

Power of Like-Minded Companionship: Role of Social Benefits in Breeding Blogging Intention

Ying Ho¹, Lancy Vai Iun Mac², Yinxi Lin³

* Correspondence Author: yingho@um.edu.mo

^{1,2} University of Macau, Taipa, Macau, China

³ SF Family Office Limited

INDEXING	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords: Keyword 1; Homophily Keyword 2; Blogging Continuance Intention Keyword 3; Online Interaction Keyword 4; Social Benefits Keyword 5; Chinese Online Social Networks</p>	<p>Web bloggers are generally regarded as more credible than commercial sources, making them an ideal source for brand endorsement. Yet very few blogging research look specifically at the interaction process of the blogger-reader duo. This study highlights social interaction between blogger-audience duo as a crucial element in blogging activities. It investigates the influence of blogger-reader homophily on blogging continuance intention, and explains this relationship by the relational benefits and positive support bloggers obtain via blogger-reader interactions. Data were collected from 200 Chinese bloggers who have shared product/service comments in popular Chinese online social networks. Results suggest that social rewards (i.e., relational benefits and positive support) generated by interpersonal interactions in the blog community encourage bloggers to continue blogging. Our findings underscore the significant roles of blogger-audience homophily and emotional rewards bloggers gained from blogging interactions in enhancing blogging intention. Managerial implications on how company managers and social network operators can effectively manage their online platform are also discussed.</p>

Article History

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the Internet is phenomenal in providing opportunities for people to connect with others around the globe while they share information, opinions and experiences through various online platforms. Widely referred to as blogging, this act of sharing one's contents online has evolved from purely "journal writing" to posting pictures (photoblog) and videos (vlog). Successful bloggers are people who are able to attract a lot of viewers who follow them regularly and respond to their posts. Viewers who trust these blogs as credible sources of information increasingly sought to obtain product and brand information from these blogs (Aggarawal *et al.*, 2012). In this way, influential bloggers are able to affect purchase behavior of other consumers (Flynn *et al.*, 1996). Brands have become aware of the rise of these blogging activities and thus target their efforts in leveraging the influential impact of these bloggers (D'Lima and Srivastava, 2019). A survey revealed that more than 92% of Chinese have bought products based on recommendations (AsiaPac Net Media, 2021). Besides, a McKinsey survey found that more than three-quarters of Chinese respondents between 18 and 54 cited online review as among the top three influential sources when they made purchase decisions (McKinsey, 2020). Therefore, bloggers are deemed to be credible sources of information and thus can

drive the development of online retail marketing, making blogging an important strategic communication tool for companies (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014).

While many bloggers continue to blog, many more blogs are short-lived. An intriguing question is why some bloggers lose motivation along the way and discontinue their blogging activities. In this study, we seek to investigate the factors that influence bloggers to continue blogging. Blogging requires enormous amount of time and effort so it would be interesting to study what keep bloggers to continue sharing. Considerable amount of research have found that bloggers are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards obtained from blogging. Li (2022) recently reviewed that these factors are mainly related to ex post experience (e.g., perceived usefulness satisfaction, self-benefit) or ex-ante motivations (need for sharing and professional development, altruism, etc.).

While people may blog because of various motivations, not all these motivations are equally important (Pentina *et al.*, 2016). In this study, we focus on the emotional side of online interaction in explaining people's motivation to continue blogging. Bloggers regularly connect with others online, generating interpersonal interaction which fulfill their social needs. The interactive nature of online platforms allows bloggers to relate with others closely and therefore enable them to build relationship with their audience. This can create social bonding and a sense of closeness with the audiences. This is particularly the case when the audiences are like-minded people sharing similar characteristics or opinions as the blogger. Blogger-audience homophily (or shared similarity) plays a significant role in enhancing the social rewards elicited from the dynamic interaction on blogs. When people interact with similar others, they are likely to relate closely with the audience and therefore gain relational benefits from such social interactions. This will likely enhance the stickiness of the blog and the blogger's blog sharing intention. This study therefore seeks to explain blogging continuance intention through the emotional lens whereby social rewards like relational benefits and positive support can be obtained through blogger-audience homophily.

