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Abstract

This dissertation examines the phenomenon of mom blogs to determine their handling of conventional motherhood and the rhetorical nature of their discourse. Unlike other prior studies of blogs and specifically of mom blogs, the dissertation examines both the blog entries themselves and the many comments such entries generate from readers. In addition, it seeks to determine the values and rhetorical practices of any community that might be established through such blog commenting. To accomplish these aims, the dissertation focuses on the entries and comments from three particular blogs chosen to represent the network of mom bloggers.

The commonplaces or ideals of the conventional motherhood narrative are first established as they have been identified in existing scholarship on mothering. This provides a framework against which the rhetoric of the mom blogs can be compared to determine the picture of motherhood identity presented by these mom blogs in relation to the societal norms of motherhood. Research on the diary style blog is surveyed as well to establish the mom blogs' potential to support particular emotional interaction between the writer and readers, and the ways such interaction can serve the production of community. Additionally, this chapter considers some established defining characteristics of online communities. Moreover, the diary style blog and online community share similar rhetorical features.

A grounded theory analysis of a year's worth of entries the mom blogs reveals they present/perform motherhood identities via an ethos of inexperience or lack of knowledge. They struggle with the judgment of others based on cultural expectations for body image and performance of motherhood, and they themselves struggle with their

own tendencies to judge other mothers similarly. The content analysis of the comments from the same three blogs indicates that readers most often respond with affirmation of the writer, either through the sharing of similar experiences, through the extension of the original entry topic, or through the mirroring of the blogger's rhetoric. The analysis concludes that the mom bloggers and their audiences do react against cultural expectations that they are unable to fulfill, but that they do not overtly resist or interrogate those expectations. In fact, the communities that emerge among the writers and readers seem to serve a support group function. The comments offer affirmation for the bloggers, but there is no indication that their interactions with one another, alone, will prompt significant cultural change. However, the simple scale of participation presented in this dissertation—the three bloggers combined with the large number of commenters' contributions—indicates that ideal motherhood is not operative for a significant number of mothers.

THE RHETORIC OF MOM BLOGS:
A STUDY OF MOTHERING MADE PUBLIC

By

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric
in the Graduate School of Syracuse University

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Introduction

In December 2008, Facebook user Heather Farley posted photos on her Facebook page of herself nursing her newborn. Facebook administrators removed the photos and sent Farley a warning that her account would be deleted if she continued to upload “obscene” photos. Farley protested, creating the group “Hey Facebook, breastfeeding is not obscene.” Shortly thereafter, a physical protest to the Facebook policy converged on Facebook’s Palo Alto, CA, headquarters. Discussion on *All Facebook*, an online community that “unofficially” tracks Facebook policies and applications (allfacebook.com), exploded with polarized opinion, commenters vehemently arguing from both sides. Some decried that nursing is natural and thus people should not be afraid of or hide it; others responded that breastfeeding is disgusting and that it and other equally natural and disgusting acts, such as urinating, should be hidden from public view (O’Neill, Nicole).

Heather Farley’s actions (both posting photos of herself nursing and creating of the protest group) and the furor that followed suggest two things: 1) That mothers are using social media to assert their mothering experiences publicly and 2) that the real images and experiences of motherhood are still regarded as inappropriate or taboo by some people and institutions.

Motherhood as an identity or cultural role provides a site of contention: as the above example of Heather Farley’s use of social media suggests, mothers struggle to negotiate and navigate this role, as it is in many ways defined outside of their control by cultural norms and narratives. Weblogs or blogs provide a particularly public venue in

which mothers have been conducting this negotiation for some time¹. This dissertation seeks to understand more clearly the rhetorical construction of motherhood in blogs—specifically, the ways in which mom blogs (also known as mommyblogs or the mamasphere) respond to conventional representations and expectations of motherhood. I examine the content and rhetorical approaches used by a sample of mom blogs, considering both the entries written by the bloggers themselves and the comments readers have left. I hope to characterize these mom blogs' engagement with society's norms and views regarding motherhood: do mom blogs have the potential to support the development of a community that could drive larger social and cultural change? Do the bloggers and readers subvert society's norms? Do they work to revise existing cultural narratives? Do they preserve and sustain conventional expectations? Do they develop their own particular rhetorical forms or discourse? In this examination, I hope to identify patterns in the rhetoric of mom blog writers and readers, to be able to characterize that rhetoric in relation to the conventional expectations of motherhood, and to determine whether mom blog writers and commenters can be characterized as a community that could shift the traditional expectations of motherhood.

This dissertation is based in the field of rhetoric which has traditionally been interested in how language use plays a role in reflecting the norms of cultures and subcultures, establishing cultural norms, as well as fostering social change. Social media, like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and weblogs, provide rich opportunities to examine

¹ In 2004, the Pew Internet and American Life Project published a report in which they characterize blogs as “a key part of online culture” (Rainie). Heather Armstrong, often considered the first mommyblogger, began writing about her daughter on her blog, *dooce.com* in 2003, and continues to do so today. However, at the time of this writing (2011), blogging has seen a decided decline in popularity, as other social media platforms gain in use, such as Twitter and Facebook (Kopytoff).

discourse of particular groups, as these environments are generally public and easily accessible.

Rhetorical theory concerns itself with social values and the effect of those values on identity (Grabill and Pigg 101-102). Further, this dissertation assumes that rhetoric is an artifact related to the performance of identity. That is, I assume that the writing examined in this dissertation is a performance of identity: these writers' word choice, their use of rhetorical devices, their understanding of motherhood, and their understanding of their audience reveals and constructs these women's identities as mothers in their blogs. In other words, rhetoric can provide a method of examination to describe and analyze these mothers' performed identities.

Likely the most recognizable theorist who argues that rhetoric constructs identity is Kenneth Burke. In "Reconsidering Kenneth Burke: His Contributions to the Identity Controversy," Ann Branaman describes Burke's characterization of identity as socially constructed, as constructed out of language exchange, and as having the crucial potential to leverage (or be a site of) social critique and social change (Branaman 444-445). According to Burke, identity emerges through a series of ongoing identifications (recognitions of similarities) and disidentifications (recognitions of difference or division) that he termed consubstantiality (Cf. *A Rhetoric of Motives*). Consubstantiality relies on persuasion and interactions through rhetoric in order for people to make recognitions of division and connection, for people to decide with whom they identify and with whom they do not. Burke's theory that constructions of identity can engender social change undergirds my use of rhetorical analysis to understand whether these women reject, wish to change, or embrace the role of motherhood.

The field of rhetoric has more recently defined identity not as a stable self but instead as a representation or understanding of a set of one's experiences (Eagleton cited in Anderson 6). The word "identity" has been attacked by postmodernists, as Dana Anderson argues; however, this dissertation doesn't assume that the performance of each of these writers reveals an essential self as the word often denotes (and as the postmodernists indict). Instead, I follow Anderson's definition of identity: "a person's ability to articulate a sense of self or self-understanding" (3). Anderson calls this definition the "common-sense nature of identity" (5), and through rhetoric (the expression of one's sense of who she is; that expression consumed by others; that expression reflected upon by both parties) identity is performed. Anderson argues that this common-sense identity is based on an individual's negotiation of her social performance of self, in particular social settings. Furthermore, Anderson claims that identity is performed through rhetoric (the expression of one's sense of who she is, that expression consumed by others, and that expression reflected upon by both parties). Such identity is socially constructed and dependent on a person's representation of her self rather than

revealing a 'real' or static identity that is impervious to interactions with others. Based on such an understanding of identity, an examination of the rhetorical performance of these women's blogs allows me to determine who they present themselves to be in their blogs, particularly as mothers and in relation to the larger cultural motherhood narratives.

