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# Blog psychology: Insights, benefits, and research agenda on blogs as a dynamic medium to promote the discipline of psychology and allied fields

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It is generally recognised that blogging started in 1994, with Links.net considered to be the first ever blog. Since then blogs on a variety of topics and disciplines have emerged. Undeniably, blogs have been a functional vehicle in promoting psychology and have been instrumental in promoting mental health. Psychology and mental health blogs offer a wealth of information, insight, and interesting content for their audience. The range, immediacy, and diversity of bloggers' voices are highly compelling; readers are often drawn to blogs for their speed and intimacy. In light of this, the present paper outlines how blogs can serve as a transformative medium to promote the discipline of psychology and allied fields. It also provides a brief account of psychology blogs and provides an overview of popular blogs in the discipline. A new field could potentially materialise in the discipline and this can be known as 'blog psychology': a sub-branch of the discipline that attempts to apply psychological principles and research in order to optimise the benefits that readers can derive from consuming blogs. Potential theories of blog psychology may incorporate the readers' perception, cognition, and humanistic components in regards to their experience to consuming blogs. It could also explore a range of psychological principles involved in running blogs.

Keywords: blog psychology, cyberpsychology, internet, mental health, psychology

## BACKGROUND

It is estimated that in January 2017 there were more than 1.8 billion websites (Fowler, 2017). A website can be a personal, commercial, governmental website, or a non-profit organisation website. Websites are typically dedicated to a particular topic or purpose, ranging from entertainment and social networking to providing news and education.

Blogs are another form of website. As defined by the Australian Psychological Society (n.d.), these are 'shared online websites written in the form of journals by individuals, groups or corporations about any topic or issue they want.' Essentially, running a blog is democratic: anyone can start their own.

With the number of available websites, blogs have now become ubiquitous: there are blogs in every conceivable topics, disciplines, and niche. It is generally recognised that blogging started in 1994, with Links.net considered to be the first ever blog (Shevked & Dakovski, 2006). Blogging has gone a long way from being interactive, online forms of the traditional personal diary (Boniel-Nissim & Barak 2013) to becoming repository of valuable information.

The phenomenon and practice of blogging offers a rich environment from which to look at the psychology of the internet. By using blogging as a lens, researchers can see that many predictions and findings of early internet research on social and psychological features of computer-mediated communication have held true, whereas others are not as true, and that the psychology of the internet is very much a sense of the one and the many, the individual and the collective, the personal and the political. Blogs illustrate the fusion of key elements of human desire: to express one's identity, create community, structure one's past, and present experiences – with the main technological features of 21st century digital communication. Blogs can serve as a lens to observe the way in which people currently use digital technologies and, in return, transform some of the traditional cultural norms – such as those between the public and the private (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008).

To date, blogging has become a dynamic and transformative medium in promoting the discipline of psychology and allied fields. But more importantly, blogging helps people in improving their mental health and well-being. For instance, Boniel-Nissim and Barak (2013) explained that research shows that writing a personal diary is a valuable therapeutic means for relieving emotional distress and promoting well-being, and that diary writing during adolescence helps in coping with developmental challenges. Current technologies and cultural trends make it possible and normative to publish personal diaries on the internet through blogs. They examined the therapeutic value of blogging for adolescents who experience social-emotional difficulties. The field experiment included randomly assigned adolescents, pre-assessed as having social-emotional difficulties, to 6 groups (26–28 participants in each): Four groups were assigned to blogging (writing about their difficulties or free writing; either open or closed to responses), a group assigned to writing a diary on personal computers, and a no-treatment control group. Participants in the 5 writing groups were instructed to post messages at least twice a week over 10 weeks. Outcome measures included scales of social-emotional difficulties and self-esteem, a social activities checklist, and textual analyses of participants' posts. Measurement took place at pre- and post-intervention and at follow-up 2 months later. Results showed that participants maintaining a blog significantly improved on all measures. Participants writing about their difficulties in blogs open to responses gained the most. These results were consistent in the follow-up evaluation.

