

Rapid Communication

Distress, Coping, and Blogging: Comparing New Myspace Users by Their Intention to Blog

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ABSTRACT

New Myspace.com users ($N = 134$, mean age 24.5 years) completed a questionnaire about their intent to blog and several psychosocial variables. Intending bloggers scored higher on psychological distress, self-blame, and venting and scored lower on social integration and satisfaction with number of online and face-to-face friends. Intending bloggers may view this activity as a potential mechanism for coping with distress in situations in which they feel inadequately linked with social supports.

INTRODUCTION

WEBLOGS (BLOGS) are personal Web pages, usually frequently modified, in which an individual posts information about himself or herself or about topics of interest.¹ Because there is no quantitative research on blogging, it is helpful to consider analogous research on pen-and-paper journals. Several studies on journal writing as a therapeutic device show it can lead to significant improvements in an author's physical health, psychological well-being, psychological functioning, and overall functioning.² Journals can be used as a coping tool, allowing the author to utilize planning and organization skills,^{3,4} to reflect on life and gain insight,⁵ and to reduce psychological distress through venting and processing painful emotions.⁴⁻⁹ Similarly, blogs have been described as a medium for planning and organizing ideas^{1,10} and processing emotionally charged situations^{11,12} while engaging in cathartic venting and emotional expression.¹³ It may therefore be useful to examine

associations between blogging and both psychological distress and coping strategies. Given the well-established therapeutic role of journaling, it was predicted that those intending to blog would show greater levels of psychological distress than those who did not seek this outlet. A second prediction was that intention to blog would be associated with particular coping styles previously linked with journaling (planning, positive reframing, venting, self-blame).

A major difference between journaling and blogging is the presence of peer commentary. A blog by nature communicates with others, so blogging offers opportunity for dialogue not available through paper diaries.¹³ Blogs are potentially open to dimensions of social support, friendship, and positive interaction. Feedback from readers can serve as an acknowledgment of the author's cognitions, emotions, and sense of self.¹⁴ Indeed, blogs may transcend the therapeutic value of face-to-face communication, allowing authors to communicate subject matter they might otherwise be unable to express

in “immediate” social interaction.¹³ Blogs may reduce social constraints that hinder people from discussing distressing events by providing an environment where it is appropriate to share inner thoughts and feelings.^{15,16} Therefore, it is useful to examine friendship networks and social provisions available for intending bloggers. It was predicted that intending bloggers would show greater levels of coping styles involving the seeking of social support and would assess their own levels of social support as less satisfactory than those not intending to blog.

The aim of the current study was to survey new users to the social networking Web site Myspace.com, comparing those who intended to blog with those who did not intend to do so on several psychosocial variables. Myspace.com was chosen over blog-specific Web sites in order to obtain a comparative sample of non-bloggers in addition to intending bloggers. Myspace.com has a large volume of new users (23,000 daily at the time of publication), and all users have the option of blogging with ease.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants were 75 male ($M = 23.5$ years, $SD = 6.5$ years) and 59 female ($M = 25.8$ years, $SD = 9.5$ years) new Myspace.com users from Australia ($n = 69$), the United Kingdom ($n = 42$), and the United States ($n = 23$). Users were individually messaged and provided with a link to an online self-administered self-report survey. The overall response rate was 20%, considered reasonable for random Internet recruitment in the age of spam.

Survey measures included the Social Provisions Scale (SPS), a 24-item inventory measuring perception of social support on six domains ($\alpha = 0.92$).¹⁷ In relation to actual social support, participants rated how satisfied they were with the number of and closeness with online and offline friends on 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from completely dissatisfied to completely satisfied. Select subscales relevant to the research on journal writing and social support were used from the 28-item Brief COPE, which measures participants’ preferred coping styles.¹⁸ They were Planning (thinking about how to cope with stress; $\alpha = 0.73$), Venting (expressing distress; $\alpha = 0.50$), Positive Reframing (managing, reinterpreting distress; $\alpha = 0.64$), Self-Blame (being critical of oneself; $\alpha = 0.69$), Instrumental Support (seeking advice, assistance; $\alpha = 0.64$), and Emotional Support (getting moral support and under-

standing; $\alpha = 0.71$).¹⁸ The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21) was used to measure psychological distress (depression $\alpha = 0.88$, anxiety $\alpha = 0.82$, stress $\alpha = 0.90$).^{19,20} Finally, participants were asked whether they expected to start a blog on Myspace.com, allowing for a differentiation between intending bloggers and non-bloggers.

RESULTS

Coping strategies

Independent *t*-tests examined differences between intending bloggers and non-bloggers on preferred coping strategies. Table 1 shows means and standard deviations. Of the six subscales, four showed no statistically significant differences between groups. There was a significant difference for Self-Blame ($t[111.4] = -3.036$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.53$, two-tailed, Welch-Satterthwaite adjusted *df* and *p* values), with intending bloggers more likely than non-bloggers to blame themselves, and for Venting ($t[132] = -2.06$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.37$, two-tailed), with intending bloggers more likely than non-bloggers to vent. There were almost significant differences between groups for Planning ($t[132] = -1.96$, $p = 0.05$) and Emotional Support ($t[132] = -1.925$, $p = 0.06$), but no differences on Instrumental Support ($t[132] = -0.991$, $p > 0.05$) or Positive Reframing ($t[132] = -1.27$, $p > 0.05$). Intending bloggers had a nonsignificant tendency to use planning and seeking emotional support more than non-bloggers.