An examination of rhetoric also allows me to discover the ways those individual understandings are complexly intertwined with the controlling discourses of larger, socially constructed roles. A precedent for examining rhetoric to understand the negotiation of individual identity with larger controlling discourses can be seen in Amy Koerber's "Rhetorical Agency, Resistance, and the Disciplinary Rhetorics of Breastfeeding." She conducted interviews with a variety of nursing mothers and women working as breastfeeding advocates to determine whether and how such populations use rhetoric to resist the social and medical conventions that often undermine women's ability to nurse.

Koerber's study emphasizes the tension between subject agency and conventional narratives/expectations, and characterizes the negotiation between the two as rhetorical: "the acts of resistance that interviewees describe begin as active selection among discursive alternatives—[a] kind of rhetorical negotiation" (88). Koerber insists that such selection might begin with the subjects "occupying" the "pre-existing subject positions"; in other words, the women operate *within* the structures of conventional expectations. However, that resistance also has the potential to "short-circuit" the conventions (Biesecker qtd in Koerber 88).

Koerber's findings indicate that rhetorical agency does "grant individuals some ability to reject discursive elements they find problematic" (94). She qualifies her

findings with the problem that other rhetorical scholars have already identified: the rejection of particular discourses does not necessarily allow “escape [from] the ideological forces of institutional discourse” (94). So simply because a woman chooses to nurse in a restaurant, which is a rejection of the expectation that nursing remain a private endeavor, she may still be subjected to the proprietor’s request that she remove herself.

This dissertation has the added element of seeking to characterize rhetoric in a digital space. The construction of identity in digital spaces is brought into sharp relief as participants rely solely on language to do so. Grabill and Pigg write that “online communicators must use language to establish their position within a crowd of geographically distributed, unknown interlocutors who have limited means for accessing information about those with whom they deliberate” (102). Language is a vehicle for ongoing self-presentation and for audience recognition. Digital rhetoric scholarship characterizes identity as “distributed and embedded in complexly mediated dialogical activity” (Grabill and Pigg 103). The rhetoric of online spaces is primarily in service of constructing identity and building and maintaining relationships (C. Miller cited in Grabill and Pigg 103).

Therefore, the study of rhetoric frames my research of mom blogs and their interaction with conventional motherhood in the following ways: a writer’s rhetoric in online spaces provides an artifact of her performance of her own identity and the negotiations she makes in understanding her audiences. It reveals any resistance to or alignment with ideologies and social expectations. Therefore, my examination of the

rhetoric in these writers' blogs can offer insight into whether, and if so, to what extent, these women reject or embrace the conventions of motherhood.

Contentious Words

I first encountered the term mommyblog to describe blogs about mothering when Heather Armstrong of *dooce* fame began posting stories about and pictures of her first daughter, Leta, in 2003. Since then, however, the term has been contested, primarily because it invokes the young child's term for mother, which, for some, should not be used except by children. Marjorie Ingall, journalist and blogger, explains this disdain for the term 'mommy':

The very word "mommyblog" makes me cringe. When my children's doctors called me "mommy" (as in "Mommy, give her this liquid Augmentin twice a day," invariably without adding "don't be surprised if she projectile-vomits all over the kitchen," the schmucks), I corrected them: "I have a name." My children are welcome to call me mommy; when adults use it, the word sounds infantilizing.

Ingall argues that in addition to being "infantilizing," use of the word mommy by anyone other than children prevents women who are mothers from being taken seriously.

Maggie, blogger at *Mizz Information*, explains how the word 'mommy' removes respectability because it is a private term of endearment:

My kids call me Mommy. Hell, my husband calls me Cupcake. Doesn't mean the rest of the world is allowed to call me either of those things. And

would I really expect to be taken seriously, especially in a business context, if the world knew me as Cupcake?

Maggie's point is that the word 'mommy' is akin to other personal address names that should be reserved for use by family members only. To have someone from outside the family use such terms shows, according to Maggie, pompous presumption. So while the term 'mommy' is demeaning because of the word's origin as the sound a baby or toddler makes, journalist Taffy Brodesser-Akner argues in *The Wall Street Journal* that the use of the term is even more harmful than its potential to disempower mothers. In "Time for a War on 'Mommy,'" she posits that phrases like "mommy wars" and "mommy blogs" reinforce the notion that mothers' identities are shaped for them by their children and through their role as mother to children. Brodesser-Akner writes,

When we allow our children to name us, a name they use before they can speak, and then we go by that name in the world, are we doing them any favors? When our children see that we are first and foremost a mother, and a mother in their terms, I believe they suffer.

For Brodesser-Akner, the problem is not only for women who are mothers being primarily shaped by that role; the problem extends to the children who are led to believe in the truth of that primary role. And if a generation of children believes that they are the defining component of their mother's lives, that generation will grow up into citizens who reify the problems such convictions might foster, for instance, that the failure of children is the mother's fault. Brodesser-Akner explains at the end of her article: "my job is to teach them how to live in this world. How I do that is by making sure that they know that the world doesn't revolve around them."

The term mommyblog also garners disdain because it has been used to describe a specific kind of blogging: blogging in which the content is primarily about babies or young children and the daily challenges that mothers encounter. Such writing is criticized as banal and useless; for some, it has little value for an intellectual or larger (non-mommy) audience. This criticism was prominently made in 2005 with an article in *The New York Times* by David Hochman. In this article, titled “Mommy (and Me),” Hochman characterized writers of these blogs as self-absorbed, obscenely narcissistic, and “hand-wringing” (Hochman). The mommyblog has also been characterized as “boring and one-dimensional and fundamentally insignificant in the grander scheme of things” (Albertyn). Such criticism of the mommyblog has led many women who blog about motherhood and their personal lives to eschew the term for themselves, claiming things like “I am not a mommyblogger.” In a scathing blog post titled “This Is Not a Mommyblog,” one mother who goes by mothershipster laments that “the rise of the mommy blogosphere reflects the simultaneous rise of navel gazing and conspicuous consumption.”

In addition to the criticism that such writing is vanity-driven drivel, some condemn mommyblogs for their exploitation of children. This criticism has been called the “Mommy Blogger Backlash” (Cf. Strickland, Kovanis). The accusation of child exploitation has accompanied the rise of women who place advertisements and reviews on their blogs for revenue and other compensations (free products, for instance). The problem is that the stories about the children are the main draw for audiences. Often, it is the more embarrassing or shocking stories that increase audience numbers, which in turn increases potential revenue. Therefore, critics see these women as using their children’s

stories for economic gain. One commenter (Library Lady) on *The New York Times Motherlode* blog explains the exploitation this way:

[mommybloggers] are doing ... "a Kate Gosselin"--they are building their success on exploiting their kids and their families. It's not because they're doing anything good for this world, it's not because they're really doing ANYTHING when you get down to it other than putting their personal lives up there for the world to see.

