Investigating the Areas of Self-Reflection in Malaysian Students' Personal Blogs: A Case Study

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Abstract—This case study investigates the areas of self-reflection through the written content of four university students' blogs. The study was undertaken to explore the categories of self-reflection in relation to the use of blogs. Data collection methods included downloading students' blog entries and recording individual interviews to further support the data. Data was analyzed using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo, to categories and code the data. The categories of self-reflection revealed in the findings showed that university students used blogs to reflect on (1) life in varsity, (2) emotions and feelings, (3) various relationships, (4) personal growth, (5) spirituality, (6) health conditions, (7) busyness with daily chores, (8) gifts for people and themselves and (9) personal interests. Overall, all four of the students had positive experiences and felt satisfied using blogs for self-reflection.

Keywords—Blogging, personal growth, self-reflection, university students.

I. INTRODUCTION

SELF-REFLECTION has always been a subject of interest among the younger generation. They were seen as a generation who has come to value self-reflection, taking time to rethink past events and learn from their mistakes [1], [2]. Reference [3] noted that as social creatures, most human beings sensed a need for involvement and desired to be part of the world around them; thus, reflecting and sharing their lives and expressing themselves online fulfilled an innate human desire for shared experience and a hope for connection with the community.

In the past decade, Web users began to create reflective logs of their activities, detailing where they had been and what they had done and learnt on the Internet [4]. These digital texts were initially known as *weblogs,* later abbreviated to *blogs.* Blogging was an active practice, producing digital content varying widely from reflections, to to-do lists and philosophies, to references and new ideas. These blogs differed from static webpages because they could capture the bloggers' on-going expressions, identifying them with their blogs [4].

Therefore, due to these easily accessible tools encouraging self-reflection within the online communities, the young digital generation spent a great deal of their time writing in an online environment. This environment allowed them to reflect more, and provided them a space for personal growth and development [5]. Hence, the purpose of this case study was to investigate areas of self-reflection in blogs among four varsity students in a local university in Malaysia.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

A. Self-reflection in Blogs

It can be observed that students in this generation were becoming more and more active and exploratory and want to talk about their ideas, actively seek responses and at the same time try to form communities and networks in order to support their efforts as active and responsible people in the society [6]. This process of self-reflection and interconnecting of ideas were supported with the use of blogs through journaling. This was because blogs gave students an outlet to express themselves in writing and for storing information that facilitated and organized students' own meaning making process, especially when the blogs were voluntarily created, owned and controlled by the students themselves [7]. Self-reflection can be especially useful for students, because it helped them to explore various strategies for managing their varied and changeable thoughts and feelings [8].

From a survey carried out on blogs, it was found that the ease and appeal of blogging inspired writers and creators to share their voices with the world and most were focused on describing their personal experiences to a relatively small audience of readers and that only a small proportion focused their coverage on politics, media, government, or technology [9]. In fact, blogs were unique havens that combined news and information with self-reflection [10]. The survey also pointed out that all created blogs were as unique as the people who kept them and most bloggers were primarily interested in creative, personal reflections by documenting individual experiences, sharing practical knowledge, or just keeping in touch with friends and family through personal news and updates.

Besides, [11] noted that an online environment "comprised (of) a quintessential place for identity exploration for adolescents" (220). This was because the adolescence phase marked the time when individuals have arrived at a stage where they were cognitively able to understand the importance of their quest in identity exploration and can actively search for a sense of who they were through self-reflections [12]. Hence, online environments, especially ones like blogs, provided a relatively safe place for experimentation of their voice, ideas and different identities, all within the

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comfort and privacy of a room with an Internet-connected computer and this kind of accessibility to safe spaces was an important component of the identity construction process [11]. Yet, although composing online may gather large amounts of readers, responses received online were fairly less intimidating than face-to-face feedback. Through online feedback such as comment boxes or user surveys, bloggers may be able to visualize how other people may react to their reflected identities, be it from posted pictures, music, written journals or etc. Subsequently, this assisted bloggers to form identities in accordance to ways that were acceptable outside the online environments such as appropriate social roles and behaviors [13]. This was summed up through [12]'s claim that social interaction online facilitated identity construction offline which was both a mental and social process.

