenience (Lee, 2007). In their professional role, public relations practitioners use blogs to monitor what strategic publics are saying about their organization; in a recent study, 43 percent of participating professionals reported they use blogs for this purpose (Wright & Hinson, 2012). However, the motivations for reading blogs are likely to be different than the motivation for actually starting a blog and creating online content.

Shao (2009) presents three interrelated gratifications of user generated media, including blogs. First, people consume these media to fulfill information and entertainment needs; they communicate with others through these sites to satisfy their social interaction needs; and they produce their own content to satisfy the needs of self expression and self-actualization. The latter applies to bloggers who produce their own content. Self-expression refers to the desire to show others one's true identity and individuality. Blogging is a way to express oneself online by sharing personal thoughts and information while managing one's image or reputation through strategic selection of content. Self-expression can be direct by disclosing personal information, or it can be indirect, by revealing one's true self through words, pictures, opinions, and style (VanLear, Sheehan, Withers, & Walker, 2005).

Sepp, Liljander and Gummerus (2011) identified self-presentation and image management as primary motivators for bloggers, along with the need for enjoyment attained through the pleasure of writing. They also identified vanity, or the need for attention, as a common gratification sought by

bloggers. Bloggers use this attention to influence others through advocacy or may even use their blog space for advertising purposes. Sepp, Liljander and Gummeus (2011) found that advertising on personal blogs reflected elements the blogger liked.

In line with this notion, researchers found that public relations practitioners who communicate with their audiences through web or social media tools feel empowered in their position as managers or technicians have greater perceived expertise, and feel greater prestige within their organizations(Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Sallot, Porter, & Acosta-Alzuru, 2004). Through the use of blogs and other emerging media, public relations practitioners enhance their leadership in organizations due to their ability to target publics more effectively via these media (Porter, Trammel, Chung, & Kim, 2007). They determine what information is relevant to their clients or organizations, how to engage with the various publics, which in turn, build practitioners' social capital and boost their status.

The preceding discussion is somewhat related to another motivation for bloggers to produce online content through user-generated sites: the need for self-actualization, or the motive to realize one's full potential (Shao, 2009). Whether conscious or unconscious, the need for self-actualization can lead to media use goals that can be reached through blogging, such as seeking recognition, fame, or personal efficacy (Kollock, 1999; Rheingold, 1993). Personal home pages represent online platforms through which individuals fulfill their motivation to present their personalities and inner selves (Papacharissi, 2002; Shau & Gilly, 2003). Specifically, personal blogs allow bloggers to express their identities and actualize their own potential through self-reflection and sharing of personal feelings and thoughts (Walker, 2000). Based on the research on blog uses and gratifications reviewed above, we propose the following hypothesis and research questions:

H1: Bloggers and blog readers are different in their motivations for using blogs.
RQ1: Is satisfaction with blog use associated with motivations to use blogs?
RQ2: Which motivations to use blogs predict gratification needs by blog use?

Although the motivations for blogging are related to the motivations and traits of opinion leaders (e.g., social interaction, self-expression and self-realization), opinion leadership has not been identified as

a motivation for blogging. Schiffman and Kanuk (2007) cite four motivations behind opinion leaders' behavior. The first is self-involvement, which is related to the gratification of getting attention in exchange for giving others advice, or the good feeling derived from helping others. The underlying motivation may be to be recognized for a certain expertise. The second motivation is product or issue involvement. This refers to the need to share information when one has a strong opinion – positive or negative – about or a special interest on a product or topic. The third is social or "other" involvement, which refers to the desire to share information to build relationships and show friendship or caring. The fourth motivation is message involvement, which results from repeated exposure to a message, such as through advertising or popular culture. This creates the desire in opinion leaders to discuss the message with others.