This argument assumes there is no value or benefit in mom blogging except for the visibility achieved through revealing the private details of one's life, specifically, the private details of the children's lives, which make the mothers who share them exploitative.

Because the term mommy and mommy blog have received such criticism—and because many women who keep blogs about their mothering experiences have objected to the term—this dissertation will use the term *mom blog* to describe blogs written by women who catalogue their mothering experiences. In using this term, I hope to remove some of the disrespectful connotations of the infantilizing word “mommy”; however, I hope to retain a bit of the informality and authenticity that characterizes these writers' work. To call them “mothering blogs” would, to my mind, introduce an official, prescriptive element to the definition—a mothering blog sounds as though it would offer advice in the *What to Expect When You're Expecting* vein. Instead, the writers and texts this dissertation examines are working from a place that often seeks advice—more of a “I-didn't-know-to-expect-this-did-you?” angle.

The Radical Mom Blog

Moms who blog have argued anecdotally that their experiences with blogging have been transformative. Additionally, these writers have argued that, in their experience, a community emerges when they participate as bloggers (both as readers and as writers). They also both see blogging about their mothering experiences and reading others' accounts as important to the construction of their identities as mothers.

For instance, in discussion on the *BlogHer*² forum that attempted to address “The Radical Nature of Mommy blogs,” Meghan Townsend offers her assessment of how blogging (both reading and writing) created for her a sense of belonging. Notice how she characterizes her mothering experience as isolating, and how her attempts to find “real” information from conventional sources fail:

Accurate representations of what parenting is really like are difficult to find. For some reason, either no one wanted to write about the realities, or no one wanted to publish them. Most of what I have read is sugarcoated or for instructional purposes only. Motherhood can be frighteningly lonely and isolating. I remember longing to learn about someone who had similar feelings of self-doubt, insanity, and paralyzing fears in addition to all the joy. I looked in bookstores and the closest thing I could find was a book

² “BlogHer is a community and media company created in partnership with women in social media. Lisa Stone, Elisa Camahort Page and Jory Des Jardins founded BlogHer in 2005 in response to the question, ‘Where are all the women bloggers?’” (*BlogHer.com*). BlogHer hosts a national annual conference concerning women and blogging.

written by Jenny McCarthy. It was all either too cutesy or to [sic]³ emotionally sterile.

Then I found the blogs, and I was mesmerized. It was like I had found my people. Like the end of that blind melon video when the little girl in the bee costume finds the other bees. That's what mommyblogging is to me. I love that I finally found my bees. (Townsend)

Townsend's initial complaint about "accurate representations of motherhood" as "hard to find" resonates clearly with the concerns established in Chapter One of this dissertation about mothering as invisible. She continues her complaint that much of the information she received was "sugarcoated," which suggests that motherhood accounts presented mothering as easy and happy and that any difficulties were de-emphasized. Townsend's final metaphor draws on the 1990s alternative band Blind Melon's popular video for their song "No Rain." An awkward girl in a bee costume searches for people who understand her (i.e. look like her), and at the end she finds a group of other people wearing bee costumes who welcome her enthusiastically. Townsend characterizes her discovery of mom blogs as a discovery of a community where she feels she belongs. Further, her testimony shows that her impression of the mom blogging community is one in which "real" mothering experiences can be shared, breaking the silence and revealing what had been invisible. Townsend's description of mom blogs, which she directly

³ The texts I'm incorporating from these bloggers and commenters are often riddled with spelling errors and breaks from conventional usage. Often what would be considered an error may be a purposeful misspelling or intentional refusal to conform to convention. Because of the number of errors in these texts, as well as the difficulty of judging which errors are intentional and which are not, I will refrain from using the [sic] in the quotations from the blogs and the comments.

contrasts with the conventional images of motherhood, implies that the mom blogging community can improve mothering experiences because women can share their authentic experiences with one another.

Melissa Camara Wilkins makes a similar argument about the potential for mom blogs to change motherhood in “Beyond Cute: A Mom, A Blog, and a Question of Content.” She argues that mom blogs specifically serve both readers and writers in a kind of reciprocal fashion, where readers do not merely benefit from a mom blogger’s publicly shared mothering experiences. Wilkins argues that readers are served in three interrelated ways: 1) a community emerges around the search for transparency about parenting/mothering, 2) the personal narratives serve to raise readers’ consciousness about the nature of motherhood, and 3) such consciousness-raising changes readers’ understanding of normative motherhood (Wilkins 152). Writers are served, Wilkins argues, in that they are given an opportunity to put their own experiences as mothers into a different perspective, one that forces them to see their own experiences through the eyes of others. Wilkins writes, “I blog primarily for my own benefit...[it gives me] the chance to sift through the activities and emotions of the day to create my own story and meaning. ... I find the writing of my own stories to be cathartic, and made more so by connecting with readers” (152-153). Wilkins argues that blogging serves not only to make readers feel connected to the blogger, but also to allow the blogger—the writer—to feel connected to the reader. Additionally, Wilkins posits that mom blogs both support community as well as encourage the community members to be reflective of and revisionary about their own mothering experiences as well as motherhood writ large.

A small number of recent scholars have recognized the potential for the mom blog to impact societal notions about motherhood, including their potential to revise and redefine the conventional notions about what mothers can write about publicly. This scholarship argues that blogs already have begun revising motherhood as it characterizes the mom blog as “radical,” following Alice Bradley’s claim during *BlogHer*, a conference held by and for women bloggers, that “mommyblogging is a radical act⁴.” *Mothering and Blogging: The Radical Act of the Mommyblog*, edited by May Friedman and Shana Calixte, was published in 2009. The project came out of the Association for Research on Mothering (ARM), an international feminist research organization dedicated to understanding mothering across cultures housed at York University in Toronto.⁵ Additionally, Lori Kiddo Lopez, doctoral student at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, published an article titled “The Radical Act of Mommy Blogging: Redefining Motherhood Through the Blogosphere” in 2009 as well.

These two texts provide useful starting points for a discussion about mom blogs and their potential for making cultural change. And as their respective titles indicate (as well as their discussions and conclusions), these authors assume that the work of redefining motherhood through radical blogging has at least begun. However, to understand the mom blog phenomenon more carefully, this dissertation seeks to develop a more thorough, methodical analysis of mom blogs in light of such claims, to either

⁴ Bradley was responding to participants at a particular conference session who complained that women writing about their children on their blogs were wasting their time when there were far more important issues to write about publicly (Bradley “BlogHer, BlogMe”).

⁵ Sadly, the ARM lost funding in early 2010.

corroborate or question the validity of such claims. For instance, Friedman and Calixte's edited collection relies on first-person accounts of women who have blogged as mothers and who identify themselves as non-normative. And while the essays illustrate, compellingly, that these particular women were able to forge online connections with other mothers through their blogs and were able to understand mothering from new, non-normative perspectives as a result of their blogging, this collection focuses primarily on women whose mothering experiences are already located on the margins of normativity—women who came to motherhood already questioning society's expectations of them as mothers. Represented in the collection are adoptive mothers, queer and lesbian mothers, mothers with disabilities, mothers of color, and mothers in poverty. Because the edited collection focuses on mothering experiences that are firmly 'outside' the ideal or conventional motherhood narrative, the claims that the authors and editors make about the radical work of mommyblogging might, in some ways, be skewed. In other words, many of the authors in this collection can be characterized as 'radical' simply because of their subjectivities. In order to measure the potential radical nature of mom blogs writ large, this dissertation will select writers based on their connectivity rather than their subjectivity.

