Understanding the Different Types of Social Support Offered by Audience to A-List Diary-Like and Informative Bloggers

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Abstract

Blogs offer audiences a forum through which they can exchange ideas and provide feedback about the everyday lives and experiences of the bloggers. Such interactions and communication between audiences and bloggers could be regarded as a kind of social support. The present study aims to identify and compare the types of social support offered by audiences to continuous popular diary-like and informative bloggers, and to explore the possible benefits that bloggers may obtain from such social support. Content analysis was used to analyze the 485 and 390 comments provided by the audiences to the A-list diary-like and informative blog posts, respectively. Results reveal that validation, compliment, and encouragement are the most common types of social support given by audiences to A-list bloggers. Chi-square test results show that the audiences offer more encouragement-type of social support to diary-like bloggers and more complimentary and informational social support to informative bloggers. Such types of social support may enhance A-list bloggers' self-esteem, boost their confidence, promote their self-understanding, and help them obtain the benefits of social validation, which in turn encourage bloggers to commit continuous self-disclosure.

Introduction

THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORK SITES (SNSs) has recently become a global trend. Blogs comprise one of the most popular social network media, highlighting users' participation in online content creation and mutual interaction. According to Barnes and Duck,¹ social support refers to "everyday behaviors that, whether directly or indirectly, communicate to an individual that she or he is valued and cared for by others." Also, social support is a daily interactional or communicative process.² Kim and Johnson have stated that the blogosphere is an interactive forum for discussion and opinion sharing.³ Therefore, the interactive or communicative process through which bloggers reveal their moods, everyday lives, experiences, or other information, as well as the audience response posted in the comment box, can be considered an act of social support.

Prior studies suggested that self-disclosure in blogs or Facebook is beneficial to users in obtaining social support and establishing or maintaining friendship via positive interaction.⁴⁻⁷ However, social support can be further classified into various types, such as informational or emotional support.⁸ Therefore, drilling the specific type of social support received by bloggers from interactive audiences is beneficial in extending our understanding of the interactive blogging communication phenomenon. Past studies examined the types of

social support provided during the interaction between Internet users in SNSs, such as Bulletin Board System (BBS) forums⁹ and self-help forums.¹⁰ However, previous studies seldom investigated the types of social support received by bloggers from interactive audiences. Moreover, according to Derlega et al.,¹¹ social supports have socially mediated benefits of disclosure to the receiver; therefore, the possible relationship between the social support received by the bloggers from the audience and the benefits they obtain from their self-disclosure is also needed to explore.

The two general types of blogs are diary-like and informative blogs.¹² Blogs written by authors who are inclined on knowledge sharing by providing information are termed informative blogs. In contrast, blogs written by authors who are inclined toward self-disclosure and on the consequent interaction are termed diary-like blogs. Diary-like and informative blogs have differences in the topics of posts. Whether these differences may lead to different types of social support with regard to audiences' response must be further examined.

The present study aims to examine the types of social support that audiences offer to continuous popular (A-list) diary-like and informative bloggers, respectively, based on Cutrona and Suhr's⁸ social support category system through the content analysis method. Moreover, the differences among the types of social support received by diary-like and informative bloggers are investigated. Finally, the current

study also explores the benefits that continuous popular bloggers may obtain from the social support they receive. The research results may enhance the public's understanding of the interaction between A-list bloggers and the audience, as well as the potential benefits of their interaction.

Social Support

Definition

Albrecht and Adelman define social support as verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perceptions of personal control in one's experience."¹³ Although social support is helpful during stressful situations, Barnes and Duck point out that the exchange of support does not only manifest during crises, but also is an everyday occurrence in personal relationships.¹ The study of everyday supportive interactions is important, because these form the basis for the support exchanged during crises. The present study adopted the definition of social support proposed by Barnes and Duck¹ and regards the interaction between the audiences and the bloggers through posts and feedback as a kind of social support that occurs in the communication between the bloggers and the audiences.