But most importantly, it was the immediacy of the particular blogs entries, an unplanned record of how the individual felt or thought at that particular point in time and the ease of online publishing that allowed posts to be put down on the digital page straight away in contrast to handwritten diaries whose entries were usually delayed [4]. By reading other bloggers posts and perhaps being reminded of their own experiences, other readers who were currently not involved may even be interested to begin a similar journey of self-reflection for themselves [14].

III. THE STUDY

The objective of this study was to investigate categories of self-reflection in blogs in the English language among four varsity students in a local university in Malaysia. This sample size was chosen as in-depth information from a small number of people was of greater value especially in information rich cases and it allowed detailed monitoring to provide deeper insights. This area of study was significant especially in understanding how students manage their own personal growth through self-reflections as a young adult.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on this objective, the research questions that guided the study were
- What were the categories that emerge from the written content in blog as a result of self-reflection by the university students?
- How did those categories of self-reflection help students in their personal growth?

V. METHODOLOGY

A. Subjects of the Study

The students were selected from an English Language course. This was because they reflected a typical group of ESL bloggers who were course-mates and friends. Students' relationships were often better understood in the context of groups [15]. Thus, more value would come from focusing on each individual blog in this social group rather than attempting a casual analysis of many unrelated blogs. The students selected were 2nd and 3rd year students, aged 20-23 years old. They were an appropriate sample as they were positioned halfway through the duration of their studies in the university, and their reflections were more likely to reflect the academic life of university students.

B. Procedures

The method that was used to determine the categories of self-reflection was content analysis. To carry this out, blog entries by the four students were downloaded from their individual blogs. Their blogs were analyzed based on entries written in one semester, 20th December 2010 to 30th April 2011. Each blog contained 17 to 74 entries in that duration, and they were organized into file folders, labeled according to date of entry. The contents in the blog entries were downloaded at the end of the semester and they included published materials such as texts in the form of personal reflections, thoughts, opinions, articles, assignments, questions, or announcements, and comments given by readers on their posts, photos, videos, music and illustrations, etc. For the purpose of this study, only entries related to self-reflection were analyzed. The method used to identify those entries were through reading and re-reading and in the process, a coding instrument made up of categories of self-reflection was created based on the blog text.

Additionally, the students also participated in individual interviews which focused on their individual feedback to further support the data retrieved from the blogs. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word to be analyzed.

C. Data Analysis

A few widely used approaches proposed by [16]-[19] were used to analyze the data. Sections of the blog texts were analyzed and coded according to the categories that emerged during the coding process. Table I shows an example of a category (varsity life) in the coding instrument used during the coding process.

TABLE I
EXTRACT OF THE CODING INSTRUMENT

Code	Definition	Coding rules
Varsity life	Blog entries that depicted reflections of students' varsity activities and experiences	- References to terms like "university", "lectures", "exams", "classes", "assignments", "projects", "extra-curricular", etc. - Description of reflection on experiences, current issues, struggles, what and how they felt. - Explanation of experiences, feelings, etc.

The categories of self-reflection in this study were identified by connecting each item, word, sentence and passage of a document to a category. This was done in two stages: first, grouping all *relevant texts* into *repeating ideas*, and second, grouping all *repeating ideas* into abstract *themes*, representing more general ideas implicit in the *repeating ideas* [20]. The data was organized into a computer assisted

qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo, to record the findings efficiently.

VI. FINDINGS

Findings demonstrated that blogs were a comfortable and appropriate medium especially for expressing self-reflective thoughts. Table II illustrates the categories that were found in the students' blogs which depicted self-reflection.