Lopez's article is compelling in its thorough treatment of the conditions that surrounded the original *BlogHer* discussions concerning Alice Bradley's claim of radicality. Additionally, she considers the larger context of mom blogging, including the effect that marketing and consumer culture have had on both mom blogs and their reception by the larger public. However, Lopez's selection of examples from mom blogs has no methodological explanation; additionally, it is unclear whether Lopez has

participated as a blogger (or as a mother⁶). Finally, neither Lopez's nor Friedman and Calixte's work directly addresses the crucial role that commenters play in the ecology of a blog. This dissertation will test the initial claims of these scholars by methodically selecting writers and applying grounded theory and content analysis to both the writers' entries as well as the readers' comments.

Therefore, while bloggers like Townsend and Wilkins have made initial, first-hand claims of transformation and community, and Friedman and Calixte and Lopez have begun the work of understanding mom blogs and their relationship to conventional societal views of motherhood from a scholarly perspective, this dissertation seeks to extend and potentially complicate these initial claims. In order to do so, this dissertation diverges from existing studies of mom blogs (Cf. Herring et al., Lopez) by employing systematic method of text selection based on the bloggers' self-identification and their interconnectivity to one another, by including not only the content of the initial entries but also the content of the readers' comments, and by using a mixed method of grounded theory and both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. This combination allows me to characterize their negotiation of mothering with the assumption that they have identified themselves as mom bloggers; the writers in this study have self-selected to be identified as part of a particular group. My method allows me to assume that the writers I've selected have had either direct or indirect exposure to one other within the blogosphere, so that any rhetorical patterns can be reasonably attributed to the existence

⁶ In no way do I wish to imply that non-mothers and/or non-bloggers cannot research mothers and bloggers; however, a researcher who identifies as a mother and a blogger might provide a new and potentially different perspective.

of a rhetorical community. Finally, the combination of grounded theory and content analysis provides me with a rhetorical method of study.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter One, “The Construction and Expectations of American Motherhood,” outlines and defines *conventional motherhood* as it has been taken up by scholars across various disciplines. That is, as this dissertation works to understand the relationship of mom blogs to conventional motherhood, it is necessary to describe the expectations, images, and problems of our shared notions of *what it means to mother*. This chapter begins with a survey of the two most influential texts on such expectations of mothers: Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*. Nearly all the current literature on motherhood references these texts, mostly in service of decrying the ways in which problematic expectations of mothers still exist despite the work of Friedan and Rich. My purpose in providing this survey of scholarship on mothering is to reveal how scholars of multiple disciplines have reached similar conclusions: a ‘conventional’ or ‘ideal’ narrative of mothering exists, and this narrative can be characterized as hegemonic. I identify the larger problems with and effects of such expectations so that I can juxtapose them with the content presented in the mom blogs. This juxtaposition will allow me to determine the nature of the bloggers’ engagement with such expectations.

Chapter Two, “Diary-Style Blogs and Online Communities,” first describes the rise of the diary-style blog, in which writers present the private details of their lives in public fashion. It is this diary-style blog that allows readers and writers to establish the

necessary feelings of immediacy that allow for online communities to emerge; further, the establishment of value for such blogging—the kind in which readers approve of and respond to personal narratives—encourages an environment for mothers to share their personal experiences. Additionally, this chapter surveys scholarship in sociology, new media studies, and rhetoric that discusses the characteristics of online communities and the provisional components of online interaction that typically allow such communities to emerge. I establish the definitions of the diary-style blog, the online community, and the relationship between the two so that I can determine whether the reader comments on mom blogs represent meaningful interaction among community members.

Chapter Three, “Methods of Analysis,” introduces the methods followed and the bloggers studied in this dissertation. I used network visualization to select bloggers for this study. Network visualization renders graphic representations of the virtual connections between the readers and writers of these blogs. Using these graphic representations, I selected three mom blogs who shared some readers, read one another’s blogs, and yet did not share prior, non-blog connections. Such conditions assured me that any community I might discern would be the result of blog interactions. Additionally, this chapter outlines my use of grounded theory and content analysis to establish two approaches of close reading for both the bloggers’ entries as well as the readers’ comments. I offer examples of the descriptions I rendered from the entries to establish patterns in topic and rhetoric, and I define the codes used to characterize the rhetoric of the comments.

Chapter Four, “Analysis of Mom Blog Entries: What Are They Writing About?,” presents the findings from my close reading of the 2006 entries from three blogs: *Mom-*

101, *sweatpantsmom*, and *IzzyMom*. My analysis reveals four patterns in content type (topic) from these three writers: the negotiation of their mothering inexperience, the negotiation of their identities, the struggle with body image, and the judgment of other mothers.

Chapter Five, “Analysis of Mom Blog Comments: How Do Readers Respond?,” presents the findings from my content analysis of the readers’ comments on the three blogs I study. I note that a) the topic of the initial entry can often determine the type of comments that readers leave; b) readers tend to leave more comments when the bloggers write about particular topics; and c) no matter what the initial entry discusses or how the blogger frames it, readers are most likely to leave comments that indicate they identify with the blogger in some way.

Chapter Six, “Motherhood Anonymous,” applies the findings of the two analysis chapters to attempt to answer the questions that both drive and have emerged from this dissertation: What potential does the rhetoric of these mom blogs and their commenters have to contribute to a revised narrative of motherhood? How do the mom bloggers present themselves in this public sphere as they express their frustrations and achievements; what kinds of identities do these mothers perform? How do their readers interact with them in their discussions of such frustrations and achievements? Have distinct rhetorical norms or genres developed in the entries? In the comments? Are there rhetorical approaches in the entries and the comments that reveal shared values in behavior? Do these three blogs, with their myriad comments, indicate the existence of an online mom blog rhetorical community with cultural norms and practices? And can these blogs be characterized as radical, as scholars and bloggers have argued?

Chapter 1

The Construction and Expectations of American Motherhood

“The geography of mothering is a complex, shifting terrain. On the one hand, there are routes assiduously traveled and surveyed, well marked by popular sentiment and signposted by professional opinion; on the other, there are territories that remain obscured in turns and thickets, unarticulated in their reaches and vistas.” (O’Barr, Pope, and Wyer 1)

The role of motherhood as it is represented in the media (television, advertising, film, and popular books) and by culture writ large continues to provide women with contradictory messages about the value and expectations of motherhood. These messages are both contradictory within themselves, as well as contradictory to what is often reasonably achievable by most women. The dichotomous nature of motherhood as existing in two separate realms, one the “ideal” and one the “real” (or the “well-marked” and “signposted” versus the “obscured... thickets” described in the epigraph of this chapter), becomes the focus for much scholarship on the nature of motherhood emerging from social or cultural criticism, psychology, women’s studies, and philosophy.