This study addresses three research gaps in existing blogging motivation research. First, current research considered blogger's personal motives, technological factors, intrinsic and extrinsic rewards as motivators for blog participation. Less researchers investigated blogging as a dynamic process with constant social interaction between blog members. This study highlights the importance of blogger-audience social interaction in inducing blogger's blogging intention and examines how social rewards received from blogger-audience interaction (i.e., relational benefits and positive support) trigger blogger's blogging continuance intention.

Second, past literature mostly used cognitive factors (such as source credibility, e-WOM credibility, message quality, brand perceptions) to explain the effect of source homophily on consumer reactions to online communication (Daowd *et al.*, 2021; Le *et al.*, 2018; Lee and Watkins, 2016; Muda and Hamzah, 2021). Less researchers took the relational and emotional perspectives in examining the underlying mechanism of homophily-behavior relationship. This study focuses on the social interaction of the blogger-audience duo and explains the role of blogger-audience homophily in inducing positive blogger behaviors by social emotional rewards generated in the blog community interactions.

Third, although interpersonal homophily has been considered as an influential factor in online communities, most literature discussed its impacts on message persuasiveness and blog audience responses (e.g., blog engagement, attitude toward User-Generated Content, buying intention). Extant studies are relatively silent on how homophily affects participation behavior on the blogger side (e.g., blog continuance intention). While it is beneficial to study consumer responses to blogs, it is equally imperative to understand what factors motivate bloggers to continue sharing, share more contents, and participate more actively in blog communities. To address this gap, this study investigates the influence of blogger-audience homophily on blogger's blogging continuance intention, and explains this effect by the social rewards bloggers obtain via blogger-audience interaction.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. It starts with a literature review of extent research related to blogging and its motivation. We then present the research method including the data collection as well as measurement of variables. This is followed by the results, discussions and conclusions. Limitations and future research directions will be discussed to conclude the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sources of Blogging Motivation

Popularity of blogging activities (e.g., blog, vlogs) attracts much research attention on motivational factors of blogging participation. Some researchers investigated from the perspective of the incentives and rewards bloggers obtain from blogging activities. Past studies examined intrinsic rewards of blogging such as pouring out feelings (Liao *et al.*, 2011) and altruism (Lertpratchya and Carpenter, 2015; Vilnai-Yavetz and Levina, 2018), and extrinsic rewards such as regularly connecting with other people (Liao *et al.*, 2011), reciprocity and reputation (Lertpratchya and Carpenter, 2015). Miura and Yamashita (2007) and Ko (2013) identified benefits to self as an important reason for continuous self-disclosure in blog. A past study suggested differential influence of these incentives and rewards on blog participants. For sharing of e-business content, Vilnai-Yavetz and Levina (2018) found consumers tend to self-report intrinsic motives (such as fun and altruism), while extrinsic incentives (such as financial incentives and recognition from others) induced higher actual sharing willingness. Besides blogging rewards, other researchers explored blogger's personal motives and technological factors which facilitate blogging participation. Blogger factors studied include self-disclosure habit of bloggers (Ko, 2013), blogger's knowledge, responsiveness, market mavenism (Thakur *et al.*, 2013), blogger's personality traits (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness), and personal innovation in information technology (Wang *et al.*, 2012). Technological factors such as ease of use and enjoyment (Hsu and Lin, 2008), perceived control, playfulness and connectedness of blogging service (Zhao and Lu, 2012) are also examined.

An important theme in blogging motivation research is the crucial role of social factors in shaping consumer attitude and behavior. Joyce and Kraut (2006) found that interaction in online communities influences newcomer's willingness to return to the online group. Social factors such as community identification (Hsu and Lin, 2008), social connection (Li and Lin, 2012), and relationship with others (Miura and Yamashita, 2007) have been researched. There is a consensus that social interaction between online community participants generates various social rewards which satisfy their relational needs. In this study, we emphasize the social-interaction characteristic of blogging

activities. Blogs are virtual platforms for the blogger (who writes blogs and responds to comments) to interact with blog audience (who read, comment, and share blogs with others). When bloggers share their experience and opinion on blogs, they actively seek, receive, and respond to feedback from followers in the blog community. Meanwhile, feedback from blog audiences may also mold blogger's behaviors (Lomborg, 2012).