TABLE II

SELF-REFLECTION CATEGORIES FOUND IN STUDENTS' BLOG ENTRIES

Category	Sub-category	Example of blog entry
1. life in varsity	reflection on studies and exams	I was completely absorbed in my studying that I'd forgotten about the world outside. I was rushing to finish going through the text book and slides for my first paper so I could try out some sample questions before the Big Day...
	satisfaction with hostel activities	The beginning of my college's festival the 10th, is today! :D ... Number 1, the head did his job by calling the sound system person and checked with the canopies and lightings...
	pleasant surprise with lecturer	...Our lecturer for this course, Prof A--- dropped by our stall yesterday morning and my oh my were we surprised~ ... it was HARD to imagine he actually made time to come all the way from the faculty of education to see us! ...we were all nervous yet honored at the same time!
2. emotions and feelings	sadness and frustration	AAHHHHHHH... I'm bumped out. MOHE is giving out scholarship this week and I screwed last sem's result badly. I wanna cry. :(((I'm sad. I'm stressed out. aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
	frustration	perasaan skrg mcm taik (translation) feeling like sh*t now
	anger and rage	-Oh. My. God. I am literally shaking with rage right now... Oh, don't worry.. I am soooooo gonna tell you why. ...I've cooled down somewhat, as you can see. But I am still appalled … -In retrospect, my last two posts seem rather harsh.
	anger	i'm PISSED not because you stepped on the emergency break out of the blue...but simply because you could have just said sorry but you DIDN'T! thoughtless. abrasive &*%@#! may god bless you.
3. various relationships	family relationships	-...I always look forward to meeting my cousins again... -gonna meet my beloved family tomorrow! -the whole Miri family clan was extremely pissed off.
	friends and friendships significant other	-Nana, I'll miss you -you shall be dearly missed a--- -My relationship with a certain someone is slowly growing.:) I've learned a lot from him... -I really really like this guy. Heh. I'm looking forward to talk to him this new year. :)
4. personal growth	self-control of the human character	... I will constantly remind myself that instead of wasting my breath, to channel the energy into something more productive. I guess I also need to control my anger now. I never used to be this irritable >.<
	responsibility	...somehow I know that God teaching me a lot of new responsibilities for my future growth. I know not what are they for but for now, I'm taking the role of leadership and teaching.
	virtues	three important things i gathered from my marketing project in kajang today: 1) you never know until you try 2) never judge a book by its cover 3) people, no matter how rich or how poor, are kind and generous at heart <3
5. spirituality	discipline	I know the Lord is teaching me discipline in the little things He is giving me...
	gratitude	Did I mention God has been so faithful to me throughout the whole trip?
	for others	.. I pray that parents nowadays will instill love and peace in the heart of their children. :)
	lesson learnt	hmm... God, You are teaching me about HUMILITY, aren't you?
	thanksgiving	Thank You Lord for the responsibilities.
6. health conditions		-Have been sick for the past few days....Didn't mean to sound whiny or anything, but it just sucks being sick.. Comment from reader: *hug* aww u poor girl... =| get well soon... -i might have infection in my left eye. the eye drop is scary. painful. i feel numb.
7. busyness with daily chores		-I've been busy this past week. I have tons of work to do -- -I honestly do not know how I'll handle my time and my mind...
	self-depreciation	- I'M NOT GOOD IN ORGANIZING MY MIND, MY THOUGHTS AND SO MANY THINGS ... I SUCK AT TEACHING SOMEBODY. I SUCK AT SO MANY THINGS.
	request for support	- I'm freaking out honestly. i NEVER once becoming a secretary before...Please be with me. Ask "How are you?" and listen to my cries...Pray for me too. I need all the emotional support.
8. gifts for people and themselves	gifts for others	Mummy's birthday was coming up, so I thought I'd make her and dad a little gift. Mum's would be a birthday-cum-Christmas gift, Dad's would be just a Christmas gift. :)
	birthday gift	Can I have a Bro's 600ml or 500ml water bottle for a birthday gift?...
9. personal interests	writing	I want to write more stories...I hope I can manage my time in a way that I can actually make time to do something I love.
	photography	Nick shot from another angle, I tried this one. :)...
	soup	...i am a HUGE fan of soup!!!…sweet corn soup...i miss home cooked soups soooooooooo much!

The content of the entries showed that the university students often reflected innumerably about themselves, their daily lives and things that happened around them. As stated by S4 and S3, writing their reflections in their blog were useful as this helped them to learn from their experiences and from there, make personal improvements in various areas of their lives.