This chapter considers such scholarship that examines motherhood. From this scholarship, I identify the commonplaces or tropes of conventional or ideal motherhood as well as the pervasive cultural understandings of motherhood ‘norms’ and practices. The scholarship I survey defines conventional or ideal motherhood using several different terms and phrases (institutionalized motherhood, the romanticization of motherhood, the new momism, etc.); however, each of these terms offers a similar perspective: mothers are held up to unattainable ideals, and such unattainable ideals initiate a domino-effect of problems mothers must face concerning identity and success/failure. I establish these ideas in order to consider (in future chapters) how mom blogs address—and to determine

how they position themselves in relation to the expectations—the conventional notions of motherhood. Blogs as online public writing spaces are often treated by writers as opportunities for “on-the-ground,” first-person dissemination of experiences and opinion. The potential exists, then, for mothers who write blogs to contribute meaningfully to a public understanding of motherhood by delivering their real mothering experiences.

Formative Scholarship on Motherhood

Most current scholarship cites Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). These influential liberal feminist thinkers began to uncover the contradictions and problems inherent in public expectations of motherhood. These contradictions are based in the tension that surfaces as a result of the expectation for mothers to abandon their “selves” for the project of mothering. For Friedan, the feminine mystique describes the expectations of “proper femininity” and subsequently the public expectations of proper motherhood: women forsake personal goals and convictions in service of housekeeping and rearing children. Friedan argues that according to the feminine mystique (the public expectation of women), mothering is expected to be the most important (and only) expenditure of a woman’s energy and resources; further, mothering is expected to be the single source of a woman’s identity: mothers should “live through their children” (Friedan 282-288).

These public expectations for mothers are what Adrienne Rich calls institutionalized motherhood: “as soon as a woman knows that a child is growing in her

body, she falls under the power of theories, ideals, archetypes, descriptions” that dictate who she is, what her role should be as a mother, and that she slough off any identity that would conflict with those expectations (Rich 42). Rich argues that these expectations are implicitly based on a biological model: “Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal ‘instinct’ rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self” (42). The instinctiveness of motherhood, as well as the idea that the mother abandon all other endeavors for the nurturing of the future generation, can be linked to arguments of biology and evolution: survival of the fittest and the primacy of reproduction and preservation of genetic lines.

Further, the hegemony of patriarchy requires motherhood (as well as heterosexuality and the nuclear family) to be “natural” (and therefore unquestioned, and unquestionably “good”) in order to sustain itself (43). Any critical approach to the institution, such as an assertion that a mother doesn’t always love her children unconditionally, becomes not only a subversion of motherhood but also an implicit subversion of nature—it is “unnatural” to give up children for adoption, for instance. The subversion of nature, then, becomes a subversion of the larger cultural structure. “Female anger” that results from the frustration of motherhood “threatens the institution of motherhood” and threatens the patriarchy (Rich 46). To complicate matters further, to be angry as a woman—to be angry as a mother—is to be angry at *oneself*. It is to be angry with nature and with the culture that made the individual (Rich 46).

Friedan, whose book was first published in 1963, argued that a tension exists between what women are expected to accomplish and what they might be reasonably able to do, which accounts for the potential frustration and anger that Rich describes. Friedan

argued that women should reject the power of the patriarchal expectations of the institution of motherhood and should reclaim their rights to an identity *outside motherhood*.

The problem that Friedan maybe could not have anticipated was that once women rejected the June Cleaver model of children-centered motherhood, social expectations would shift to valorize the stay-at-home mother, making *motherhood*—rather than the successful woman who may or may not have children—into the more socially valued identity.

In subsequent scholarship, namely her book *The Second Stage* (1981), Friedan continued to complicate the problems that women face in occupying both motherhood and personhood roles. And while she did not change her basic position concerning mothers as having personal non-mothering identities, her work continued to build on the problems that arise when politics and the economy define all people's roles (not only mothers and women) (Cf. *Beyond Gender* [1997]). However, it is Friedan's initial call to action in *The Feminine Mystique* that scholars of motherhood cite in historically situating the problems that mothers currently face as a result of larger cultural narratives of motherhood.

The Paradox of Motherhood: A (Necessary? but) Unattainable Ideal

“[There] was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform.” (Friedan 7)

Recent social and cultural criticism of motherhood draws heavily on the work Friedan and Rich began in their indictment of the social structures that disempower women and mothers. That scholarship and criticism has honed in on the paradoxical

nature of motherhood as it is portrayed in the media and via cultural expectations. For instance, motherhood is depicted as the most important job a woman can have, while at the same time it is psychologically and economically devastating for many women. Moreover, motherhood is depicted as a serene, loving, instinctive, and wholly fulfilling, while for many mothers, these depictions are altogether inaccurate. This paradox is often given a name to show that the public expectations of motherhood are frequently unattainable by individual mothers, as Rich does in distinguishing the *institution* of motherhood from its *experience*. Anthropologist Sheila Kitzinger calls the public expectations of mothers the “romanticization” of motherhood (200). A brief scan of titles shows how authors and scholars have consistently addressed the problem of motherhood as a paradox or an unattainable ideal: *The Mommy Myth*, *The Myths of Motherhood*, *Motherhood Misconceived*, *The Mask of Motherhood*, *Perfect Madness*, *The Impossibility of Motherhood*, *Mothering Against the Odds*.

Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels name the paradox of motherhood “the new momism” in their work *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*. The new momism as an ideal is delivered to women via popular media, and includes the following premises: 1) women are only “real women” when they are mothers, 2) women are the preferred caretakers of children, and most importantly, 3) *a mother must be singularly devoted* to her children’s development in order to be a proper mother (Douglas and Michaels 4-5). The new momism finds its roots in Friedan’s feminine mystique, but is revised to include Friedan’s call that women should find value outside mothering: “the new momism *seems* to be much more hip and progressive than the feminine mystique, because now, of course, mothers can do work

outside the home, have their own ambitions and money, raise their kids on their own, or freely choose to stay at home with their kids rather than being forced to” (5). The problem with the new momism is in its inherent contradiction: mothers are expected to provide unconditional and constant support to their children *as well as make the choice to live lives of their own*.

The pervasiveness of the new momism is a result, Douglas and Michaels argue, of the representations of motherhood in the media that began in the 1980s and continue now. They argue that “several overlapping media frameworks . . . have fueled the new momism” (7). These frameworks include the news media, advertising and marketing, prime time situation comedies, parenting books, and Hollywood’s film and celebrity industry. These frameworks serve to create and perpetuate cultural narratives. Such narratives appear on the nightly news: the constant scare of potential child abductors (with the increased fear now of children and molesters potentially connecting in online environments), the menace of negligent mothers (i.e. welfare mothers, “crack” babies), and the problem of corporate culture’s incompatibility with parenting. These narratives appear in celebrity culture (the “frenzied hypernatism of women’s magazines” [8]): famous and celebrity mothers get their bodies back quickly after giving birth, (properly) love their babies more than their careers, and use technology (or adopt) to become mothers. These narratives appear in countless books on the “how-to” of parenting, which often are rife with contradictory authoritative information: breastfeeding will increase a child’s IQ, allowing children under two to watch television will ruin their ability to learn in schools, over-scheduling children with activities will disable their creativity, allowing

children too much free time will result in under stimulated, video-game-playing couch potatoes.

These pervasive cultural narratives in the media create a “powerful and contradictory cultural riptide” (Douglas and Michaels 11). That riptide pulls mothers in two opposite directions: on one hand, they should stay home and dedicate themselves to the proper development of their children; on the other, they should pursue their own dreams of being whatever they would like to be outside the home. And this contradiction results in inevitable failure for women who mother, since neither of these goals is easily achievable *when they must happen concurrently*. Further, as Douglas and Michaels put it, “both working mothers *and* stay-at-home mothers get to be failures. The ethos of intensive mothering has a lower status in our culture, (‘stay-at-home mothers are boring’), but occupies a higher moral ground (‘working mothers are neglectful’)” (12).