This study proposes that social rewards from blogger-audience interaction help satisfy blogger's psychological needs which motivate him/her to continue blogging. According to the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Sweiss and Abdalatif, 2022), need for relatedness and need for competence are two major psychological needs which form the basis for human motivation. Need for relatedness refers to a person's desire for connection with others and sense of belongingness to groups (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Need for competence is a person's desire to feel that he/she is capable and effective in managing the environment (Broeck *et al.*, 2010; Deci and Ryan, 2000). People are more likely to be intrinsically motivated when they perceive relational security and sense of competence (Ryan *et al.*, 1997). We reason that interaction between blogger-audience duo generates social rewards to the blogger, which facilitate the satisfaction of his/her relatedness and competence needs, and further enhances positive blogging behaviors (e.g., continue writing blogs, spend more time on blogging, and manage blogs more frequently). This study considers two key social rewards, namely relational benefits and positive support from audience, which satisfy the blogger's relatedness need and competence need respectively.

Relational Benefits

Relational benefits are conceptualized as the social benefits that blogger receives by establishing and maintaining relationships with blog audiences. Human beings naturally seek to form and maintain interpersonal attachments, and to fulfill their need to belong (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1987). Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, (2004) found that a major motive for consumer participation in virtual communities (in terms of online platform visit frequency and comments written) is social benefits (e.g., communicating with other people, meeting nice people) obtained from online interactions. We propose that bloggers derive various relational benefits from their interaction with blog followers (such as building relationship with blog audiences and gaining sense of belongingness in the blog community). These relational benefits then satisfy the blogger's need for relatedness and induce the blogger to be intrinsically motivated toward positive blogging behaviors. During blogging interactions, bloggers often expect satisfaction of their social needs such as social comparison and social bonding (Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013). Discussing topics of common interests, personal feelings, and life experiences with like-minded people strengthens the social bonding between the blogger and his/her audiences. Moreover, by sharing interesting product usage experience, blogger may attract and connect with new friends of common interests. Furthermore, blog encounters enable participants to recognize one another as community members and creates sense of closeness (Lomborg, 2012). Through regular interactions with blog members (e.g., sharing information, listening to audiences' feedback, responding to other's comments), blogger signifies his/her presence, role and participation as a member in the blog community (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004).

The influential role of relational benefits on blogging participation is supported by existing literature. Wu and Atkin (2017) found that social connection motive significantly predicts new comment posting behaviors in social networking sites. In an online bulletin

board community study, Preece *et al.*, (2004) showed that posters have a greater sense of belonging to the community than lurkers (who do not actively post). It is also found that community identification (i.e., the perception of belonging to the virtual community) significantly influences people's intention to use blogs (Hsu and Lin, 2008). Therefore, we hypothesize that bloggers obtain relational benefits from social interaction with blog audiences, which enhance their blogging continuance intention.

- H1: Relational benefit has direct positive impact on blogging continuance intention.

Positive Support

Positive support from blog audiences is another significant social reward blogger gains from blog interaction. Blogger often receives audience feedback in forms of comments, likes, and shares after posting blogs. The positive feedback (such as agreement, emotional encouragement, and empathy) reinforces bloggers' intention to blog. As Cognitive Evaluation Theory proposes, social-contextual events (such as feedback and rewards) arouse one's competency feeling, which enhances intrinsic motivation for such behaviors (Ryan and Deci, 2000). In blogging activities, feedback from other people help blogger judge his/her performance and ability (Lu and Hsiao, 2007). Affirmative comments from audiences indicate to the blogger that other people recognize his/her viewpoint as important and valuable, and thus the blogger will be more confident and willing to further share information. Moreover, many bloggers use blog writing as a way of pouring out feelings (Liao *et al.*, 2011) and exchanging negative product experiences with followers. When the blogger is in negative mood, positive supports from blog audiences (e.g., encouraging remarks, sharing of blog post to others) endorse the blogger's actions and feelings. Hence, the blogger feels being socially supported and is more courageous and confident in future blogging activities.