...it's very useful for reflection, reflecting on the things you did and aiming to improve yourself and become a better person. (Student 4)

...when writing it helps me to reflect on myself and I will learn from the reflection. I will learn something like, "In the future, you cannot do this anymore. You must do this, this way. If you want to say this, you have to say it this way." Like that. (Student 3)

S4 added that besides reflecting on the events in her life, blogging was a way for her readers to be updated of her activities.

... so that people who know my blog will know what's happening like in my life... (Student 4)

Furthermore, S3 and S1 elaborated that by reflecting on their feelings in their blog, it helped them to manage their emotions more effectively.

It helps me release the anger, sadness, happy emotions. Mostly emotions (that I) write in the blog. (Student 3)

...blog is like my outlet. I use it as my outlet like when I go through difficult times, when I want to grumble or complain about something, then that's where it goes. (Student 1)

S1 further expressed that by reflecting on her negative emotions in her blog, it helped her to calm down and she immediately felt better towards the end of the post. At the same time, the time taken to compose the post enabled her to rethink about her actions and reflect on the incident in a clearer manner without the immediate emotional influence.

By the end of the post I felt better you know. Really better. And then posting, publishing it and then reading it back I could see that, "ok this is what happened" and I could feel like what happened, but in a calmer mood after reading it...(Student 1)

By expressing and reflecting on their emotions on their blog, similarly to *thinking aloud*, it also helped students to see things more clearly and from different perspectives.

If it's like I'm going through a dilemma or something, then I post my questions there. (Student 1)

writing actually helps me to, umm... collect my emotions, think about what happened in a more concise or clear manner. (Student 4)

Additionally, the reflection process through blogging helped the students cope with conflicting issues. This was because the writing process required them to take time to reflect and think about the issue as they composed the blog post and this enabled them to assess the conflict from the other person's point of view.

...it helps me manage the issue cause you know, you write out and then you're conscious of it... I consciously try to also see the other side of a certain issue...(Student 1)

Also, the reflection process through blogging helped S1 in forming more concrete opinions on particular issues. For if she did not blog, she would not have reflected or thought about it.

I think sometimes thru the process...I'm trying to see where my stand is. Maybe I myself am not very sure, so then I force myself to think in order to write the post. I think about it and then, maybe I come to that realisation and say ok, this is my stand on (this issue). (Student 1)

Sometimes students also wanted their readers to be aware of the predicament that they were going through. This was because by reflecting on their problem on their blog which can be viewed publicly, they may get comfort and satisfaction from their readers through their comments.

...satisfaction, you can express yourself and people give feedback and you feel satisfied. (Student 3)

Moreover, S4 expressed that she may not be able to find someone to confide in at the time of need and therefore had resorted to writing in her blog to help sort out her struggles. Through that process of reflection, she was then able to take time to ponder as she composed her post and look at her problems from different angles and perspectives. That had led her to further develop herself mentally and emotionally.

It is not like every time (when) you have some story to share or problem and you can't get a friend... Writing helps me to collect my emotions, thinking about what I feel in a concise or clear manner. When I look back at the experience... helps me to learn... That itself has helped me in self-development (Student 4)

However, S4 added that it was not merely the blog itself which helped her but it was more of the availability of a place to reflect on her thoughts which helped her to sort everything out.

... by simply allowing me a place to express myself and an outlet for my emotion and what I think, it has already helped a lot. (Student 4)

Besides, S1, S2 and S4 described that through blogging and archiving their life stories, it enabled them to review their year and evaluate their experiences and ways they had matured. This, in effect, helped S1 to make and improve her future resolutions.

... helps me look at my life...the blog actually help me organise things and then I can see it...I get an idea of what it's been like for me and then it helps me see where I've grown or see experiences...it helps me to try to make an effort cause I'm conscious of it... so I try to do better in the future (Student 1)

...Every semester I try to look back to see... what i've been through...how far i've grown. (Student 2)

when I look back at the experiences and what happened, I feel that, actually, whether

experiences, whether they are good or bad, they help you to learn in a way. And I think that, that in itself has helped me in self-development. (Student 4)

For S2 and S4, writing their reflections in their blogs also served as a reminder of what they have learnt about themselves and in future, when they read back their previous posts, they would be able to see how much they have progressed and grown as an individual.