The new momism, as it is presented in these ubiquitous media frameworks, creates the appearance of agreed upon “norms” about mothering (Douglas and Michaels 18). Those norms suggest that the mother’s job is to anticipate and address her child’s every physical and psychological need, to teach him to be an independent thinker and to be reading-ready (or reading, even) before he can even talk⁷, to feed him organic food and dress him in clothes made of organic cotton, to provide him puzzles and trucks made of wood not treated by chemicals. And if a mother doesn’t believe in the importance of such intensive parenting practices, she is still judged against that intensive set of criteria. As Douglas and Michaels put it: “Even if [mothers] think [such norms] are preposterous,

⁷ “Your Baby Can Read!” promises one television advertisement, which shows a 9-month old baby, barely able to sit himself, grabbing his toes after being shown a flashcard with the word “toes.”

[they] assume [they'll] be judged harshly by not abiding by them" (18). And the ubiquity of the media frameworks that carry these narratives of motherhood allows for everyone, not only mothers, to understand and preserve these criteria. So mothers are not simply judged by other mothers who buy into intensive mothering or the new momism, but mothers can be judged, rather easily, by anyone.

Similarly, Sheila Kitzinger describes this media bombardment and argues that it results in making mothers see themselves as failures. That is, mothers are not only judged by other mothers and other non-mothers, but they also become their own critics, internalizing those intensive narratives and then feeling guilty and negligent when they are unable to live up to their unattainable expectations. The reason mothers are susceptible to thinking they *can* or *should be* able to fulfill the unattainable ideal—and the reason they mark themselves as failures when they cannot—is revealed by Susan Maushart, author of *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Everything and Why We Pretend It Doesn't*. Maushart cites scholarship in sociology and anthropology corroborating the theory that “what [women] see as motherhood is not what [they] get” (Maushart 8). In other words, before women become mothers, they themselves see and participate in the construction of that new momism via the media frameworks that Douglas and Michaels describe—before the web, there had been no framework or space in which real moms could share real experiences to mitigate the unattainable expectations set forth in those conventional frameworks, so the unattainable expectations remained.

The new momism, the romanticization of motherhood, the mask of motherhood: all of these terms harken back to Betty Friedan's initial description of the female double-

consciousness: “there was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform” (Friedan 7).

Effects of the Unattainable Ideal: Guilt and the “Bad Mother”

The cover of *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* by history scholar Peter Stearns delivers a distinct message in its visual rhetoric. While the title suggests the history is of *parenting* and of *childrearing*, words that connote such tasks are not about mothering or fathering but instead concern a more collective, shared role, the cover image presents a sepia-toned photo of a woman only. The image shows her, wearing a Donna Reed hairstyle and a striped collar, gripping her temples and squeezing her eyes shut. Her brow is furrowed and her teeth show in a severe grimace. The message—intended or not—is that while *parents* may be anxious, it is primarily the mother who suffers anxiety.

According to Douglas and Michaels, such anxiety results from the contrast between the images in the media, which broadcast unattainable “norms,” with the reality of motherhood in everyday life. This contrast, combined with the contradictory messages about working and staying home, ensures that most American mothers will develop unavoidable guilt about their mothering choices. The theme of guilt is easily traceable throughout the scholarship on motherhood, and guilt is always framed as the result of being a “bad” mother—“bad” because she is unable to make her life match that which is projected in the cultural narratives of motherhood. Adrienne Rich confessed in 1976, “I remember feeling guilt that my explosions of anger were a ‘bad example’ for my children, as if they, too should be taught that ‘temper’ is a defect of character, having

nothing to do with what happens in the world outside one's flaming skin" (46). Rich felt guilt because her anger was not appropriate according to institutional motherhood—the image of mothering that she was supposed to embody. Shari Thurer, psychologist at Boston University and author of *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*, addresses in 1994 how “popular mother culture”—which can be understood to be the same as Rich's “institutional motherhood” and Douglas and Michaels' “new momism”—sustains mothers' guilt:

Popular mother culture implies that our children are exquisitely delicate creatures, hugely vulnerable to [their mothers'] idiosyncrasies and deficits, who require relentless psychological attunement and approval. ... [Further], a sentimentalized image of the mother casts a long, guilt-inducing shadow over real mothers' lives (xi).

Thurer contrasts “popular mother culture” against “real mothers' lives” to show how guilt occurs because the two are irreconcilable.

The rift between what is expected of mothers and what they are able to reasonably accomplish is characterized throughout Thurer's text as a kind of “violence” that mothers endure. Violence and anger are also themes in Rich's *Of Women Born*, where throughout she uses passages from her journal to explain the desperation and suffering she experienced when her children were young:

September 1965 Degradation of anger. Anger at a child. How shall I learn to absorb the violence and make explicit the caring? (Rich 22)

Additionally, Rich uses the word “murderous” on several occasions to describe her state of mind: “the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and

blissful gratification and tenderness” (21); the “moments of murderous anger at [her] children” (24); “if anyone laid a hand on my child, I’d murder him” (37). Having the responsibility of “being the primary agent in a child’s development—and its primary obstacle” creates a feeling of powerless responsibility for mothers (Thurer 261). Being both responsible and impotent, according to Thurer, creates feelings of desperation, anger, and violence (261). Rich’s passages from her journal, above, illustrate Thurer’s point, by showing how desperation can potentially escalate to a kind of self-destruction—Rich’s anger is turned inward on herself, an “absorption of violence.” The inherent contradiction of the expectation that mothers preserve identities of self and also serve as the sole source for their children’s well being—in addition to the expectation that mothers effect their children’s well being in perfect fashion—can create an unavoidable vortex of guilt.

Contributing to the guilt that results from unattainable expectations is the trend of “mother-blaming,” which has emerged primarily from Freudian psychoanalysis, but persists in all spheres political, academic, or cultural: “clinicians and researchers, ... politicians and social commentators, still blame mothers for their children’s problems and also for larger societal problems, [and] mothers tend to internalize this pervasive immense sense of responsibility and blame” (Coll, Surrey, and Weingerten xvi). So, while mothers may effectively internalize the unattainable expectations implicit in popular media and continually find themselves lacking, mothers also must contend with overt criticism levied at them by legislators, educators, and the media.

Historically, mothers have been expected to preserve the character ideals of the nation through their childrearing (Cf. Mintz). Moreover, mothers have been blamed for

the weakness of our nation. Jennifer Terry, author of “Momism and the Making of Treasonous Homosexuals,” illustrates how political and psychiatric discourse of the early 20th Century blames “women’s increased participation in the public spheres of employment, politics, and culture” for the erosion of “family values” and dissolution of distinct gender roles (Terry 170). Conversely, and ironically, the same discourses blame mothers for their over-protective behavior toward their sons, which results in “character weakness” in grown men (Terry 171). During a time when the political atmosphere required the stoicism and brawn of patriotism (the height of WWII and the subsequent emergence of the Cold War), these “character weaknesses” became the nation’s weaknesses. Terry explains how one psychiatrist, Edward Strecker, was responsible for a national committee to study “sexual variants.” The report Strecker’s committee made to the administration explicitly blames “bad mothering” for the nation’s perceived moral and militaristic impotence (Terry 177). His report, titled “War Psychiatry and Its Influence upon Postwar Psychiatry and upon Civilization” was published in 1945 in *The Journal of Mental Disease*, effectively reifying the expectation that mothers are responsible for preserving the nation’s values and military strength.