Opinion Leadership and Two-Step Flow

The topic of opinion leadership has long interested communicators and marketers because these individuals exert an exceptional influence on the attitudes and behaviors of people within their social networks (Goldsmith & De Witt, 2003). Originated by Katz and Lazarfeld's (1955) model of a two-step flow of communication, opinion leaders (influencers) are viewed as brokers that receive information from the media or marketers and subsequently diffuse this information to other individuals or consumers. The tendency for public relations practitioners to establish relationships with bloggers stems from the assumption that bloggers are opinion leaders who can use their blogs as a platform to diffuse information and affect the attitudes and behaviors of their audiences. Evidence for the importance of identifying and targeting influential members in the blogosphere can be found in the mounting attempts to develop computer-generated models, primarily in information sciences and technology disciplines, for social network analyses and content mining (e.g., Li & Du, 2011; Li, Lai & Chen, 2011; Maatsumura, Yamamoto & Tomozawa, 2008; Song, Chi, Hino, & Tseng, 2007). While these models are designed to identify opinion leaders from a system analysis perspective, less is done in terms of analyzing the human aspect of influencers in social networks (e.g., Li & Du, 2011). Understanding these individuals is key to develop effective methods to communicate with them.

Opinion leadership is defined as the extent to which an individual influences the opinions and behaviors of other individuals within their social network in a certain way with relative frequency (Jamrozy,

Backman & Backman, 1996; Rogers, 2003). Valente and Pumpuang (2007) extend the scope of areas of influence, and argue opinion leaders influence the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of others. Looking at opinion leadership from the followers' perspective, Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman (1996) argued that consumers tend to rely on other people as sources of information, in addition to media and advertisements, and trust more the opinions of others. Opinion leaders are often approached by others for advice mainly because of their perceived expertise on a given topic and similarity in interests (Dichter, 1996). The central notion within these definitions is the use of interpersonal or social communication as the means to influence others (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996).

Opinion leaders are considered to be domain-specific or monomorphic, meaning that their expertise and influence is usually related to a specific area of influence (Vander Merwe & Van Heerden, 2009). Demographically, opinion leaders are characterized as younger male with higher levels of education and socio-economic status (Gatignon, Robertson, 1985; Midgley & Dowling 1978; Robertson, Zielinski, & Ward, 1984; Summers, 1970). Additionally, they are characterized by sociability, so they tend to be talkative, extroverted, and affiliated with more groups (Baumgarten, 1975; Summers, 1970). They tend to be less dogmatic (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 1980), more innovative (Myers & Robertson, 1972; Summers, 1970) and more adventurous (Taylor, 1977) and feel and act differently, exhibiting public individuality (Chan & Misra, 1990). In terms of media consumption, they are more exposed and responsive to new information and ideas, through various mass media channels (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Keller & Berry, 2003) and have an affinity for technology (Geissler & Edison, 2005). Thus, they go online more often than non-leaders and spend more time on the Internet in each session (Lyons & Henderson, 2005).

Early researchers argued that word-of-mouth opinion leadership is motivated by product interest, individual needs or selfish factors, as well as factors related to helping others (Dichter, 1966). While historically opinion leaders influenced the decision-making of less than a dozen people (usually their immediate family and friends), the emergence of digital communication and the Internet provide opinion leaders with unprecedented opportunity to exert their influence on an unlimited number of users (Lyons & Henderson, 2005). Chau and Hui (1998) identified three ways in which opinion leaders influence the decisions of others. First, they act as role models who inspire imitation; second, they disseminate

information via word-of-mouth; and third, they give advice and verbal direction. These mechanisms of influence are based on interpersonal communication or word-of-moth as the means to disseminate information from opinion leaders to their recipients.

In the online context, e-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth), has been acknowledged as an important tool that facilitates information diffusion throughout online communities (Sun, Youn, & Wu, 2006). Compared to traditional WOM, e-WOM communication is considered more influential because it is instantaneous and convenient, and it has the one-to-many reach and absence of face-to-face human pressure (Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, & Raman, 2004). Opinions posted online are considered powerful because they are long-lasting and far-reaching and showed to affect receivers' choices (Graham & Havlena, 2007). Compared to websites, blogs raise e-WOM to a higher level of opportunity to influence others. According to Jin and Liu (2010), the primary effectiveness of e-WOM relies on the perception that they are not motivated by material interest, but rather motivated by a real concern for the well-being of others, as well as their knowledge and experience. The continuous usage of readers of a particular blog can potentially create a loyal community that uses WOM, with bloggers potentially becoming respected authorities who lead the conversation on a given topic.