Existing findings are consistent with the notion that positive feedback encourages information sharing behaviors. Verplanck (1955) showed that statement of agreement to the speaker's opinion will stimulate speakers to share more. Miura (2007) found that positive feedback from weblog readers enhances the author's psychological satisfaction with information provision in weblog publishing. Positive feedback from blog audiences (e.g., sympathy, support, encouragement) motivates blog writing behavior (Miura and Yamashita, 2007). Ko *et al.*, (2011) identified esteem support and emotional support provided by blog readers as motivating factors for A-list journal-type bloggers (Ko *et al.*, 2011). Thus, we postulate that the positive feedback (e.g., support, encouragement, and empathy) from blog audience encourages bloggers' blogging participation.

- H2: Positive support has direct positive impact on blogging continuance intention.

Blogger-Audience Homophily

In blogging research, homophily refers to the shared similarity between online community members (i.e., blogger and audience). Past research examined different aspects of interpersonal homophily, such as demographic factors, opinions, preferences or value judgments (e.g., Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020; Ladhari *et al.*, 2020; Lee and Watkins, 2016). In blogging activities, bloggers may understand their audiences (e.g., identity, likes and dislikes, value in life, opinions and preferences) from followers' information provided by social media platforms and audience feedback during online interactions. The blogger will

perceive a high blogger-audience homophily if the audiences are in similar demographic groups, and show similar preferences and opinion.

Extant literature recognizes interpersonal homophily as an influential factor in online communication (e.g., blogs, reviews). A meta analysis of eWOM research showed that similarity between online community members encourages them to share their experiences (Ismagilova *et al.*, 2021). Researchers found that information source who is perceived as homophilous by audience is considered to be more influential (Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020; Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019). Moreover, homophily plays a significant role in consumer attitude formation. Muda and Hamzah (2021) showed that beauty consumers perceive vloggers to be similar to them to be more credible, which in turn enhances their attitude toward user-generated content. Homophily between online community members also helps moderate the impact of negative WOM on consumer attitude toward the company (Suwantee *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, past studies highlighted the important role of homophily in influencing consumer behaviors. In a study of narrative versus nonnarrative health blogs, Lu (2013) revealed that for nonnarrative health blogs, health-related similarity is more persuasive in adoption of health behavior. Li and Peng (2021) demonstrated that the perceived blogger-reader homophily is positively related to advertising trust and consumer image satisfaction with the social media influencer, which further stimulate consumer purchase intention.

This study postulates that high blogger-audience homophily amplifies the blogger's perceived social rewards (i.e., relational benefits and positive support) from blogger-audience interaction. In terms of relational benefits, increasing homophily induces interpersonal attraction and encourages social connection and interaction with online community members. When interacting with similar others, people feel safe and thus are more willing to develop and maintain interpersonal attachments. In other words, higher interpersonal homophily creates more opportunities for bloggers to extend their relationship network and gain relational benefits from social interactions. This echoes with past studies which suggested that higher perceived similarity with other blog readers increases people's blog engagement (Magno, 2017; Mainolfi and Vergura, 2022). Moreover, when online community members are like-minded, it is easier for them to identify with one another (Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020). This accelerates the development of sense of community feeling and social bonding in the online community. In a study of luxury fashion brands, Lee and Watkins (2016) showed that attitude homophily between YouTube blogger and viewer induces higher para-social interaction, which enhances luxury brand perception and purchase intention. The perceived blogger-reader homophily positively relates to advertising trust and consumer image satisfaction with the social media influencer (Li and Peng, 2021). Thus, we postulate that high blogger-audience homophily boosts the relational benefits blogger receives blogger-audience interaction. Moreover, the heightened perceived relational benefit further induces blogger's continuance intention.

- H3a : Blogger-audience homophily has direct positive impact on relational benefit.
- H3b: Relational benefit mediates the relationship between blogger-audience homophily and blogging continuance intention.

We also expect that blog audiences who are similar to the blogger are more likely to positively affirm the blogger’s opinions, be empathetic to the blogger’s sharing, and give encouragement to the blogger. Since homophilous audiences are similar to the blogger (e.g., in terms of demographic background, value judgment, or preference) and thus share similar perspective, they can better understand blogger’s opinions and resonate with the blogger’s standpoint. Ladhari *et al.*, (2020) posited that attitude homophily and value homophily enhance viewer’s emotional attachment to the vlogger, which is positively related to perceived vlogger popularity. Thus, we hypothesize that when blogger and audience are similar, blog audiences are more likely to give positive and supportive comments to the blogger. This amplifies the positive support blogger receives from blogger-audience interaction, which will drive blogger to continue blogging.

