

Blogs: A Virtual Intersocial and Interpsychological Power

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Abstract

The study investigated the virtual intersocial and interpsychological power in the blog between bloggers and blog viewers. In the study, Goffman's imagination theory, Weber's self conception theory, and Mauss's body techniques theory were reviewed to analyze and discuss the phenomenon of virtual power in blogs. Also, literature analysis and fifty-eight popular blog websites were surveyed and analyzed. Some conclusions about virtual power are made in the study. First, in most popular blogs, the author wears a "make-up" in their blogs. That is, they "mask" themselves, not showing their real selves. Second, by setting up their own blogs, somehow bloggers can gain the power to dominate their blog viewers. Third, while the blog attracts heterogeneous groups, the bloggers's virtual power would in some way be constrained. Fourth, when more and more viewers browse the blog, most bloggers always wish to segregate heterogeneous viewers in order to present different selves being masked in front of different viewers.

Keywords: virtual power, blog, self-presentation, self-disclosure

1. Introduction

In recent years, the blog has become one of the most popular and fashionable individual media in the network. The blog has become a new individual public medium in network, and more and more bloggers have begun blogging in the Internet. The reason for blogging in the Internet is that by owing a blog webpage, bloggers can document their lives, release their emotion, and express their comments and opinions to the public. Blog is a website in which bloggers present themselves and transmit images and messages to the public. Morris (2001) defined blog as a frequently updated website in which there are dated and brief entries, with the new entries pushing the old ones to the bottom of the webpage. Gorssman (2004) defined blogs as an amateur website rapidly providing news, information and personal opinions to blog viewers who share the same interest with the blogger. Rosencrance (2004) defined blog as a kind of knowledge management and communication tool.

Generally speaking, the blog shares the following four characteristics—*Archive*, *Permalink*, *Time stamp*, and *Date header* (Baggetun & Wasson, 2006; Cohen, 2006; Ernst, 2003; Mattison, 2003) *Archive*: The media used in the blog could be pictures, articles, or voices. Hence, how to integrate pictures, articles and voices in the blog is important. The blogger may use time serial, for example day by day or week by week, to integrate the media. In addition, the blogger can integrate different topics, for instance, story or tour journal, in the blog. While integrating different methods and media to present his/her articles in the blog, the blogger also personalizes his/her own blog characteristics.

Permalink: When there is too much content in the blog, it would become difficult for blog viewers to find a certain passage or certain article. In the blog system, permalink offers the function to identify certain passages or articles. Besides, it also helps connect articles in different blogs.

Time Stamp: When the bloggers edit articles in their blogs, the blog system has a function to automatically record the time for editing in the database. This function is called time stamp. The purpose of time stamp is to set the sequence for the management of database in the blog system.

Date Header: Date header links information between blogs and Internet system. The blog viewers can realize the editing time of articles in the blog by the date header. Comparing the date header of articles shown in the blog with the event shown in the Internet, the blog viewers can infer and make a connection between these articles and the event.

Morris and Ogan (1996) think that the blog is a kind of critical mass in terms of creative writing. The blogger is also a kind of message producer, who has better computer medium communication skills than face-by-face communication skills. Blog is a hyper personal communication because it decreases the disadvantages of communication—social stratum, formulaic impression on sex, attraction of externalization, authoritative structure, and so on. Thus, bloggers and blog viewers have courage to present their opinions, not afraid of being criticized. Stone (1991) thinks that the social energy in blogs is “communication.” Blogs symbolize an invisible but useful communication technology for bloggers and blog viewers (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Considering the popularity of blogs, the impact blogs make on the media and public agenda (Drezner & Farrell, 2004), and the credibility bloggers wield among readers (Johnson & Kaye, 2004), blog viewers undertake the responsibility to monitor blogs while blogging. Blog websites represent a special type of personal logs shown in personal Homepages in which bloggers share their personal mood stories or diaries with blog viewers.

While selecting blog Home page for the formation of self-impression, bloggers write something on their own blog homepage. Via diaries, jottings, prose, poetries, fiction, or photos, bloggers express what have happened or what might happen in their own lives. As for blog viewers, being deeply impressed by bloggers and further following bloggers’ mood to rise and fall, blog viewers read bloggers’ articles and may pour their sympathy and anger on the virtual space. On the other hand, for bloggers, they seek for identification and support from other bloggers and viewers by self-disclosing behaviors. While their blogs being browsed frequently, bloggers in some sense would feel they become popular. In addition, if both bloggers and viewers can express their opinions appropriately, the Echo function will expand interpersonal relationship in cyberspace. Consequently, the virtual community strength would result in a positive interpersonal communication (Kelleher & Miller, 2006).

