

## **It's All About Me: Blogs and Teenagers**

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### **Introduction**

Blogs (short for weblogs), are websites that anyone with computer access can create to publish online personal journals or diaries. While most blogs take the journal format, some also go further and provide commentary or information on a particular subject such as food, politics or local news. However, personal journals are by far the most popular way of writing a blog, with millions of people around the world using them as a way to share their thoughts, feelings or everyday lives with the world at large. A large number of Australian teenagers host blogs and this is discussed will be further below.

The personal journal is a well known method for individuals to engage in reflective thought, but blogging presents a way of taking it to another level, as it is a way for individuals to publish material on at no cost on a global scale. Some of the reasons that people blog are for self development, to improve their writing skills, as a way of collecting information or developing an expertise on specific subjects, for making and extending relationships or for building a community with people who share similar interests. For others the blog serves a social need to share - information, advice or experience in the name of social responsibility or caring.

### **Blog Overview**

In order to become a 'blogger', you firstly need to locate a blog hosting provider, which is as easy as doing an Internet search. Commonly utilised websites are [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com), [www.blqosome.com](http://www.blqosome.com) or <http://spaces.msn.com/>. Some have charges attached to their use, but most are free. Once you join a provider you name your blog, add information about yourself such as favourite movies, books or interests and add any video, audio or pictures of your choosing. Most blogs tend to be a mixture of text, links to other sites and pictures.

Each time you wish to update your blog, say add some information or make a comment, you do what is known as 'making a post.' This is done by clicking a button on the blogsite which brings up an area, (somewhat like an email) in which you are able to share your thoughts. Anybody reading your blog is free to comment on anything you have written and the choice is generally there for them to do this anonymously. While the people that visit the blog are able to post or comment, only the blog owner or editor can initiate new subjects or frame discussion

### **Teenage Blogging**

One place that many adolescents spend a lot of time is online (Herring, Kouper, et al 2004). Being online allows them the opportunity to embark on self-discovery, connect with others, experiment with gender and learn about the world. Many adolescents have embraced blogging, and some studies suggest that almost half of all blogs are created and maintained by teenagers (Rainie & Horrigan 2005; Huffaker & Calvert 2005). It is for this reason that

parents and educators need to be aware of the some of issues surrounding the practice and these are now discussed more fully.

Many teenage blogs cover the same territory, such as references to romantic relationships in the boyfriend/girlfriend genre, discussion about what is going on with school or study, typed lyrics of favourite songs and links or discussion about favourite music or bands. While many parents may already see the advantages in their teenager regularly writing about something, as this will improve their communication and literacy skills, there are also other benefits. Blogs can help a teenager develop digital literacy, as they provide a way to have a presence on the Internet that is easy to set up and requires no technical expertise. I believe this is particularly important in terms of teenage girls, who are often described as disinterested in technology (AAUW 2000), but have been identified as a demographic which has embraced the practice of blogging; with a number of studies finding there are more female teen bloggers than male (Herring, Kouper et al 2004).

Blogs also provide a no cost 'owned' and personal space that can give an adolescent the feeling of having some type of power or voice, at a time when they can feel the peculiar powerlessness that comes when a person is bridging childhood and adulthood. Nurmi (2004) argues that at the edge of adulthood people begin to construct and make sense of their lives by thinking more deeply about the events that have shaped them both past and present. In terms of this process, writing about oneself and being able to reflect on past journal entries could be a way of helping this process.

The format of blogs allows for instant communication and dialog between writer and audience and for some people who feel lonely or disconnected this may provide an opportunity to feel part of the larger world and connected to others. Teenagers in particular can feel they are misunderstood and the only ones suffering the growing up process, so the opportunity to form relationships and affiliations with other bloggers is positive on two levels. Not only does it offer the opportunity of 'belonging' in a personal sense, but also by the process of commenting, linking and posting to each other's blogs, bloggers form a type of community (Lave & Wenger 1981) which may have a positive effect on learning about social ties, friendship and connection (Lenhart et al 2005).