- H4a: Blogger-audience homophily has direct positive impact on positive support.
- H4b: Positive support mediates the relationship between blogger-audience homophily and blogging continuance intention.

In summary, this study highlights social interaction between blogger-audience duo as a crucial element in blogging activities. Social rewards (i.e., relational benefits and positive support) that blogger receive during blogging interactions are proposed as the mediators, which explain the impact of blogger-audience homophily on blogging continuance intention. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework of this study. In the following section, we explain the research methods and discuss the major findings.

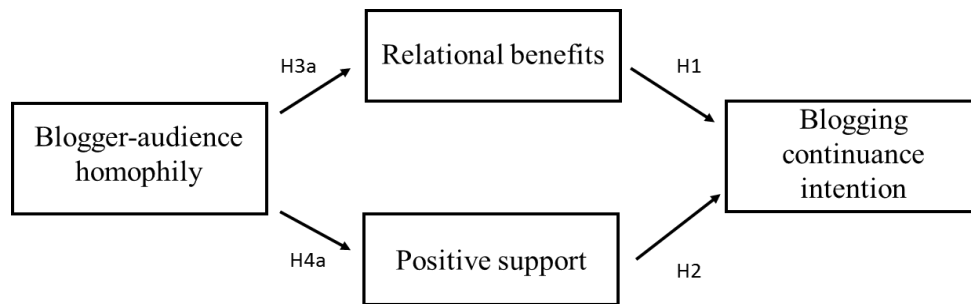


Figure 1. Conceptual framework (mediating hypotheses H3b and H4b are not depicted)

RESEARCH METHOD

Data Collection

A survey was conducted with Chinese online bloggers who have previously shared product/service comments in their personal blogs in popular Chinese online social networks. A research company in China was approached to contact Chinese bloggers who have at least one social media account and have posted some comments of products/services on their blog or social media page before. These qualified bloggers are provided with a link to an online structured questionnaire.

A total sample of 200 bloggers were obtained. Majority of them are female (59%), aged 21 to 30 years old (44.5%), married (73.5%) and are university educated (78%). Most of them are experienced bloggers with 4 to 6 years of blogging experience (34%). They

blog every week (66%) and on average 3-4 hours per day (45%) on platforms like Douyin (81.5%) and Weibo (66.5%). Text (94%) is the most popular blogging format followed by video (70.4%). For details of the sample and their blogging behavior please refer to Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

	%
Gender	
Male	41.0
Female	59.0
Education	
Junior high school	0.5
Senior high school	1.5
Diploma	12.0
Bachelor	78.0
Master	7.0
PhD or above	1.0
Marital status	
Single	25.5
Married	73.5
Divorced	1.0
Age	
20 or below	4.0
21-30	44.5
31-40	43.5
41-50	7.0
51 or above	1.0

Table 2. Blogging Behavior

	%
Blogging experience	
Less than 1 year	1.0
1-3 years	19.0
4-6 years	34.0
7-9 years	28.0
10-12 years	15.0
More than 12 years	3.0
Blogging format	
Video	70.5
Text	94.0

Live broadcast	6.5
Pictures	0.5
Platform used	
Little Red Book (Xiaohongshu)	57.5
Zhihu	31.5
Douyin	81.5
Weibo	66.5
Bilibili	37.0
Others	3.0
Hours blogging per day	
Less than 1 hour	4.0
1-2 hours	34.5
3-4 hours	45.0
5-6 hours	13.0
7-8 hours	3.0
More than 8 hours	0.5
Frequency of blogging	
Every day	22.0
Every week	66.0
Every month	9.5
Every quarter	1.5
Every year	0.5
Above one year	0.5

Measurements

All measurement scales were formulated with reference to existing literature and most of the items were adjusted slightly in wordings to fit the current research context. Please refer to Table 3 for the complete list of measurement items used in this study. Blogger-audience homophily is measured using a short scale adapted from Lawrence *et al.*, (2013)'s study. We adapt the expected relationships and community identification items in Hsu and Lin (2008) to evaluate the relational benefit variable. Positive support is taken from the study of Ko (2013) while continuance intention to blog is adopted from Liao *et al.*, (2011)'s study. All scales are measured on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 represents strongly disagree and 7 represents strongly agree.