Typology

Cutrona and Suhr define a social support category system, which involves five general categories of social support: (a) informational, (b) emotional, (c) esteem, (d) social network

support, and (e) tangible support.⁸ Informational support refers to messages that include knowledge or facts, such as advice or feedback on actions. Emotional support is related to the expressions that include caring, concern, empathy, and sympathy. Esteem support is defined as the messages that help to promote one's skills, abilities, and intrinsic value. Social network support is defined as the messages that help to enhance one's sense of belonging to a specific group with similar interests or situations. Finally, tangible support is conceived as physically providing needed goods and services to recipients. Each of the five categories includes several subcategories. The partial typology of the social support framework of Cutrona and Suhr⁸ is provided in Table 1.

Research Design

Method

The present study used the content analysis method to analyze the content of the audience's feedback or comments on A-list diary-like and informative blog posts. Many studies use content analysis to explore the blogging phenomenon.¹⁴⁻¹⁷

Data collection

The data for the present study were collected from 485 and 390 audience responses to five diary-like and five informative bloggers, respectively. The 10 A-list bloggers were selected using a simple random sampling method from a continuous popular list of bloggers by comparing the Wretch (the largest blog service in Taiwan¹⁸) ranking of A-list bloggers in

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR SOCIAL SUPPORT CATEGORY

Social support category	Diary-like		Informative		Total		Chi-square test	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	Chi-square	p Value
Informational	6	1.24	61	15.63	67	7.66	45.149	0.000
Suggestion/advice	3	0.62	46	11.79	49	5.60	37.735	0.000
Situation appraisal	3	0.62	10	2.56	13	1.49	3.769	0.52
Teaching	0	0.00	3	0.77	3	0.34		
Reference	0	0.00	2	0.51	2	0.23		
Tangibles assistance	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00		
Esteem support	190	39.18	212	54.36	402	45.94	1.204	0.273
Compliment	67	13.82	115	29.49	182	20.80	12.659	0.000
Validation	123	25.36	97	24.87	220	25.14	3.073	0.080
Network support	7	1.44	4	1.03	11	1.26	0.818	0.366
Companionship	7	1.44	4	1.03	11	1.26	0.818	0.366
Emotional support	120	24.74	56	14.36	176	20.11	23.273	0.000
Relationship	4	0.82	7	1.79	11	1.26	0.818	0.366
Sympathy	1	0.21	1	0.26	2	0.23	0.000	1.000
Encouragement	115	23.71	47	12.05	162	18.51	28.543	0.000
Empathy	0	0.00	1	0.26	1	0.11		
Others	162	33.41	57	14.61	219	25.01	50.342	0.000
Competing for rank	35	7.22	5	1.28	40	4.57	22.500	0.000
Asking further questions about the blogger's opinion	40	8.25	24	6.15	64	7.31	4	0.46
Talking with other audiences	18	3.71	1	0.26	19	2.17	15.211	0.000
Greeting	3	0.62	1	0.26	4	0.46	1	0.317
Expression mark	3	0.62	0	0.00	3	0.34		
Talking to themselves	53	10.93	25	6.41	78	8.91	10.051	0.002
Sharing their own experiences	7	1.44	1	0.26	8	0.91	4.5	0.34
Asking for help	3	0.62	0	0.00	3	0.34		
Total	485	100	390	100	875	100		

TABLE 2. EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES IN SOME SOCIAL SUPPORT TYPES

<i>Social support category</i>	<i>Examples of responses</i>
Validation	"You should write more articles like this. Let those who want to raise big dogs think it over so that they will not regret and abandon the dog." "Yes! This is what I really like! I have eaten here for so many times that the manager's wife knows me!"
Compliment	"I just find that you understand the life philosophy. What a knowledgeable person!" "Wow, the last picture has a strong appeal. He really has a lot of talents in creating beautiful things!"
Encouragement	"You just don't need to think about them. Cheer up~ maybe inappropriate here. Anyhow, I still feel that I should give you some encouragement. People always put their own ideas onto others. The problem is that you are you and me is me—individual entities. We shall try our best not to put our ideas onto others." "I have been reading your blog posts for a long period and it is my first time to leave a message. ~ go ahead. Reading your journals at work is my happiest moment every day. Keep writing."
Informational support	"You can go to a coffee shop and ask for coffee grounds, because I worked part-time for a coffee shop and took home the remaining coffee grounds to absorb the bad smell. They are very effective!" "Once, I went shopping in Taoyuan Airport using Canadian dollars; it is very convenient! Moreover, checks are more convenient than cash and credit card when going to Europe because checks can be reissued, but the other two cannot."
Companionship	"I can't image that you have also the hobby of collecting old things. Welcome to my blog and see my gramophone collection—We could chat and exchange ideas." "We live very close to each other and my kid is nearly 10 months old too. What a coincidence!"