Both Jennifer Terry and Paula Caplan, author of “Mother Blaming,” cite another mid-20th Century work, Philip Wylie’s 1946 *Generation of Vipers*, as being partially responsible for the images of mother as excessively dominant, nagging, and life-ruining. Wylie’s work is almost amusing when taken outside of its historical context (at the time Wylie was presenting his argument seriously): he writes, “Mom is everywhere and everything and damned near everybody, and from her depends all the rest of the U.S.” (Wylie qtd. in Caplan 130). His point, that “Mom” is constantly underfoot, in the way,

and “all tongue and teat and razzmatazz” (Wylie qtd. in Caplan 130), neglects to acknowledge that this is the way mothers were (and in many cases still are) expected to be: responsible for every choice and move their children make.

Strikingly, Strecker’s and Wylie’s dated characterizations of Mom as “the root of all evil” can be seen in current cultural representations of motherhood—from children and mothers alike. For instance, mother-blame is a common, especially in its self-placement. That is, mothers often blame themselves for their children’s shortcomings. Caplan explains, “Mothers of misbehaving kids blame themselves for ‘not setting enough limits’ if they are slightly less rigid disciplinarians than average, and if they are slightly more rigid, they blame themselves for ‘coming down too hard’ on the child” (Caplan 133).

This contradictory (“damned if you do, damned if you don’t”) nature of motherhood is often cited as the result of another facet of the mother’s conflicted role: while she is to be fully responsible for and in control of the children, she is at the same time expected to be meek and compliant to the husband. That is, she inhabits a space of both complete control and complete powerlessness. Jennifer Terry traces one possible source of this particular dichotomy to the men’s return home from the Second World War. The image of Rosie the Riveter (“Yes We Can!”) is a common symbol of women moving into the workforce to keep the economy going when men left to fight, but there is no image for what happened to the women when the war ended: women were expected to return to the home and resume their previously private motherly and wifely duties, allowing the men to reclaim their jobs. At the same time, there was a push in psychiatry to “maintain” the “mental hygiene” of “the nation’s future citizens” (Terry 174):

Conferring enormous ideological power upon the middle-class nuclear family, these experts [in psychiatry] placed women of all classes in a particular kind of double bind: as wives they were to stand dutifully and submissively by their husbands, while at the same time, as mothers, they were to exert power, preeminently by instilling standards of virtue and patriotic self-sufficiency in their children. (174)

Such responsibility required mothers to center their lives around their children and their husbands, making any kind of life outside of the home—whether it was a paying job or simply a personal interest or hobby—untenable (174). And regardless of whether a woman can be successfully submissive to her husband, placing the responsibility for the whole development of a child’s mental, physical, emotional, moral and civic integrity on *one* person will inevitably find her lacking. Such perceived failures or lack then results in guilty feelings of “not good enough” or the “bad mother.”

To explore how women interpret their roles as “bad mothers,” Judith Warner, author of *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, conducted interviews with 150 mothers, roughly half of them from the Washington, D.C., metro area and the other half via the internet from a variety of American cities and towns. As a mother of two young children attempting to manage her the own conflicted attitude toward mothering, Warner characterizes her work as “an exploration of feeling”:

That caught-in-the-throat feeling that so many mothers have today of always doing something wrong. And [this book is] about a conviction I have that this feeling—this widespread, choking cocktail of guilt and

anxiety and resentment and regret—is poisoning motherhood for American women today. (Warner 3-4)

As an American returning from living several years abroad in France (and having experienced motherhood as it is valued and defined by French culture), Warner provides a useful, if polemical, framework to interpret these mothers' experiences in their American communities. She cites, for instance, an experience she had when she had her first child in France. The pharmacist, having noticed (or known) that she was a new mother, included a complimentary package of breast pads with her order without being asked. Warner situates her experience at the pharmacy with other examples from her French community (the pediatrician who answered his own phone, the principal of the school who told Warner and her husband to call her with any questions) to illustrate the way in which French culture understands the need for (and implicitly creates) a support network for mothers and parents. She characterizes this network as “an extended community of people who'd guaranteed that I was never, from the moment I became a mother onward, left to fend for myself alone” (30-31).

When Warner returns to America, she finds this community missing. She realizes that American culture creates a kind of opposite effect for mothers. Rather than rallying around mothers, American culture creates a kind of screen or blind around them. Through her interviews, she finds that this screen exists in part because mothers feel as though they are only allowed to recognize one aspect of motherhood publicly: the recognition of guilt—the recognition of their “bad mothering.” The list of issues that mothers are to keep silent about is far longer: personal ambitions, feelings about their identity, topics of

sex and sexuality, and especially things like policy solutions or changes that might ameliorate the strain of mothering (Warner 31-32).

From her interviews, Warner concludes that the result of this expected invisibility of motherhood feeds a cultural momentum. Mothers are so consumed with living for and providing for their children that they **create** these pockets of isolation for themselves. Further, these pockets of isolation are exacerbated when “ [mothers] are so depleted that [they] have little of [themselves] left” for any personal interests or pursuits (33). The expectation that mothers keep themselves and their children in private spaces further exacerbates the problems that Maushart and Douglas and Michaels discuss concerning the ways mothers judge themselves against the popular media’s representations of motherhood: real motherhood is invisible and therefore not available for mothers as a point of reference.

Effects of the Unattainable Ideal: The Invisibility of Motherhood

Do imagine me in the midst of ten or twelve Women, who spoke of nothing else than of all their little Domestic cares, of the faults of their servants, of the good Qualities or Vices of their Children; and there was one Woman amongst the rest who spent above an hour in relating from syllable to syllable the first tatlings of a Son of hers, but of three years old. You may now judge if I did not spend my time after a lamentable manner. (de Scudéry 767)

Part of the current problem with motherhood’s split between cultural expectation and individual experience is that the isolation that mothers create for themselves keeps other women, especially non-mothers, from understanding the extent to which motherhood has the potential to be totalizing and harmful. Further, the guilt built into motherhood preempts women from sharing their experiences, especially when their

experiences don't align with those of larger cultural expectations or those they witness on television.

However, judging whether a personal experience aligns with others' requires the sharing of such experiences—and the sharing of such experiences is often unacceptable. Madeleine de Scudéry's excerpt above, taken from a 15th Century guide to proper conversation-making, reveals how Renaissance rhetoric placed domestic matters, especially those relating to children, into a decidedly “non-public” category. It is this ancestry of silence that has preceded cultural expectations of the separation of public life and private mothering today.