... personal growth and (to see) how far I grow like the way i think... how did I carry myself as well and how did God carry me in whatever situation. (Student 2)

... self-development, reflecting on the things you did and aiming to improve yourself and become a better person. (Student 4)

With regards to the public viewing ability on the blog, S1 expressed that when she wrote her entries, she usually did not think much about the number of people who read her blog and tended to reveal more private reflections.

The irony is, I know that it's an online blog that everybody can read, its public, but when I write, I don't think that there are millions of strangers reading it, you know. I don't think (of) that, because I just write and that's why I tend to be more open. (Student 1)

S1 added that she usually revealed more of herself on her blog than to people face-to-face. She expressed that somehow, in face-to-face interactions, she was inclined to be more private as opposed to disclosing more information on her blog and in online chats.

…I tend to be more closed, face-to-face... But on my blog...I tend to be more open, like reveal more about myself... Even though, at the back of my mind, I know that anybody can read my blog... but I feel more...comfortable... (Student 1)

S1's response demonstrated that blogs were a platform in which students felt comfortable, confident and free to express themselves without reservations. S1 also pointed out that at times, it was better to express to total strangers who did not know her personally rather than to people whom she knew, which may result in awkwardness.

...sometimes, the comfort is in knowing that your readers are strangers also. Because sometimes, those things that you write are very personal and deep rooted. If it's someone that you are close with, like friends, then sometimes it can be a little bit awkward that they know that about you. If strangers, then yet they can offer you honest opinion or responses to what you've written...it's a nice feeling. (Student 1)

Some of those…certain posts, like when I'm going through things...those are things that I realise I haven't even told some of my family,

my friends; but I write it there. I don't know why, but I feel comfortable. (Student 1)

It was observed that to avoid awkward situations or further questioning. Some of these private issues may even create unpleasant responses by people who knew her personally and especially those who have authority like parents and teachers.

VII. Discussion

Analysis indicated that blogging gave positive experiences to students, especially allowing them an outlet for self-reflection. Students blogged actively to reflect upon themselves (inward) and their experiences (outward). This helped them to manage their thoughts about their experiences, assess, and manage personal and emotional issues, see things from different perspectives, evaluate their experiences and ways they have matured, receive feedback from readers, and form new goals and improve future resolutions.

Findings showed that students had a lot to reflect and share about their varsity experiences. A majority of reflections on their blogs mainly evolved around their life in varsity and this indicated that the students enjoyed telling people about their experiences. Blogging fulfilled their need to be heard as a human. Additionally, this demonstrated that blogging was much more than just random writings and held significant value for the students' self-esteem.

The reflections on their emotions were important to the students as it helped them to manage the feelings that they go through. Findings showed that although there were instances of entries reflecting on pleasant and happy feelings, most of the emotions reflected were of anger, frustration and sadness. In the students' reflections, they also added *emoticons* (derived from the hybrid of "emotion" and "icons" and were either composed of punctuation characters or of graphical symbols). This affirmed the study by [21] who noted that *emoticons* can express emotion, strengthen a message and express humor like facial behavior in face-to-face communication. This was because online interactions lacked facial expressions and body gestures important to the reflection process [22]. Additionally, the reflection of emotions gave students a cathartic release of pent-up feelings [23]. This process helped students cope with conflicts by allowing them to think through the issue, see it from another perspective and calm down as they wrote the post and rethought their actions and emotions. Moreover, from the open display of their predicaments, including health issues, it was seen that the students wanted readers to know and in turn, may be comforted through readers' comments.

Maintaining relationships with various people were also considered an important part of students' life. From relationships, students received support, care and encouragement when needed. Students' reflections about their families showed that family relationships played an important role in their lives and that they were not forgotten even though students were occupied with their busy university life. Reflections on friendships on the other hand also showed that

friends were an important part of their lives. As reported by [24], they provided support, companionship, recreation, shared advice and valued possessions, served as confidants, critics, and loyal allies, and provided stability in times of stress or transition. As pointed out by [25], while parents were the most important people in students' lives, findings from the study showed that problems were more frequently discussed with close friends, thus forming a special bond between them. And as most of their times were spent on university grounds during the academic semester, it was natural for students to spend more time with friends in classes, during meals and outings compared with their family members. Besides reflecting on family and friends, students also reflected about the stages of the romantic relationships that they were involved in. Experiences in romantic relationships were usually considered something private and people may often felt embarrassed to share them openly, rather they chose to write them in confidential diaries in the earlier days. However, the students talked about what they went through freely in their blog and this demonstrated that blogs were a platform in which students felt comfortable, confident and free to express themselves to the public.