The preceding discussion on opinion leaders and the unique characteristics of blogs for one-to-many, e-WOM communication raises questions regarding the extent to which bloggers are opinion leaders who use blogging for discussion, opinion sharing, and information exchange and who can potentially exert influence on their audiences.

To harness the potential influence of bloggers, it is important to distinguish between bloggers as content generators and their readers in terms of their characteristics as opinion leaders or influentials. Because those individuals who write their own blogs are doing so due to a special interest on a topic and understanding that their communication will reach mass audiences, we assume that there will be differences between bloggers and their readers in terms of opinion leadership. In addition, no previous research was found that studied opinion leadership as a motivator for bloggers and the desire to share information as a gratification sought through blogging. The present study attempts to address this gap by analyzing the association between opinion leadership as a trait, and communication for leadership as a motivation, as well as other Internet-use motivations, to satisfaction with blog use. Based on the literature

on opinion leadership and the likely overlap with blogger traits, we propose the following hypotheses and research question:

H2: There are differences in the extent of opinion leadership between bloggers and blog readers.

H3: Bloggers' opinion leadership is associated with the motivation to communicate for leadership.

Method

Sampling and Participants

Data were collected from bloggers from various categories listed in Technorati's blog directory. Technorati is a blog search engine and directory that indexes more than a million blogs based on the popularity and influence of blogs (*About Technorati*, nd). Blogs were selected from the topic areas of sports, food/cuisine, lifestyle, green living, and travel. News, entertainment, and political blogs were excluded because the purpose of the study was to understand bloggers who were likely to blog about companies and products from a consumer perspective. Eligible blogs for the study included those that were not linked to any business, company or organization, and that identified the individual blogger who managed the blog. Blogs with numerous guest bloggers or with unidentified bloggers were excluded. A systematic random sample of eligible blogs (using a skip interval of 10% based on Technorati listings by category) was contacted by e-mail, invited to participate in an online survey, and asked to post the survey link on their blog to obtain responses from blog readers. A total of 2,550 bloggers were contacted, yielding a study sample of 552 participants, which included 76 (14%) who identified themselves as bloggers only, 157 (29%) as readers and 312 (57%) as both bloggers and readers. An exact response rate was not calculated because it became impossible to track how many people were exposed to the survey link.

Most participants were female for all blog user types, but non-bloggers (i.e. only blog readers) were much more likely to be female compared to bloggers. There was no difference in marital status between blog use groups. However, with respect to socioeconomic variables, non-bloggers were more likely to have lower incomes, more likely to have no more than a high school education, and less likely to have a graduate degree. Blog readers who were not also bloggers were somewhat older on average than

the other groups and spent considerably less time using blogs than the other two groups. Table 1 presents the demographic differences between bloggers, dual blogger/blog readers, and blog readers only.

Based on Tukey post hoc comparisons, those identified as blog readers only were older on average (M=40.9 years) than respondents who identified as both bloggers and blog (M=36.8 years). There was no statistical difference in age between bloggers and people who were only blog readers, nor between bloggers and bloggers who were also blog readers. Post hoc analysis revealed that those identified as blog readers spent significantly less time using blogs than bloggers and dual bloggers/blog readers, but there was no statistically significant difference between bloggers and bloggers who are also blog readers.

Table 1

Demographics of Respondents

Participant demographics by type of blog use		Blogger (n=76)	Blogger & reader (=312)	Blog reader (n=157)	Chi Square	Sig.
Sex	Male	44.2%	32.3%	19.7%	15.841	< 0.001
	Female	55.8%	67.7%	80.3%		
Marital Status	Single	32.5%	35.1%	31.6%	7.702	NS
	Married	55.8%	58.5%	57.6%		
	Divorced/Widowed	11.7%	6.4%	10.8%		
Education	High School or less	5.2%	4.8%	13.9%	26.641	<0.05
	Associates Degree or Some college	26.0%	20.2%	20.3%		
	Bachelor's degree	39.0%	45.5%	43.0%		
	Graduate/Professional degree	29.9%	29.5%	22.8%		
Income (US$)	Less than $24,999	24.7%	26.7%	40.5%	23.780	<.01
	$25,000 to $34,999	27.3%	15.1%	18.4%		
	$35,000 to $49,999	24.7%	27.3%	22.2%		
	$50,000 to $74,999	10.4%	16.7%	13.9%		
	More than $75,000	13.0%	14.1%	5.1%		
Age	Mean	38.7	36.8	41.0	ANOVA F(2,541) = 6.423	<.01
	Std Dev	12.1	11.0	13.9		
Hrs /wk on blogs	Mean	16.8	13.5	5.7	ANOVA F(2,516) = 26.4	<.01
	Std Dev	13.6	14.2	6.4		