Furthermore, there are some benefits that the blog homepage brings to bloggers and blog viewers. Bloggers and blog viewers become more knowledgeable after browsing and negotiating some interesting topics in the blogs. Also they can construct a “voice” from their writing. Through these voices, they produce some invisible power and set up a new platform of “voices.” Thus, through the invisible power and voices, the virtual intersocial and interpsychological power in the blog between bloggers and blog viewers are produced. In the study, literature analysis and fifty-eight popular blog websites were surveyed and analyzed. In addition, the author reviewed Goffman’s imagination theory (1999), Weber’s self conception theory (1992), and Mauss’s body techniques theory (1973) in order to analyze and discuss the phenomenon of virtual power in blogs. The people participated in the in-depth interviews were two professors majoring in psychology and education.

The virtual intersocial and interpsychological power existing in blogs

After the analysis of the fifty-eight popular blogs in Taiwan, how these blogs exert their virtual intersocial and interpsychological power is discussed as follows.

News: Some blogs have a space to post hot news. When the bloggers read the hot news/information, some criticism and opinions will be posted in these blogs. If the blogs attract many people, the reliability of these blogs would be increased.

Political Issues: In Taiwan, some lawmakers or politicians have some blogs. The purpose of setting up their own blogs is to let people have a chance to understand them and to support them to win the

election. These blog websites are used to attract citizens. So, these blogs have many political issues to be discussed, for example, homosexual or AIDS issues. In addition, the blog viewers can also propose some issues and ask the lawmakers or politicians to answer for these issues. Hence, These blog websites offer a way for communication between the politician and citizens. However, almost 50% blog websites set up by lawmakers and politicians are closed after election. It could be possible that some candidates lose the election, and therefore, they close their blog websites for communication.

Economic Issues: Some blogs discuss economic issues; therefore, some professional knowledge is presented in these blogs. Hence, they can attract economic experts or professionals to join the discussion on economic issues. Although, this kind of blog is difficult to attract general people to browse and participate in the discussion. However, owing to its professional standing, it is easy for these blogs to construct their “authority.” Newspapers and magazines would like to cite some economic articles from these blogs.

Culture Issues: Some blogs discuss the relationship between native culture and other cultures. These discussions like to compare the cultural differences, belief problems, and religious issues. Nevertheless, the discussions on beliefs and religions always lead to violent disputes. In Taiwan, the most severe cultural problem is the different recognitions on country identity between China and Taiwan. Some people think that Taiwanese culture is the same as Chinese culture, while others think that Taiwanese culture is very different from Chinese culture because Taiwan was once occupied by Spain, Holland, China and Japan. Therefore, Taiwanese culture is composed of a diversity of subcultures. This critical discussion in this blog website always intends to enforce the blog viewers to accept some certain ideology. Owing to the political stress between China and Taiwan, such discussion is easy to cluster groups to fight against each other. Other blogs would emphasize the importance of diversified cultures because many Taiwanese people marry Filipinos, Vietnamese, or people from other countries. Therefore, the impact the new immigrants has made on Taiwanese culture is also popularly discussed.

Tour Issues: Some blogs offer tour knowledge for blog viewers. For example, if blog viewers want to have a tour in California, these blogs may suggest them some scenery spots and how to tour economically. Also, if viewers decide to join a package tour, the blogs may suggest them some tips while choosing tour companies to get a tour with lower price but higher quality. For instance, if viewers decide to travel alone, these blogs may suggest them some websites which can offer them good hotels and rental cars with cheap prices. Some bloggers would write down their tour experiences in the form of tour journal or tour articles in their blog websites. If these tour journals and articles become popularized or professionalized, these bloggers would be recommended as tour experts, and these blog websites would be highly evaluated.

Marketing: Some people or companies set up a blog in order to sell their products. Commonly, they organize a group to discuss quality, function, or price of similar products. Then, through discussions in the blog websites, the potential customers would be influenced by the blogs and turn to favor some certain products. Hence, the purpose of marketing is achieved through the blog discussion. In these years, marketing has become more and more popular. To commercialize a blog has become more and more obvious. Some people also use the blog to market and advertise themselves. They post photos in their blogs with a view that maybe someday they can become a singer or a model. Somehow, blogs own the power of advertising and marketing.

The virtual power for social structures and characteristics

On the other hand, after the analysis of social structures and characteristics related to the virtual power in the blog. The author found that the virtual power could come from the blogger’s sex and his/her viewpoints on certain issues, such as issues on subgroup/minority group, Internet power, leader, and audience segregation.