### Popular psychology blogs

Essentially, psychology blogs can be grouped into two: academic and general. Academic psychology blogs (APBs) are those aimed for researchers and academics. The contents of APBs are sourced from latest research published in scholarly journals. On the other hand, general psychology blogs (GPBs) are

those run by authors who may not have a formal qualification in psychology. It is often considered that GPBs often publish 'pop psychology' contents.

These are the popular APBs:

1. *Advances in the History of Psychology (AHP)* notifies readers of resources, publications, conferences, and other events or issues of interest to researchers and students of the history of psychology.
2. *APA Psych Learning Curve* is a place where educators, students, parents, activists, and psychologists can explore the latest in psychology education and education in psychology.
3. *BPS Research Digest* is published by the British Psychological Society since 2005. Its aim is to showcase psychological science while also casting a critical eye over its methods.
4. *Brain Blog* is written by a neuropsychologist, this blog focuses on topics such as memory, aging, and the way we give directions.
5. *ISCHP Blog* is managed by the International Society of Critical Health Psychology. One of its aims is to promote active commitment to equity, transparency and inclusion in the way we run the society and its events and projects.
6. *NUIG Health Psychology Blog* is from the School of Psychology of the National University of Ireland, Galway is a central hub of research in this area, with strong links to the Divisions of Health Psychology in both the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) and the British Psychological Society (BPS).
7. *OU Psychology Blog* is run by School of Psychology of the Open University. It covers forensic psychology, counselling, and social psychology.
8. *Psychology and Psychologist* publishes news about psychology and psychologists, including commentary and archival articles published in *The New York Times*.
9. *Psychology / Psychiatry News* is published by Medical News Today and it features the latest psychology and psychiatry research from prestigious universities and journals throughout the world.
10. *UCL Experimental Psychology Blog* is run by UCL's Psychology and Language Sciences (PALS). They undertake world-leading research and teaching in mind, behaviour, and language. It brings together researchers in a range of disciplines such as cognition, neuroscience, linguistics, education, communication, medicine, health, phonetics and development.

These are the popular GPBs:

1. *Brain Blogger* essentially challenged the traditional biomedical model and its associated web reporting by appointing Dr Engel's influential biopsychosocial model as a guiding principle.
2. *Mind Hacks* gives Neuroscience and psychology tricks to find out what's going on inside your brain.
3. *PsyBlog* is another popular GPB which is founded by the British psychologist Dr Jeremy Dean
4. *Psych Central* claims to be the largest and oldest independent mental health social network. Since 1995, its award-winning website has been run by mental health professionals offering reliable, trusted information and over 250 support groups to consumers.
5. *Psychology Fashion* is managed by Professor Carolyn Mair, a freelance consultant to industry and education. A Chartered Fellow of the British Psychological Society, Carolyn's work is concerned with using fashion and clothing as a vehicle for making a positive difference.
6. *Psychology Today* was first launched in 1967 and continues to thrive. On this site, they have gathered a group of renowned psychologists, academics, psychiatrists and writers to contribute their thoughts and ideas on what makes us tick.

7. *Psychreg* is the blog on psychology, mental health, and well-being. Launched in 2014 as a directory, it soon evolved into publishing articles on psychology and mental health, hosting a podcast, and having its own open access publication.
8. *Tutor2u Psychology Blog* partners with teachers and schools to help students maximise their performance in important exams and fulfil their potential. Their blog covers a wide range of topics.
9. *What is Psychology (WIP)* was created in order to bring a simple, fun and at times whimsical approach to the world of Psychology. WIP looks at psychology and psychological applications in everyday life,
10. *Welldoing* is a site devoted to mental health, self-development and wellbeing, with its own directory of therapists and counsellors.