Measures and Data Collection

Opinion leadership as a trait was measured using King and Summers' (1970) seven-item scale that was slightly modified to fit a 5-point Likert type scale (Chronbach's alpha .871). Items were 5-point semantic differentials such as: "Overall in your discussions with your friends and neighbors are you often used as a source of advice (5) ….never used as a source of advice (1)?" and "In a discussion with your friends, do you mainly listen to your friends' ideas (1) ….. or try to convince them of your ideas (5)?"

Motivations to use blogs were measured by Papacharissi and Rubin's (2000) 27-item questionnaire, which measured 6 constructs, all of which yielded high scale reliability: communication for leadership (Chronbach's alpha .804), communication for belonging (Chronbach's alpha .725), passing time (α=.906), information seeking (Chronbach's alpha . 840), convenience (Chronbach's alpha . 712), and entertainment (Chronbach's alpha .882). The original Papacharissi and Rubin scale included all communication motivations in one factor called interpersonal utility. In this study, this factor was divided into *Communication for Leadership* and *Communication for Belonging* as they are different communication functions (self-identity vs. relationship). The separate factors were validated through confirmatory factor analysis. Items representing communication for leadership as a motivation to blog included "To give my input" and "I enjoy answering questions." Items addressing communication for belonging included "To meet new people" and "To belong to a group."

To measure *satisfaction with blog use*, respondents were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied) the extent to which their use of blogs fulfills their needs (Paparachisi & Rubin, 2000). A single item measure was used for this construct, to allow respondents to rate the satisfaction of their specific individual motivations and needs. Measures of global satisfaction often use a one-item 5 - or 7-point satisfaction scale, anchored from *very satisfied* to *very dissatisfied* (Olson, 2002; Okazaki, & Hirose, 2009). Satisfaction was used as a proxy variable for media gratification. The theory of uses and gratification assumes that meeting gratifications sought through media produces media satisfaction. Kim and Rubin (1997) emphasized that satisfaction reflects the gratification of needs and expectations. Other studies looking at media gratification use simple satisfaction statements to assess fulfillment of gratifications with specific media (Dobos, 1992; Sangwan, 2005).

Data were collected using Qualtrics web-based survey software. A web link was generated that took potential survey respondents to a welcome page for the survey. After reading the informed consent statement, participants had the option to complete the survey or exit. Data were collected for a period of six months, between the fall of 2010 and the spring of 2011. Data from completed surveys were then exported to SPSS version 17.0 for analysis.

Results

H1: Bloggers and blog readers are different in their motivations for using blogs.

This hypothesis was generally supported by the data. One-way ANOVA revealed that bloggers (including those who only blog, and those who are both bloggers and blog readers) differ from blog readers in five of the six factors of motivation for blog use. There was no difference among the three groups in the motivation to use blogs to communicate for belonging. See Table 2 below.

Table 2

Differences in Blog Use Motivations by Blog User Type

Motivations	Blogger only	Blogger & Blog reader	Blog reader	F (2, 541)	Sig
Communication for Leadership	3.79	3.74	2.98	78.497	0.000
Communication for Belonging	3.48	3.53	3.39	2.389	0.093
Pass Time	2.23	2.41	2.86	11.364	0.000
Information Seeking	3.32	3.5	3.66	4.517	0.011
Convenience	3.24	3.28	3.01	6.427	0.002
Entertainment	3.86	4.04	3.76	6.686	0.001

Based on Tukey post hoc comparisons, those identified as both bloggers and blog readers were no different than bloggers in their opinion leadership (M=3.85), but scored statistically significantly higher on opinion leadership than blog readers ($p< 0.001$).

RQ 1: *What blog use motivations are correlated with blog use satisfaction?*

Bivariate correlation analysis found statistically significant positive associations between blog use satisfaction and all of the blog use motivations, except the motivation to pass time. Entertainment and communication for belonging were the motivations most strongly correlated with blog satisfaction.