Table 3. Standardized loadings of CFA, Composite Reliability (CR) and AVE

	β	CR	AVE
Blogger-audience homophily		0.845	0.578
The audiences of my blog are people similar	0.787		
The audiences of my blog are people that I	0.732		

The audiences of my blog are similar to me	0.773		
The audiences of my blog share similar beliefs and values as me.	0.747		
Relational benefits		0.893	0.511
Sharing my product/service knowledge on blogs help strengthen the tie between other bloggers and me.	0.774		
Sharing my product/service knowledge on blogs help create new relationships with new friends on blogs.	0.750		
My product/service knowledge sharing help expand the scope of my association with other users in blogs.	0.706		
My product/service knowledge sharing help create strong relationships with members who have common interests in blogs.	0.763		
Participating in blogs enhance my chance to meet blog members who have common interests.	0.624		
Members in my blog keep close ties with each other, which is a communication channel to share social lives and information.	0.763		
Members in my blog have a strong feeling of	0.682		
I am so proud of being a member of blog.	0.642		
Positive support			
On my blog, the audience expresses sympathy with my postings.	0.788	0.765	0.521
On my blog, the audience provides support	0.692		
On my blog, the audience offers significant encouragement regarding my postings.	0.681		
Blogging continuance intention		0.861	0.610
I intend to keep blogging on my blog.	0.843		
I intend to spend more time managing my	0.806		
I intend to edit my blog more frequently in	0.804		
I intend to recommend my blog to others.	0.658		

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to test the dimensionality, validity and reliability of the scales. All items were retained and the fit indices are reasonably good (Chi-square=272.35, df=146, p=0.000; GFI=0.874; CFI= 0.939; RMR=0.056), indicating

good fit of the data. Table 3 shows the standardized loadings of each item which are all above 0.5 thus meeting the minimum threshold requirements (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). To demonstrate convergent validity of the scales, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were computed. As shown in Table 3, all CR values are above 0.7 and all AVEs are above 0.5 indicating good convergent validity of the scales (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair *et al.*, 2010). As indicated by Fornell and Larcker (1981), discriminant validity is evident when the square root of the AVE value of each construct is higher than the construct's correlation coefficient with other constructs. As shown in Table 4, the square root of the AVE (shown in the diagonal of the correlation matrix) is always higher than the correlation coefficients therefore supporting discriminant validity of the scales.

Table 4. Correlation Matrix

	Blogger-audience homophily	Relational benefits	Positive support	Blogging continuance intention
Blogger-audience homophily	0.760			
Relational benefits	0.685***	0.715		
Positive support	0.650***	0.685***	0.722	
Blogging continuance intention	0.647***	0.695***	0.709***	0.781

Notes: The diagonal axis shows the square root of AVE.

***p<0.001

To ensure that the scales are free from common method bias, we used the Herman one-factor approach (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986) by subjecting all scale items to a single factor analysis. The unrotated factor analysis solution shows three factors with the first accounting for 49% of the total variance, meeting the threshold requirements of 50% (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988), therefore, common method bias is unlikely an issue.

Structural model results

Structural equation modeling using AMOS software was performed to test the hypotheses. The fit indices are reasonably good: Chi-square=41.488, df=1, p=0.000; GFI=0.914; CFI= 0.911; RMR=0.057. All paths are significant as shown in Table 5. H3a and H4a proposed that blogger-audience homophily is positively related to relational benefits and positive support. The strong and significant beta value (beta=0.685, p<0.001 and beta=0.650, p<0.001) shows strong support for these hypotheses. H1 and H2 stated that relational benefits and positive support have direct positive impact on blogging continuance intention. The positive and significant beta values (beta=0.315, p<0.001 and beta=0.383, p<0.001 respectively) again provide strong support to the two hypotheses.