The blog can also serve as a safety valve for the frustration of day to day living, and many bloggers readily take the opportunity to vent to the world about what is going on in their lives. Numerous teenage blogs I visited use it as a way of complaining about friends and family or the pressure of study and exams. Some of the blogs I viewed belonged to teenage girls who were suffering from Anorexia. I observed these young women utilising their blogs to share their frustration with how they felt about their body image, their struggle with how to get through each day without eating or the perceived interference of parents into their eating habits.

A young person is also able to use the blog space to experiment and find his or her own identity. In terms of sexual identity, Huffaker (2004) found that of

the blogs he surveyed, 17% of the bloggers discussed their homosexuality and used their blog as a platform for 'coming out'.

Contrary to the early claims of the Internet being an ideal way for a person to experiment with masking or switching gender, (Turkle, 1995), the creators of most blogs tend to display a strong willingness to supply authentic, personal information about themselves and this is particularly so with teenagers. Döring (2001) in fact found that on the blogs she reviewed, gender was the strongest representation of 'self', via disclosure of names or photos.

While I have so far discussed the positive aspects of blogging for teenagers, recent findings also point to some negative aspects of blog use. A recent study of online identity and language among teenagers by Huffaker & Calvert (2005) has found that the vast majority of teenagers stayed close to reality when expressing themselves online. The troubling aspect of teenagers being 'authentic,' is that they often revealed personal information such as real name, age, location and other ways of being located such as email addresses, instant messenger addresses or phone numbers. Parents need to be aware that children and young adults can and do publish private information about themselves and their families which could lead to undesirable contact by other adults who may be sexual predators. Because bloggers frequently link to other blogs, adolescents may also stumble into other people's blogs that may contain inappropriate or disturbing pictures or discussion content.

In addition, this open sharing of information by young bloggers may put some families at risk by revealing details about their living situations that may leave them open to home invasion or burglary.

The aspects of online community and belonging that blogs can engender, also has a negative side. For example in terms of eating disorders, some health authorities warn that pro-Anorexia communities which link up via websites and blogs may be unintentionally encouraging the eating disorder, as they provide an environment and opportunity to belong to the 'eating disorder club'. This rationale can also be applied to blogs that deal with a various other behaviours such as Deliberate Self-Harm Syndrome (which refers to self-cutting, branding or burning), as these type of blogs may normalise and affirm the very behaviour that defines the disease or disorder (Hayashi 2006, National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders).

Blogs are also used as a tool in cyber-bullying (bullying behaviour online). For example Huffaker (2004) cites a recent study in which 2,500 children aged 10 to 17 years of age reported being harassed or threatened online. With the amount of personal information provided on many blogs, this can give bullies not only ways of contacting the blogger, but ammunition in the form of the personal or candid disclosures made by the blogger on their blog.

### Conclusion

Blogs provide an unprecedented opportunity for anyone interested in studying the human condition to learn more about the lives of others. In this regard the blogging community are able to provide mental health professionals with a unique opportunity to learn more about how people think, live and feel.

With regard to teenagers, positive aspects of blogging certainly exist in terms of how it aids self-reflection and may help young people to define their self identity, but the negative aspects cannot be ignored. In this respect parents and educators need to be aware of the high levels of self-disclosure that some teenagers willingly engage in, and the ramifications of this for individuals and families.

If you are interested in reading more blogs from around the world, Google now has a blog search located at <http://blogsearch.google.com/> .

### Blog terminology

While the term 'blog' is a contraction of 'Web log', 'blog' can also be used as a verb, meaning 'to maintain or add content to a blog'

Blogger - the person who writes in the blog

Vlog - a blog comprising of videos,

Photoblog - a blog comprising of photos

Linklog - a blog comprising of links to other sites

(Most blogs are primarily textual with some photos)

Blogroll - a list of a blogger's favourite blogs, usually appearing down the side of the blog.

Blogsphere - the blogging community

Post - to write in a blog.

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