Table 3

Correlation of Motivations to Blog and Satisfaction with Blog Use

n=505	r-square	p
Communication for Leadership	.197**	.000
Communication for Belonging	.253**	.000
Pass Time	-.015	.370
Information Seeking	.102*	.011
Convenience	.156**	.000
Entertainment	.379**	.000

*Note: * $p \leq 0.05$. **$P \leq 0.01$*

RQ 2: *What factors predict satisfaction with blog use?*

A linear regression was performed to assess the impact of all the variables on the gratification derived from blog use. The full model containing all predictors (OpinLeadership, ComBelonging, Entertainment, Information Seeking, Convenience, ComLeader) was statistically significant, $F(7, N=528)=16.92$, $p< .001$. The model as a whole explained 18.5% of the variance in satisfaction (R squared=.185). As shown in Table 4, opinion leadership, communication for belonging, and entertainment were the only independent variables that made statistically significant contributions to the model.

Table 4

Linear Regression, Standardized Coefficients

	Standardized coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.114	9.83	.000
Opinion Leadership	**.109**	**2.54****	**.011**
Communication for Leader	.029	.53	.597
Communication for Belonging	**.113**	**2.11***	**.035**
Pass Time	-.084	-1.89	.058
Information Seeking	-.055	-1.06	.286
Convenience	-.047	-.87	.382
Entertainment	**.381**	**7.88****	**.000**

Note: * *p* ≤ 0.05. **P* ≤ 0.01

H2: *There are differences in the extent of opinion leadership between bloggers and blog readers.*

This hypothesis was supported. One-way ANOVA results show that bloggers score higher on opinion leadership than blog readers (M=3.74 and M=3.05 respectively, F=43.33, *p*(2)<0.001). Based on Tukey post hoc comparisons, those that identified as both bloggers and blog readers were no different than bloggers in their opinion leadership (M=3.85), but scored statistically significantly higher on opinion leadership than blog readers (*p*< 0.001).

H3: *Bloggers' opinion leadership is associated with the motivation to communicate for leadership.*

This hypothesis was supported. Opinion leadership was positively correlated with communication for leadership (r=.323, p<.001). In addition, opinion leadership was associated with communication for belonging (r=.133, p=.002), and entertainment (r=.122, p=.004). Opinion leadership was negatively correlated with the motivation to pass time (-.120, p=.005). There was no correlation between opinion leadership and the motivations to seek information of convenience (See Table 5).

Table 5

Correlation of Opinion Leadership with Motivations to Blog

n=505	r-square	p
Communication for Leadership	.322**	.000
Communication for Belonging	.149**	.000
Pass Time	-.138**	.001
Information Seeking	-.021	.320
Convenience	.027	.275
Entertainment	.110**	.007

Note: * *p* ≤ 0.05. **P* ≤ 0.01

Discussion

This study investigated the motivations of people to use blogs and the extent of opinion leadership as an individual characteristic among bloggers and blog readers. As public relations and communications professionals are advised to use blogs to reach their intended audiences (e.g. Kent, 2008; Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009), it is imperative for them first to develop a profound

understanding of the individuals involved in the blogosphere. Understanding who they are and what motivates them to use this vehicle will help public relations professionals to better address needs, manage communication more effectively, and leverage the potential influence of bloggers on their readers. Similarly, understanding what distinguishes bloggers as diffusers of information will provide important insights for message strategy to appeal to these distinct segments. The study was guided by the premise that there should be differences among those individuals who create their own blog out of a passion, special interest in, and expertise on a given topic, and those individuals who become the audiences of this medium and share an interest on this topic. Building on the uses and gratification theory, and opinion leadership research, this study found that bloggers and blog readers are different from each other on various aspects.

Demographically, the bloggers in the sample match the profile of Technorati's indexed bloggers, and also fit the expected profile of opinion leaders, who are likely to be male (more than blog readers), young, and highly educated, and represent all income levels. Incidentally, these demographics also fit the profile of heavy Internet users. This study excluded technology, news and political blogs; this may account for the higher overall representation of women bloggers in this study compared to the blogosphere in general. Future studies may explore whether the blog topic and the blogger's gender are also associated with the opinion leadership or motivation to blog.