October 2005 and December 2010. The reason why we have chosen the audience responses from continuous popular blogs is that such blogs have been running for a long time, attracting many people to visit their blogs regularly, and accumulating numerous feedback or comments. Response data were then collected by choosing the 10 latest posts from the article list of each 10 blogs, as well as the first 10 responses to each posts in the Comments box. Because some posts had <10 responses, the researchers collected 50 diary-like posts and 485 related responses, as well as 50 informative posts and 390 related responses.

Data analysis

Before conducting the formal coding process, two coders discussed the meaning of the social support typology. Later, these coders independently coded a small portion of audience feedback into five categories and subcategories. To understand the correct meaning of each feedback, the two coders had to read the content of each blog post. As a result, the other subcategory was added into the code book, because both coders found many comments, such as "Great, I'm the first person to respond to your post again" difficult to classify into the social support typology. After coding, the inter-rater reliability coefficient of each category was above 0.88, indicating that the two coders strongly agreed on the coding results. Moreover, Cohen's Kappa was used to calculate the reliability coefficients for each category. According to Stemler,¹⁹ a Kappa coefficient between 0.61 and 0.80 indicates substantial coding results. Finally, the reliability test results showed that, with the exception of the informational support (0.54), the Kappa coefficient for each of the categories was accepted as follows: esteem support (0.77), social network support (1), and emotional support (1).

The low Kappa coefficient of informational support may be attributed to the rarity of observations. Viera and Garrett²⁰ illustrated that the low values of Kappa may not indicate the

low value of overall agreement if rare findings are present. In our case, two types of informational social support (teaching and reference) have low-frequency codes, which may result in a significant increase in chance agreement, leading to low Kappa coefficients.²¹

In the second phase, the other support category and posts under the informational and esteem supports with inconsistent agreement between the two coders were summarized and discussed by the coders. Moreover, another coder also joined the discussion. Common themes of the posts in the other support category were then generalized to provide a view of social support related to the interaction between the bloggers and their audiences. Furthermore, the posts under the informational and esteem supports with inconsistent agreement between the two coders were also reclassified into significant agreement subcategories to enhance the reliability of the content analysis results. Consequently, the content analysis results are shown in Table 1. Some examples of responses of each social support type are listed in Table 2.

Results

Social support in A-list bloggers

Esteem support. The content analysis results in Table 1 shows that esteem support most frequently constituted more than 45 percent of the total support messages. In this category, the subcategory called validation refers to the expression of agreement with the recipient's perspective of the situation,⁸ which constitutes almost 26 percent of the total responses. Moreover, validation is the most common type of social support that audiences offer to diary-like bloggers. Meanwhile, validation appears frequently in the responses to informative bloggers. These results indicate that the majority of the audience agrees with the bloggers' opinions.

Compliment in this category is defined as the statement of positive observations regarding the recipient, with emphasis

on the recipient's abilities.⁸ This also appears frequently in the total responses. Many diary-like bloggers often talk about their views on something through creative writing or quotations, write down their emotions and feelings, or even share experiences in their blogs. Such descriptions and expressions often help the audience confirm their writing abilities or creativity, or praise them for things they describe in blog posts. Likewise, the complimentary social support given by the audiences to informative bloggers are related to praise for their abilities or admiration for the message or photos in their posts.

Emotional support. The second largest category of social support received by A-list bloggers is emotional support (N=176, 20.11 percent). In this category, encouragement refers to the act of providing the recipient with hope and confidence.⁸ Table 1 shows that encouraging responses constitute a large percentage (N=162, 18.51 percent) of the total support messages. The content analysis results show that when diary-like bloggers write about their frustration or adversity, the audience encourages them by conveying inspiring messages.