Table 5. SEM Results

Hypotheses	Standardized beta	Hypotheses testing results
H1: Relational benefits → blogging continuance intention	0.315***	Supported
H2: Positive support → blogging continuance intention	0.383***	Supported
H3a: Blogger-audience homophily → relational benefits	0.685***	Supported
H4a: Blogger-audience homophily → positive support	0.650***	Supported

Note: ***p<0.001

We also tested the indirect effects of the homophily-blogging continuance intention through the two mediators. Using bootstrapping procedures (Hayes, 2009; 2013) with 2000 sample size, we found support for the mediating effect of both relational benefits and support in explaining the impact of homophily on blogging continuance intention (Table 6). Therefore, H3b and H4b are supported.

Table 6. Indirect Effects from Bootstrapping

Indirect effects	Standardized beta	Lower Bound CI	Upper bound CI
H3b: Blogger-audience homophily → relational	0.214***	0.112	0.345
H4b: Blogger-audience homophily → positive	0.248***	0.172	0.332

Note: ***p<0.001

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussions

Naturally, human beings are group animals who enjoy company of peers. The proliferation of social media and online communities increase the chances of getting to know more people, engage in interactions and thus build relationships with “friends” online. This study focuses on the emotional side of interaction between bloggers and their audience which motivates the blogger to continuously update his/her blog. Sharing information online by bloggers has been a popular activity which provides both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards to bloggers. Influential bloggers are like celebrities who can reap enormous benefits while sharing information. However, the “turnover” rate of bloggers is high meaning that many actually lost their interest to continue blogging. In this study, we found social rewards as demonstrated by relational benefits and positive support are vital to continuous blogging intention.

However, not all interactions online are equally effective in stimulating interpersonal closeness and emotional attachments. We found in this study that interaction with like-minded peers is more likely to strengthen emotional bonding and rapport. By connecting and interacting with audiences who share similar characteristics and interests, bloggers’

perceived relational benefits (e.g., relationship building, community identification) and positive support from blog interactions will be enhanced. Such social rewards can greatly encourage blog engagement as well as parasocial interaction which can become so real that it is often regarded as real social relationship. These results have significant implications in theory as well as for managers.

Theoretical Implication

This study contributes to blogging research in a number of ways. First, most extant literature on blogging intention investigates blogger's personal motive (such as altruism, blogger's enjoyment) and technological factors (such as ease of use, control, and playfulness of blogging service). Very few researchers look specifically at the interaction process of the blogger-audience duo. This study underscores the interactive nature of blogging activities, and highlights the role of the social rewards blogger obtains from blogger-audience interactions in motivating blogging behavior. Our findings reveal that social rewards (i.e., relational benefits and positive support) generated by interpersonal interactions in the blog community can indeed encourage bloggers to continue blogging. This result echoes with Alexandrov *et al.*, (2013) which found a positive link between expected satisfaction for need for social bonding and positive WOM behavior. Our finding is also consistent with Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, (2004) which identified social benefit as a significant motivator for visit frequency and number of comments written on online opinion platforms.

Second, most online communication studies on interpersonal homophily used cognitive factors (such as source credibility, message quality) to explain the effect of source homophily on consumer reactions. This study emphasizes on the significant role of the social emotional factors generated by blogger-audience interaction duo in blogging activities. We explain the effect of blogger-audience homophily on blogger continuance intention by the perceived social benefits blogger receives from blogger-audience interactions (i.e., relational benefits and positive support). The findings suggest that interpersonal homophily not only induces cognitive considerations in bloggers, but also magnifies emotional rewards bloggers experience in blogging interactions, which eventually trigger positive blogging behaviors.

Third, our results support the crucial role of interpersonal homophily in online communication. Past research suggested that source homophily impacts on blogger influence and popularity (Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019; Ladhari *et al.*, 2020) and audience's buying intention (Lee and Watkins, 2016; Li and Peng, 2021; Mainolfi and Vergura, 2022). This study adds to the current literature by further demonstrating the significant role of blogger-audience homophily in shaping blogger behaviors. We found that blogger's homophily with blog audience enhances the perceived relational benefits and positive support he/she receives from blog interactions, which in turn increase his/her blogging continuance intention. In other words, when bloggers feel that they are similar to their audiences, they perceive more social rewards from interaction with blog members and thus demonstrate more positive blogging behaviors. Our findings are in line with the eWOM meta analysis conducted by Ismagilova *et al.*, (2021) which showed that similarity between online community members encourages them to share their experiences.