From a media use perspective the results support the major tenet of the uses and gratification theory that users are selective and goal-oriented. Thus, different users will exhibit different motivations to use a particular medium. In this study, bloggers and blog readers were found to be different in their motivations to use blogs with the entertainment, communication for leadership, and convenience being the top three motivations for bloggers. In contrast, blog readers, scored higher than bloggers on information-seeking and the motivation to pass time. These differences demonstrate distinctions among these two groups in terms of the different needs they seek to fulfill by using blogs.

There were no differences among bloggers and blog readers with respect to the motivation to use blogs for belonging. Both bloggers and readers use blogs as a way to fulfill their need for belonging and social interaction. Unlike traditional media, blogs by their nature provide opportunity for virtual social interaction. The blogosphere is a participative network phenomenon that connects individuals who share

areas of interest and involvement. Further, blogs allow for the sharing of comments and hyperlinks to other sources on the web or other commenters' blogs, which can facilitate social interactions (Blachard, 2004; Erickson, 1996; Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004). Blogs create a virtual community that generates a sense of belonging among participating individuals, which, in turn, motivates individuals to repeatedly use and interact with the same blogs regardless of the roles they play (e.g., blogger vs. reader). These findings were corroborated with the stronger relationship between media satisfaction and the motivation for entertainment and communication for belonging. In other words, the more blog users are motivated by the need for entertainment or social belonging, the more likely they are to be satisfied with their blog use.

This study found that compared to blog readers, bloggers scored higher on opinion leadership. Similarly, bloggers scored significantly higher than blog readers on the motivation to use blogs to communicate leadership. This tendency was reflected in the correlation between opinion leadership and the communication for leadership motivation that showed the highest correlation among all motivations to blog. Conversely, the negative correlation between opinion leadership and the motivation to use blogs for passing time shows that opinion leaders are not likely to use blogs in passive ways, but rather with a more active, possibly persuasive, purpose. These results confirm that bloggers are likely to be opinion leaders who use blogs as a channel to exhibit their leadership. Opinion leaders disseminate information using WOM communication (e.g., Chau & Hui, 1998; Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). Blogs as a platform for e-WOM, provide opinion leaders/ bloggers with an ideal environment to exercise their leadership and disseminate communication that is influential.

Implications for Public Relations Practice

Based on these findings, public relations practitioners would benefit from reaching and engaging bloggers by specifically highlighting the entertainment and enjoyment aspect of their communication messages. Alternatively, they should use message delivery techniques that stress entertainment or amusement, such as a creative video or games rather than a written news release or statement. Addressing bloggers' need for belonging -- the social aspect of using blogs -- public relations practitioners should communicate to bloggers messages that emphasize their role as members of a particular

community with unique interests also shared by the client. Blogs' personal conversational style provides a forum for bloggers to exert their individuality and self-expression. This requires public relations practitioners to approach bloggers differently from the way they approach journalists.

Working under rigorous professional standards, journalists are required to be objective and refrain from subjecting content to their personal preferences or the desire for self-promotion. Thus, public relations practitioners have more latitude in the way they manage relationships with bloggers and how they approach them, and more importantly, they should take into account the gratification bloggers seek to fulfill from the medium.

The need to communicate with bloggers in a way that addresses their motivation to use blogs is based on the understanding that bloggers are important individuals in the diffusion of information. Thus, strategic communicators must acknowledge and value bloggers as not only members of a virtual community, bur also realize they tend to consider themselves opinion leaders and influencers within their communities.

Bloggers are opinion leaders in the blogosphere who to a certain extent can assume the role of a gate-keeper. Therefore, it is recommended that public relations practitioners adhere to the two-way symmetrical model in their communication with bloggers. Communication with bloggers should not only address their needs to blog but also take into account opinion leadership as their personal trait. Providing bloggers with exclusivity on information, making them first-to-know, or providing them with information that enriches their knowledge and affirms their expertise and leadership status in a particular area can greatly contribute to cultivating fruitful relationships.