### Benefits of blogging

One study (Lee, 2017) explores how the application of blog assignments facilitated the L2 writing process and how blogging affects the way students view blog-based L2 writing instruction and peer feedback. The results showed that beginning students had a positive attitude toward the use of blogs because it gave them agency over their learning, and engaged them in co-construction of knowledge with their peers. While scaffolding through peer feedback affected students' self-regulated efforts to make improvement on written content and increase language accuracy, strategies for effective use of feedback from the instructor was important. This study concludes that blogging not only empowers students to be creative with the content, but also promotes attention to language forms. L2 educators are strongly encouraged to take full advantage of the widely available blog technology by incorporating it into their teaching methods to further promote critical reflection and collaborative interaction within socially bounded online learning environments.

In June 2015, the American Historical Association (AHA) published its guidelines for evaluating digital scholarship, capping off a year-and-a-half of research into the emerging field of digital history. Blogging sat at the centre of the AHA's discussions, as scholars considered its relationship to digital history and its potential as an emerging form of scholarship in the digital era. McGregor (2017) summarised those debates and outlines the development of group blogs within academic history. Reflecting on his own work as the founder of the *Sport in American History* group blog, McGregor showed how it, like other blogs, is a form of new scholarship that helps rethink traditional methods of publication and scholarly communication. This new form of scholarship is less formal and more democratic, as well as geared for public consumption. McGregor further suggest that, within sport history, *Sport in American History* has fostered a more cohesive and collaborative community, bringing together an often-splintered subfield.

On another aspect, the learning process, as argued by Morris (2017) involves contextualising new knowledge with prior experiences and beliefs. In the scientific discipline, the focus of learning is geared towards learning how to do science, but there are significant barriers to learning, including jargonised terminology and excessive use of acronyms. Scientific discoveries are made by experimentation, but science as a discipline progresses through a series of ongoing conversations. Blogging provides a platform that widens access to these conversations by communicating science in a style of writing that sits somewhere in between the formal and informal. Regenerating scientific writing as a blog can enhance student learning by breaking down the barriers to learning posed by 'intellectually inaccessible' information. Morris described an experimental approach to teaching cancer biology by regenerating a classic review article in the field as a series of blog pieces, using everyday metaphors and analogies to describe the characteristics and behaviour of cancer cells. Other aspects of discipline, identity, 'voice' and communities of practice are also considered. Until such time as blogging is recognised as a valid academic output, however, it will remain firmly somewhere in between.

In recent years, the common and mundane dying has begun to take place in the public space of the internet. Among the blogs about food, fashion, travel, and other joyful aspects of life, blogs about severe disease and dying have appeared. The aim of one article (Andersson, 2017) is to describe some characteristic features of a sample of cancer blogs and to discuss them in the light of Zygmunt Bauman's theory of the rationalisation of death in modernity and theories about networked media, especially the theories about 'affective labour' and 'ambient intimacy' by McCosker and Darcy (2013), and Pfister (2014). It will then be argued that an affective communication is performed in and through these cancer blogs, where not only language but also the deficiencies of language – and what is called *shared ineffability* – might be valuable and meaningful (although not unproblematic) as part of a late modern approach to death, and in the practicing of the art of dying

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Recently, there has been a dramatic proliferation in the number of blogs; however, little is published about what motivates people to participate in blog activities. Based on the theory of reasoned action, researchers developed a model involving technology acceptance, knowledge sharing and social influences. A survey of 212 blog participants found strong support for the model. The results indicated that ease of use and enjoyment, and knowledge sharing (altruism and reputation) were positively related to attitude toward blogging, and accounted for 78% of the variance. On the other hand, social factors (community identification) and attitude toward blogging significantly influenced a blog participant's intention to continue to use blogs. Together they explain 83% of the variance of intention to blog (Hsu & Lin, 2008).

With the continued popularity of blogs, it is important that a specialised discipline be developed to encompass all forms of internet-mediated communication, specifically in blogs, such as the use, design, and its impact on mental health and well-being of its readers.

Potential theories of blog psychology may include the readers' perception, cognition, and humanistic components in regards to their experience to consuming blogs. Blog psychologists may also draw upon developmental and narrative psychologies and emerging findings from cyberpsychology. The theories and research in psychology could be used as the backbone of blog psychology and guide the discipline itself.

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