Besides, blogging aided students' personal growth by allowing them to self-reflect and make necessary adjustments to become a better person. It built them up holistically, enabled them to assess issues from different angles and spurred further mental and emotional self-development. Furthermore, reflecting on the blog caused the students to think further about issues, before writing and sharing it with their readers. As they disclose their opinions, students were continually prompted to reformulate their thoughts more clearly. A study by [23] verified that this process of self-clarification encouraged them to explore their beliefs, values, character, self-perceptions and new things that they have learnt about themselves. Also, the reflecting and thinking process helped the students in forming their opinions on particular issues, learn from their experiences and make personal improvements in various areas of their lives. Entries which referenced spirituality also showed that blogging enabled the record of a spiritual journey, and gave them opportunities to reflect and assess views of spiritual growth and be reminded of self-development through the many situations and circumstances students experienced throughout life.

Additionally, students also reflected on how busy they were with studies and other responsibilities. This was common especially for varsity students as they had assignments to complete, datelines to meet and projects to submit. Occasionally, students even wrote entries which showed self-depreciation to appear helpless so that others came to their aid and to receive assurance from their readers. By informing their readers about how busy and frustrated they were with their workload, students felt better having released some of their emotional tension on the blog for other people to know. Instead of suffering in silence, this was a form of catharsis and by having the impression that other people knew, this helped

the students cope with their stressors better as they felt that they were not alone in their struggles.

Besides, students reflected on gifts and presents they have made or given to others and about what they liked to receive from other people. Again, these students were not embarrassed to display their abilities and let people know what they wanted. And blogs were the perfect place to display their reflections. Claims about their abilities to create craft as gifts for people displayed a strategy known as competence or self-promotion where the goal of this self-presentation strategy was to be perceived as skilled and qualified by other people.

Finally, students also reflected on their personal interests in their blogs by reflecting on their hobbies and things they liked. It was observed that students often felt the need to share various things about themselves to their readers. Through their reflection, this pointed them to a journey of self-discovery as it gave them the opportunity to know themselves better. By searching and putting words to describe themselves, their interests became something tangible and they were then able to identify that this "interest" defined who they were. For example, findings showed that the students identified themselves as the kind of people who liked writing, photography or drinking soup.

This study analyzed ESL students' self-reflections in blogs, highlighting their categories of reflection. As a powerful technological tool, blogs have thus, been proven useful for personal growth through self-reflection.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Self-reflection was significant because it encouraged students to reflect on their lives and this promoted personal growth, boosted deeper level thoughts, formed viewpoints on various issues, managed conflicts and emotions and formed stronger relationships among family and friends. Because of these, the students in this study indicated that they would continue using blogs even after they have graduated. And because they had a sense of connection and identity with their blogs, losing it or being unable to access their blogs would affect them deeply.

IX. FUTURE RESEARCH

Building on this finding, additional aids allowing students to self-reflect and aiding their personal growth should be identified; e.g., networks connecting like-minded bloggers, or other online applications providing further support for new kinds of reflections. Analyzing students' self-reflection in blogs can help educators and researchers understand the worldview of today's youth by discovering how, through personal growth, students formed identities, shaped their behavior and developed social roles in the society. This can enable further understanding to develop students holistically.

APPENDIX

Questions for the interview

1. Do you find that reflecting on the blog is important for you? Why?
2. What do you feel is the result of blogging for self-reflection? Elaborate.
3. Do you find that blogging helped you with personal growth? How?
4. What do you consider are the advantages of maintaining blogs for self-reflection? Why?
5. How does self-reflection through blogging help you manage issues or emotions in your life?
6. What do you like most about blogging? Why?
7. What do you feel is the difference between self-reflection on a blog compared to a paper journal? Why do you feel so, and how is it different?

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