Moreover, for both in the diary-like and informative blogs, some audiences show their support and loyalty to bloggers through their responses in the Comment box. Common expressions used to encourage bloggers to continue sharing their life and experiences include "Go for it," "tweet," and so on.

Informational support, network support, and tangible assistance. Table 1 indicates that the audience seldom provides informational support and network support to A-list bloggers; both types of social support constitute less than nine percent of all responses. After further comparing the differences of comment frequency between the two types of blog, Table 1 shows that the audience seldom offers advice or reference information to diary-like bloggers. However, they offer more informative social support to informative bloggers. Several audiences describe or give suggestions or opinions on informative blogs and even reply to bloggers' questions.

Moreover, in both diary-like blogs and informative blogs, very few audiences emphasize their companionship with bloggers and share the same interests with bloggers. Table 1 also shows that no audience gives tangible assistance to bloggers or tangible network support, such as access or presence. This is possibly due to the constraint of the network setting, which limits audiences to give tangible assistance or true companionship to bloggers. However, audiences spending time responding to bloggers' posts, in fact, could be regarded broadly as a kind of network support to bloggers.

Others. Finally, as with Coursaris and Liu,¹⁰ the researchers found that a large portion of responses cannot be classified into Cutrona and Suhr's⁸ social support typology. These kinds of responses were collectively placed into another category in Table 1 and further classified into eight subcategories. "Talking to themselves" has the largest percentage, comprising 8.91 percent of all responses, followed by "asking further questions about the blogger's opinion" (N=64, 7.31 percent), and "competing for rank" (N=40, 4.57 percent). Responses classified under "talking to themselves" refer to those that did not relate to the article published by the blogger, but about other emotions or memories triggered or recalled by things described by the blogger. Additionally, the researchers found that some audience asked further questions

about the blogger's opinion on things described by the blogger and promote further interactions with the author. Finally, "compete for rank" refers to audiences competing with each other to become the first reader who reply a blogger's posts. Some audience intends to compete for rank when responding to bloggers' articles and express their support to bloggers by writing such expressions as one-upmanship.

Differences among the types of social support received by diary-like and informative blogs

The present study then examined the differences among the types of social support received by the diary-like and informative blogs from audiences. A series of one-way chi-squared tests¹⁴ was used to determine any differences of social support between the two types of blogs in each of the subcategory. The test results are also shown in Table 1.

Conclusions and Discussion

Comparison of social support in blogs and other online forum

This research has found that the types of social supports that are most commonly received by diary-like bloggers are validation, encouragement, and compliments. On the other hand, social supports that are most commonly received by informative bloggers are compliments, validation, encouragement, and suggestions/advice. These results are slightly different from those presented in past studies. In specific BBS forum settings, such as an online forum for people with disabilities⁹ and an online HIV/AIDS self-help forum,¹⁰ informational support accounts for a large percentage of interactive messages. One possible reason for the differences between the blog setting and the specific-topic forum setting is that, in general, Internet users participating in the interaction in a specific topic forum have the same interests or face similar problems or situations. As a result, members in a specific-topic forum may share their experiences and give advice or references regarding their similar problems. On the contrary, blogs are more individually centered.²² Most blogs cover diverse topics. Therefore, the audience might not have the same experiences as the bloggers, making them incapable of providing informational support to these bloggers. Instead, the audience offers more validation and complimentary support to bloggers, rather than informational support.

Comparison of social support in diary-like and informative bloggers

Regarding diary-like bloggers who receive more encouragement-type of social support than informative bloggers, consistent with previous findings,^{4,6} this study revealed that diary-like bloggers are more likely to publish their daily life problems, stresses, and depressions. For example, "Actually, the personality of each individual is different, which cause the various ways in processing daily matters. The different way to resolve the same problem would lead to different results. You cannot say that it is wrong if someone does not accept others' opinions." Such contents elicit emotional encouragement from audiences, which boost their confidence or courage in solving their problems. Relatively, informative bloggers usually target sharing specific information on their blogs. For example, "This type of cookie is delicious for many

cats. But if you give too much will cause diarrhea. So, do not give too much to your cat. We usually give five to six pieces to our cat." Informative bloggers rarely express their negative life experiences. Therefore, audiences seldom respond to informative bloggers' posts about emotion-related encouragement; instead, they mainly respond with expectations and loyalty to informative bloggers to support their continued blogging. Notably, such expectation- and loyalty-related encouragements of responses commonly appear in diary-like blogs, resulting in diary-like bloggers receiving more encouragement than informative bloggers.