Sex: Most popular blog website are set up by female bloggers. After conducting an in-depth interview with a professor majoring in psychology, it revealed that blog viewers feel that females are always helpful and friendly, being used to care about others. Therefore, while reading females' blogs, viewers can relax themselves, for the blog content is soft and feminine. Hence, here comes a good or intimate relationship between bloggers and blog viewers. If somebody is going to attack or dissent from the articles in the blog, some blog viewers would post their articles to defend and to protect the female bloggers. In Taiwan, most people think that females belong to the weaker sex. If some viewers express their dissent from females' opinions, others would think that they are attacking the weaker group. Although the viewer may offer reasonable explanations and opinions to show his/her dissent from female bloggers' opinions, it would be better to keep quiet, not saying anything in the blog.

However, interestingly, in order not to be attacked by the blog viewers, some male blog viewers would pretend that they are female and then, in some way, they get some power to express their opinions, not afraid of being attacked. Viewing that the Internet belongs to a virtual world, Goffman (1999) emphasized that the Internet's environment would affect people's behavior. While male viewers pretend that they are female viewers, in some way, they can balance the sex power in blogs. The theory of Goffman's imagination (1999) can explain the complex phenomenon of "maintaining self-presentation" in front of some people. He thinks that people always want to create an imagined image in this society, and people always pay attention to the image. Therefore, in order to keep the image, people would play like an actor, presenting with certain image. Goffman defines the followings three points--Give-Give Off, Front Stage-Back Stage, Constrain-Be constrained. According to Goffman, "Give" is defined by most people as performance, action, and behavior they want to have, while "Give-Off" is defined as the performance, action, and behavior being expected by others. So, "Give" is defined by self, and "Give-Off" is defined by other people. The "Front Stage" and "Back Stage" are to explain the different behaviors taken by some people. When people present themselves, they want to show their good image, so they have pressure while presenting themselves. When bloggers use the blog to write articles to present themselves, because most people cannot understand the intention of the blogger, the blogger would do their best to present a good image to the "Front-Stage," that is, to the public. The "Back-Stage" means that when people want to release their pressure and do not want to present their imaginary image, they would cease the imagination process and go back to be the self.

Subgroup/Minority group: The blogger's role, according to Goffman (1999), should always fit blog viewers' expectation. Hence, in order to fit viewers' expectation, some bloggers would always adjust their roles. In the blog website, playing the role of a subgroup would be easier to meet blog viewers' expectation. Even if the opinions of the mainstream are in conflict with those of the minority group, interestingly, most blog viewers would support the minority group's opinions. The professor majoring in education explains that education encourages the minority group to speak up for themselves. Most media also like to report the opinions of minority groups. When the minority group's opinion is in conflict with the mainstream's opinion, an interesting phenomenon is that some blog viewers would turn to speak up and give voices for the minority group.

Internet power: The blogger has some Internet power because the blog is managed and controlled by the blogger, as the chief-editor controls the newspaper. So, if blog viewers do not agree with the blogger's opinion and dispute with the blogger, the blogger may delete these viewers' opinions. That is, the blogger can show his/her power over his/her own blog website. However, if bloggers overuse their power over their blog website, the blog viewers may refuse getting into the blog website and transfer to another blog website or set up their own blogs to fight back. Therefore, some articles whose opinions are in conflict with the blogger's opinions would not be deleted but be kept in the blog websites to make a power balance between the blogger and blogger viewers.

Leader: Leaders or experts also share some power in the blog. According to Mauss's body technique theory (1973), the leader always shows his professional knowledge. Mauss (1973) thinks that people use body technique to control themselves in order to avoid being controlled by the outside material. The purpose of using body technique is for social reproduction. When many blog viewers reproduce

their professional knowledge, the professional knowledge will in some way control these blogger's ideology. For example, if the expert writes the experience of losing weight in his/her blog website, he/she may suggest which food, which exercise, or which pill is good for losing weight. Afterwards, that food, that exercise, and that pill would become popular. The psychology professor explains that this is a "blind" phenomenon. The reason is that blog belongs to a type of fast median. When people want to lose weight, they may go to Yahoo or Google to seek for a good way to lose weight. Through surveying the website, people can easily find the experts' articles on losing weight and other articles posted by viewers to support the expert's article. If blog viewers believe that expert's opinions on losing weight, through blogging, they would in turn do their best to make other viewers believe these opinions.