Public relation practitioners can use Social Media Releases (SMRs) to approach bloggers with latest news and innovations, legitimizing their role as opinion leaders (Pitt et al., 2011). SMRs are innovative and appropriate for the blog environment as they use multimedia, links to related websites, tag clouds, comments, and trackbacks (Steyn et al., 2010;), all useful tools to facilitate bloggers' communication with their audiences in an easy-to-use format which best fits social media platforms.

The findings of this research shed light for public relations practitioners to appeal to private bloggers who write as self-appointed opinion leaders about a specific topic. It is important to note that this research does not look at the effect of their blog content on opinion followers. While many blogs are

influential, the data in this study do not confirm that these particular blogs influence their readers'

opinions, only that the individuals who write them share characteristics and traits of opinion leaders.

Further research is required to determine whether self-reported opinion leadership traits and motivations

correlate with actual influence on opinion followers.

Implications for Future Research

A potential limitation of this study is the inability to clearly distinguish between bloggers and non-

bloggers because the majority of the sample included blog readers who were also bloggers. Technorati

indexes more than 1.3 million blogs, and there are between 150 and 200 million blogs worldwide. A 2008

Universal McCann study reported that in the United States, 26.4 million people had started a blog and

60.3 million had read blogs. It is reasonable to think that many more people have ever read a blog than

those who regularly and actively read blogs without blogging themselves. It is likely that bloggers who

share an area of interest read each other's blogs regularly, while non-bloggers access blogs primarily for

information-seeking and passing time. No estimates were found in this regard. Therefore, the distinction

between blogger and blog reader may be losing importance. With the advent and virtual takeover of

social media to communicate and share views online in multi-way conversations, the role of blogs may be

evolving as the motivations for blogging may be gratified in other ways. For example, photos and

personal musing are increasingly being shared through social network pages rather than traditional blog

sites (Universal McCann, 2010). In addition, popular social media management dashboards that allow

users to post content across several online platforms including blogs and social networking sites are

becoming increasingly popular. As a result, the gratifications found in this study to be connected with blog

use – communication for leadership, social belonging, entertainment – will be met elsewhere in

cyberspace, outside the blogosphere.

Another factor to consider is the difference between hobby bloggers and bloggers who aspire to

gain an income from blogging. The findings of this study support the results of a 2011 Technorati survey

of their indexed bloggers, which indicated that their main motivations for blogging were closely linked to

the motivations behind opinion leaders, including self-involvement (i.e. "*To share my expertise and*

experiences with others," "*In order to speak my mind on areas of interest*," and "*To gain professional*

recognition"); product/issue involvement, (i.e*. "To become more involved in my passion areas"*); and

social involvement (i.e. "*To meet and connect with like-minded people*"). However, it is important to note

that among entrepreneurs and professionals, attracting new clients and advancing their careers were also

important reasons. While 60% of Technorati's survey respondents were "hobbyists," the second largest

group, accounting for 18% of respondents, was independent bloggers who either use blogging as a way

to supplement their income, or consider it their full-time job (State of the Blogosphere, 2011). Further

research would be needed to ascertain whether the motivation to gain an income supersedes the

motivation to be entertained, socialize and exert opinion leadership. If that is the case, this would also

have implications for public relations practitioners, including ethical concerns. Like traditional media

outlets that, in principle, are supposed to keep their content independent from their advertising, unless

disclosed, bloggers, as opinion leaders, are also ethically obligated to disclose any income or benefits

received related to their blog content.

Conclusions

The blogosphere is a viable arena for public relations practitioners to extend their

communications reach; therefore, it is important to understand the motivations and traits of bloggers. This

study contributes to the literature on uses and gratifications in two ways. It looked at blog users as both

content-generators and audiences and applied the motivation of communication for leadership, which had

never been applied in this context. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) developed a scale that measured,

among other motivations, interpersonal utility as a gratification for Internet use. The present study

adapted the interpretation of this scale and divided interpersonal utility into two types of communication

needs – for leadership and for belonging - that correspond with the motivations of opinion

leaders/bloggers, self-involvement and social involvement. In addition, this study adds to the growing

literature on bloggers' individual characteristics. To the extent that bloggers have been seen as brokers in

the information diffusion process, it has been assumed that they play the role of opinion leaders in the

two-step flow model. This is the first study, to our knowledge, that empirically measured their opinion

leadership as a trait and as a motivation to blog.

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