In addition, the emotion-related contents in diary-like blogs may remind a small number of audiences who have had the same experience and motivate them to respond instantly with the emotions triggered by blog posts. However, such responses may not relate to the content of blog posts. Most of these responses are difficult to understand by others and are about talking to themselves, rather than talking to authors. The comment, compete for ranks, also appears in the reply of diary-like blogs more often than in informative blogs. This may because some audiences who lack similar experiences want to express support for diary-like bloggers; thus, they use such Internet language simply to deliver their care and support to diary-like bloggers.

Compared with diary-like bloggers, informative bloggers usually receive more social support in the form of information sharing, suggestions, or situation appraisal. Informative bloggers mainly target sharing information such as on gourmet food, tourism, and the experience of parenting children. Sometimes, informative bloggers would ask questions and opinions of the audiences in their posts, for example, "If there is something we should really eat or buy, please share the information." Therefore, based on social exchange theory, perceived reciprocity norms may encourage audiences to share their experience in response to bloggers' questions,²³ and further provide detailed advice to bloggers. Relatively, diary-like bloggers use blogs mainly as a vent in which to express emotions. Therefore, they seldom ask for audiences' opinions in their blog posts. In addition, the audiences may not have the same experience with diary-like bloggers, resulting in the difficulty of audiences to offer specific suggestions to diary-like bloggers.

Moreover, the results show that informative bloggers usually receive more complimentary social support than diary-like bloggers. The possible reason is that, unlike diary-like blogs, informative blogs are topic-orientated and are mainly interested in providing useful knowledge or information to audiences. Thus, the audiences show their appreciation through compliment-like responses after obtaining useful information. Furthermore, the quality and content of the photos in blog posts are also the important sources of complimentary messages from the audiences. The majority of informative bloggers often use many photos in their blog post to deliver accurate and understandable information to audiences. As the result, the contents of informative blogs usually include more photos than diary-like blogs, which also help them receive more complimentary social support.

The benefits of social support on bloggers

Taken as a whole, the present study shows that validation, compliments, and encouragement are the major types of so-

cial support provided by audiences to A-list bloggers. Prior studies have confirmed that positive feedback provides individuals with information on how they are perceived or regarded by others.⁷ Social validation is a primary self-disclosure function.²⁴ However, bloggers who receive positive comments from the audience may allow them to feel that many people have the same thoughts and opinions toward their situation or perspective. This argument is similar with the finding of Miura and Yamashita that bloggers who received positive feedback promoted their satisfaction with self-understanding.⁷ This in turn enhances the intention of bloggers to write blogs continuously. Moreover, positive feedback may promote the perceptions of individuals regarding their achievements and their sense of competence.²⁵ Lu and Hsiao also claimed that bloggers judge their own ability to rely on the encouragement and support they received.²⁶ Therefore, the compliments, encouragement, and supportive responses offered by audiences may help bloggers believe in their own abilities, boost their confidence, and confirm their self-esteem. Consequently, positive feedback, such as validation, compliments, and encouragement may further enhance the perception of the bloggers on social validation and help them to strengthen their intention toward continuous self-disclosure.

Limitations and future research

The present study has several limitations. First, the topics of each diary-like and informative bloggers may vary. Future researchers can examine the relationship between the different contents of articles and audience responses. Second, in this study, the benefits that may be received by bloggers from the social support of audiences were inferred by the content analysis results and other related research findings. Future scholars could use other research methods, such as surveys, to further validate the relationships between blogging benefits and the social support received from interactive audiences. Finally, the present study was conducted in Taiwan, and the results may vary if conducted elsewhere, considering the different social factors in other countries. Hence, generalizing the results of the present study to other countries or cultures must be carefully conducted.

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