Audience segregation: The bloggers always use the fake names, not their real names, on their blog websites. Besides bloggers, blog viewers also use fake names to post their opinions. Goffman (1999) explains this phenomenon as audience segregation. The audience segregation is a type of "Hinder." When hindering the blog viewer to realize the blogger, the blogger viewers cannot see through the blogger but instead have to try to understand the blogger from different dimensions. In order to attract some certain viewers, sometimes, the blogger intends to create a nice and friendly image in his/her blog. Sometimes, the blogger would keep invisible, not letting the viewers know who he/she is. Sometime, the blogger would wear a persona, masking himself/herself as a smart and capable professional to attract some certain viewers. By segregating and clustering blog viewers, the blogger creates an eidolon blog website, in which dissenting voices cannot be heard often. In other words, the blog viewers are constrained.

Conclusion

The blog has been one of the most popular individual media in the network. By blogging in the Internet, bloggers and blog viewers can sharpen their writing skills, search for realities, and create a communication outlet. Until 2000, blog did not start to be used popularly in America. In Taiwan, since 2003, blog has become a kind of fashionable medium for Internet communication. Many people have used self-disclosure in the blog for interpersonal interaction. Therefore, the power of Internet distribution and interpersonal relationship could not be neglected. This study extended the work of Sallot and his colleagues by examining virtual power in relation to blogs (Sallot, Porter, & Acosta-Alzuru, 2004; Porter & Sallot, 2005). In order to explain the phenomenon of virtual power, Goffman's imagination theory and Weber's "Who I am" theory were also explored.

Goffman (1999) emphasizes how the environment influences each individual's actions. He thinks that people depend on their will to construct their self-image. While constructing their self-image, they are always constrained by others. Hence, while setting up and playing their self-image, people have to pay attention to constrain their own action in order to meet others' expectation toward their role-play. Hence, in some way, they are constrained by themselves and also constrained by others. Weber's self-conception (1992) is based on "Who I am" theory. He thinks that people continue to develop self-conception in their lives. However, each individual's perception of self-conception is different. With the learning process and environmental factors, each individual gradually builds up his/her own "Who I am" conception in his/her psychology. Nonetheless, while each individual is in the process of constructing his/her self-conception, the value of "Who I am" is always positively or negatively evaluated by himself/herself. The positive/negative evaluation will lead the development of subsequent actions.

The researcher discovered that bloggers, while presenting different self-images to different bloggers, they gain the power to dominate these blog viewers. However, when the blog attracts heterogeneous blog viewers, the bloggers's virtual power would somehow be constrained. Some conclusions about virtual power are made as follows (Craig, 1994; Goffman, 1999; Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005).

1. In most popular blogs, the author wears a “make-up” in their blogs. They “mask” themselves, not showing their real selves.

Sometimes, the blogger does not want the viewers discovering their real life or identity, they would have a certain persona or way of appearing, that is, wearing a mask, to others. Therefore, through mask-wearing, the blogger can keep an obscured situation to create a new identity for keeping a good or intimate relationship with blog viewers.

2. By setting up their own blogs, somehow bloggers can gain the power to dominate their blog viewers.

Bloggers may choose to set up a new blog to gain some power to control their viewers. Furthermore, some bloggers may choose to give up their own identities but wear a “mask” to communicate with their bog viewers. While relinquishing their own identities and putting on a mask, in some way they derive power to play the roles they assume. Furthermore, while viewers being deeply impressed by the blogger and following the blogger’s mood to rise and fall, the blogger can arouse the viewers’ sympathy for the issues in the blog.

3. While the blog attracts heterogeneous groups, the bloggers’s virtual power would in some way be constrained.

While blogger construct a “voice” on their blog, they produce some invisible power and set up a new platform of “voices.” However, after browsing some similar blogs, blog viewers may become much more knowledgeable and have different “voices” to defend against the blogger’s opinions. The different voices coming from heterogeneous blog viewers would hence lessen the blogger’s virtual power.

4. When more and more viewers browse the blog, most bloggers always wish to segregate heterogeneous viewers in order to present different selves being masked in front of different viewers.

Viewing that heterogeneous viewers would result in the decrease of the virtual power, in order to regain the power, the blogger would set up different blogs. By setting up different bogs, the blogger could segregate different viewers into different blogs, and through wearing different masks to keep identifying with different viewers, the blogger can regain the power and further recontrol the viewers.

To sum up, bloggers can present different self-images to different blog viewers to gain some virtual power. Through setting up multiple identities, bloggers can use fake names to cross the border, such as gender border, racial border, class border, etc., to free themselves and give voices to the public. While using a fake name or crossing the border, the bloggers can gain some power that they are not used to have before to control their viewers.

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