Managerial Implication

Given the high credibility of non-company sponsored blog sharing, firms often want to motivate consumers to actively share their positive product usage experiences via personal blogs, vlogs, and livestreaming on online social platforms. Our study shows that bloggers who perceive higher level of homophily with their audiences experience more relational benefits and positive support from interactions with followers, which then lead to higher blogging continuance intention. Thus, to stimulate bloggers' intention to share products and services with others, firms can facilitate social interactions between bloggers and audiences who are link-minded and/or share similar profile. One method is setting up social community on official websites or other social networking platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Weibo) as avenues where bloggers and audiences with similar product interests engage in discussion. For example, major high-tech firms such as Apple and HP build online communities for users of different product interests to exchange information. Petco, a pet supplies firm, uses Facebook platform to facilitate pet lovers' sharing of interesting information, ideas and experience. In addition, firms may leverage on the social networking power of celebrity endorsers and key opinion leaders by hosting regular fan meetings (online or offline) or live streaming sessions which enable direct interaction between the celebrities and their fans. By connecting with people of similar interests, KOL bloggers' perceived relationship benefits and positive support from their followers will be boosted, and thus they may actively share the company products and services.

Social network platform operators can also benefit from our findings. Most personal blogs and vlogs are maintained by online social networking platforms (such as YouTube, Twitter, Weibo). Nowadays, many such platforms provide comprehensive and seamless user experience by combining social community and e-commerce functions to create a closed loop of consumption. When more platform users post their usage experience and opinion regarding various merchandises, other platform participants may be stimulated to buy, which creates a positive sharing-consumption loop effect. To motivate participants of online social networking platforms to produce more high quality blog entries related to product and service sharing, platform administrators first need to better understand platform users for interpersonal similarity evaluation. This can be achieved by asking users to provide more personal information (e.g., age, nationality, marital status, interests) upon platform registration. Moreover, platform managers can deduce user interest based on user's online browsing activities (such as viewing, forwarding, commenting, and liking) and people that they interact with in the platform community. With better understanding of user profile and interests, online platforms can then use recommendation algorithms to bring like-minded and similar-profile platform users together for engagement. For examples, blog posts and bloggers which fit a user's interests can be recommended to the user. Virtual discussion sessions of different topics of interest (e.g., make-up skills, gardening, travelling, and pets) can be organized to allow platform participants of similar passion to interact with one other. When similar people gather, bloggers may experience more social benefits in product sharing and thus will be more inclined to share his/her product knowledge and usage experience.

CONCLUSION

This study explains the effect of blogger-audience homophily on the blogger's blogging continuance intention by the social rewards (i.e., relational benefits and positive support) blogger receives from blogger-audience interactions. This study defines homophily as a general concept i.e., the shared similarity between the blogger and his/her audiences. Nevertheless, other researchers suggest that homophily can be considered as a multi-dimensional construct as people can be similar in terms of different aspects such as attitude, background, value and appearance (Ladhari *et al.*, 2020). An interesting avenue for future research is to explore the differential impact of various homophily types on blogger's sharing intention. For instance, a travel blogger may be more motivated by engaging with followers who share similar lifestyle and hobby, while a pet blogger may be more inspired by interacting with people who are similar in life value (i.e., respect animal rights).

Secondly, this study reveals social rewards generated from blog interaction (i.e., relational benefits and positive support) as important mediators which explain the relationship between blogger-audience homophily and blogging continuance intention. As the Chinese culture is collectivistic in nature, our respondents (i.e., Chinese bloggers who participated in Chinese social media platforms) may place more emphasis on interpersonal relationship and group membership (Bond, 1986; Triandis, 1989). Thus, our results may not be readily applicable in individualistic societies (such as USA) which put less emphasis on group relationships. Future research can explore the cultural effect and test the validity of the proposed model in individualistic cultures.

Lastly, most of our respondents (i.e., 87.9%) are young and mature adults, who were born between 1982 and 2002. However, blogging activity is increasingly popular among consumers of all age groups. Young teenagers (e.g., below age of 20) and older consumers (e.g., above age of 50) are becoming significant participants in blogsphere. Researchers may explore how interpersonal homophily and social rewards from blog interactions influence their blogging behaviors.

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