Emotional distress

There was a significant difference between intending bloggers and non-bloggers for Depression ($t[124.2] = -2.56$, $p < 0.02$, $d = 0.44$, two-tailed, Welch-Satterthwaite adjusted *df* and *p* values), with intending bloggers ($M = 8.95$, $SD = 8.77$) more depressed than non-bloggers ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 6.66$); for Anxiety ($t[131.7] = -3.37$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.57$, two-tailed, Welch-Satterthwaite adjusted *df* and *p* values), with intending bloggers ($M = 6.42$, $SD = 6.75$) more anxious than non-bloggers ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 4.20$); and for Stress ($t[132] = -3.04$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.49$, two-tailed), with intending bloggers ($M = 12.48$, $SD = 8.53$) more stressed than non-bloggers ($M = 8.44$, $SD = 7.83$).

Social provisions

There was a significant difference at the $p < 0.05$ level for Social Integration ($t[132] = 2.01$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.39$, two-tailed). Bloggers felt less socially inte-

TABLE 1. MEANS FOR NON-BLOGGERS AND INTENDING BLOGGERS ON BRIEF COPE AND SOCIAL PROVISIONS SCALES

	<i>Non-blogger</i>		<i>Intending blogger</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Brief COPE subscales				
Positive reframing	4.04	1.97	4.45	1.72
Planning	4.30	2.05	4.99	1.90
Instrumental support	3.64	1.56	3.93	1.67
Emotional support	3.74	1.44	4.30	1.72
Venting	3.16	1.28	3.65	1.42
Self-blame	3.06	1.54	3.99	1.96
Social provisions subscales				
Attachment	13.62	2.37	13.13	2.31
Social integration	13.94	1.92	13.17	2.14
Reliable alliance	14.44	1.90	14.25	2.00
Guidance	14.60	2.00	14.13	2.08
Reassurance of worth	13.36	2.06	13.01	1.97
Opportunity for nurturance	12.24	2.36	12.10	2.07

M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

grated than non-bloggers. There were no significant differences on the other five subscales (Table 1).

Satisfaction with Friends

Independent *t*-tests showed a statistically significant difference for Satisfaction with number of face-to-face friends ($t[129.14] = 2.98, p < 0.01, d = 0.51$, two-tailed, Welch-Satterthwaite adjusted *df* and *p* values), with intending bloggers ($M = 3.87, SD = 1.13$) less satisfied than non-bloggers ($M = 4.36, SD = 0.78$); and for Satisfaction with number of online friends ($t[126.37] = 3.00, p < 0.01, d = 0.55$, two-tailed, Welch-Satterthwaite adjusted *df* and *p* values), with intending bloggers ($M = 3.51, SD = 1.22$) less satisfied than non-bloggers ($M = 4.06, SD = 0.89$). There were no significant differences between intending bloggers and non-bloggers on their satisfaction with friendship closeness for either online friends ($t[132] = 0.852, p > 0.05$) or face-to-face friends ($t[132] = 0.96, p > 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

Supporting the first prediction, that those intending to blog would show greater levels of psychological distress than those who did not seek this outlet, intending bloggers were more distressed than non-bloggers, with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Several studies have suggested

that journal writing is helpful in decreasing psychological distress,⁴⁻⁷ particularly anxiety⁸ and depression.⁹ It is possible that intending bloggers are motivated by negative affect, planning to write their online diaries with a view to expressing and possibly alleviating their distress. Future studies could profitably examine if blogging over time results in decreased levels of negative affect for blog authors in ways similar to pen-and-paper journaling.

Since intending bloggers were more psychologically distressed than non-bloggers, it is unsurprising that they more frequently used the unhelpful coping strategy of self-blame. They were also more likely than non-bloggers to vent. This finding is of interest because venting has been established as a useful component of journal writing⁴⁻⁷ and is theorized to be a major benefit of blogging.¹¹⁻¹³ Venting and self-blame together suggest a confessional type of blogging in which negative self-thoughts are aired. It would be useful to follow up intending bloggers with high levels of distress to examine the content of their blog entries.

Use of planning as a coping strategy approached but did not reach significance for intending bloggers. It may be that planning is not utilized as a tool until intending bloggers actually begin keeping blog entries, after which blogs offer benefits in insight in ways similar to journal writing.^{3,4} There were also no statistical differences between intending bloggers and non-bloggers on Positive Reframing, so overall, the second prediction, that intention to blog

would be associated with particular coping styles previously linked with journaling, was only partially supported. Some coping attributes predicted to differentiate bloggers from non-bloggers may only become manifest in studies that compare those who actually engage in blogging with those who do not, as all "intenders" may not fulfill their intentions. Additionally, some coping approaches, such as positive reframing, may increase only after the users become regular bloggers and recognize at some level that there are therapeutic elements in the activity.

Similarly, there was mixed support for the third prediction, that intending bloggers would show greater levels of coping styles involving the seeking of social support and would assess their own levels of social support as less satisfactory than those not intending to blog. Intending bloggers and non-bloggers did not differ on their satisfaction with friendship closeness, but intending bloggers were significantly more discontented with their number of online and face-to-face friends. This finding suggests that blogging might be used to increase social networking and improve existing social-support structures. The near significantly greater tendency for intending bloggers to use the coping strategy of seeking emotional support (in comparison with non-bloggers) supports this notion. Significant differences in Social Integration levels further suggest that intending bloggers were less satisfied with their current set of friends, indicating that a new group of friends with more similar interests and beliefs might be beneficial. While none of the remaining social provisions scales were significantly different between the groups, it is noteworthy that intending bloggers scored lower on average on all social provision subscales despite scoring higher on Instrumental and Emotional Support as means of coping.

In conclusion, the study showed that intending bloggers were more psychologically distressed and more likely to use venting and self-blame to cope with this stress than were non-bloggers. Intending bloggers also scored lower on measures of social provisions and were less satisfied with their number of online and offline friends when compared to non-bloggers. Further research is needed into the long-term effects of blogging on psychological distress and social support.

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