The invisibility of motherhood can be linked to the historic invisibility of women in general: “We [women] have been every culture's core obsession (and repression); we have always constituted at least one-half ... of the species; yet in the written records we can barely find ourselves” (Rich 84). Motherhood is expected to be a kind of “behind the scenes” private affair; Rich calls it the “Great Silence” (84); Friedan calls it “The Problem that Has No Name” (15-32). Further, a woman who is not a mother may not recognize or anticipate the way in which becoming a mother would likely delete her from an acceptable public life. For instance, sociologist Amy Rossiter argues that “public discourse tells us simultaneously ‘everything’ and ‘nothing’ [women] need to know” about motherhood (qtd. in Maushart 7). Kathryn Rabuzzi, author of *Motherself: A Mythic Analysis of Motherhood*, writes that the invisibility of actual motherhood exists because mothers themselves feel as though they must hide. The “heroic quest” of enduring pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing is a test of a woman's “ability to survive the wilderness alone... Whether [she's] accepted back [from the wilderness] depends on [her

ability] to keep quiet and pretend to return to life as usual” (Rabuzzi 63). Kitzinger similarly describes the cultural expectation of “going in and coming back out of motherhood” as a kind of dark quest: “When she becomes a mother, it is as if a woman must go deep into the bowels of the earth, back to the elemental emotions and the power that makes life possible, losing herself in the darkness” (Kitzinger 12). According to Kitzinger, as Rabuzzi argues, the challenge is in *pretending to return unscathed*: “Women try to hide [that their lives have been significantly disrupted] because they are told that they should slot motherhood invisibly into their lives, and they are ashamed to acknowledge they have not” (Kitzinger 12).

Maushart calls this ideal “slotting of motherhood” into one’s life “faking motherhood.” She indicts public discourse itself as the reason there is little social recognition of the material reality of motherhood. There isn’t any recognized forum for the discussion of how the expectation for such “slotting in” is unreasonable and, ultimately, impossible. If such a discussion occurred, according to Maushart, the forum would first have to acknowledge that motherhood was an acceptable public role. Since men do not experience motherhood, it is not an acceptable public role:

...one hugely important reason that scholarship, philosophy, and virtually every other form of public discourse have been so astonishingly silent on the subject of motherhood is that men do not experience it. And what we call public discourse is a forum for what men know. (17)

We might reframe this argument about public discourse as being what men (or non-mothers, or even the larger public to include mothers) *want to know*. Rossiter explains, “historically, discourses about women’s bodies organize meanings in terms of disgust and

revulsion” (217). Motherhood requires an explicit acknowledgement of the female body. The invisibility and isolation of motherhood might be a result of the attempt to govern the uncontrollable nature of women’s bodies.

There are, Maushart acknowledges, public (visible) academic investigations of motherhood. Normally, Maushart points out, these studies focus on the effect of mothers have on their children, particularly the impact of mothering on children’s psychological development. However, there is little research in service of discovering the impact of mothering *on women*, specifically the problems of intense emotional distress and depression that are often anecdotally cited but rarely given critical attention (Maushart 7-18). The still-used euphemism “baby blues” for post-partum depression is one example of a potentially serious side-effect of mothering written off lightheartedly as an easily overcome challenge. Such euphemisms keep women in the dark about the extent to which motherhood is transformative. Maushart draws on a study conducted by Amy Rossiter, who interviewed mothers concerning their experiences of entry into motherhood. Rossiter found that women reported categorically similar feelings: “shock, unprepared[ness], panic, anxiety, not knowing, out of control” (qtd in Maushart 10). These findings confirm Maushart’s argument that there is clearly a lack of transparency for what women can reasonably expect when they become mothers. And if *mothers* don’t know what they are getting themselves into, the public certainly can’t have a clear notion of motherhood’s material and psychological effects, either.

A cause (or effect?) of the invisibility of motherhood is its relegation to the privacy of the home or personal life. Mothers are both materially and conceptually barred from public participation (Hoffnung 162) because the home has been categorized as a

“private” space, and because the work of mothering has historically happened in the home. Adrienne Rich reports that the Industrial Revolution, which moved a family’s livelihood from the homestead to the factories, is responsible for the privatization of the home. At the time, the case was made for women to remain in the home for the purpose of making sure the children were properly cared for. This was a reaction to the conditions children suffered when early factories saw many women hired, and the children were often left in the care of an older sibling or a neighbor child. Babies were weaned early and children were “dosed with laudanum to keep them quiet” (48). However, Rich argues, in moving women out of the factories and permanently into the home, the conditions of children did not necessarily improve. Reports from the Women’s Cooperative Guild in Britain collected accounts of mothers whose husbands worked in the factories following the mass migration of women “back” to the home. According to Rich, “These lives stood as far as possible in contradiction to the ideal of the home as a protected place apart from the brutal realities of work and struggle. The average woman had from five to eleven children...most of them with no prenatal care and inadequate diet” (Rich 50).

Other cultural and social taboos of femininity, such as the taboos surrounding the menstrual cycle, childbirth, and menopause, may contribute to the invisibility of motherhood (Rich 103-106). While there is no consensus about the exact origin of such taboos, it’s clear that the cultural taboos that create silence about such issues emphasize the “out of control” nature of women’s bodies. A woman’s apparent inability to control her own body becomes a source of shame, and shame encourages silence. Rich explains, “An ambivalence of pride and shame (and fear) have marked, under patriarchy, the onset

of the menses; sometimes a young woman will experience outright denial and revulsion” (106). The same ‘uncontrollability’ of pregnancy, childbirth, and children may contribute to the relegation of mothering to the private sphere.

Ultimately, however, the silence of actual mothering exists as a result of the hegemonic quality of what Patrice DiQuinzio calls “essential motherhood” (10-13). DiQuinzio’s theory of essential motherhood expects mothers to feel continual, unconditional love for their children and complete self-fulfillment from housewifery (23). To admit that a mothering experience is otherwise—to admit that mothering is not emotionally fulfilling and completely rewarding—is to admit failure, or worse; to admit that mothering is not fully satisfying in and of itself is to deny the very natural duty that women are made for (DiQuinzio 56-58).

Amy Rossiter’s case studies show several ways in which the ‘taking care of others’ mandate—whether it is framed as a “natural” duty or not—creates isolation for mothers. One of the most obvious examples that Rossiter gives is the way that mothers often do not feel welcome in public places with their children, and since their sole purpose is to take care of those children, they themselves are unable to be ‘public.’ Rossiter catalogues one woman’s reasons for creating self-isolation: “her peers didn’t want to go out with the baby,” “adult recreation and leisure activities do not welcome babies,” “her baby was very attached to her,” and “she felt guilty about feeling isolated” (242). Rossiter’s case study illustrates the cyclical nature of isolation: isolation keeps women from understanding or knowing how their own experiences fit (or don’t) with other mothers’ as well as contributes to their feelings of guilt, which further prevents them from finding forums for sharing experiences. Additionally, the isolating model of

‘mother as caretaker’ feeds another effect of motherhood: the loss of subjectivity, or the loss of identity. Having one’s existence relegated to the private sphere means one is not able to contribute to culture in meaningful or meaning-making ways. Rossiter puts it this way: “the social situations in which one’s identity is normally continuously re-constituted simply disappear. Mothers are left without the social interactions which construct and produce identity” (244). In other words, the ultimate result of the relegation of motherhood into the private sphere is the potential loss of the self.

Effects of an Unattainable Ideal: Loss of the ‘Self’

The loss of one’s self or one’s identity is another commonplace in the discussions of ideal motherhood—and it can be situated as a rhetorical issue, as Rossiter explains above: because motherhood is meant to be kept private, *there is no acceptable audience to whom a mother can present herself as a non-mother*. The expectation that mothering remain a private endeavor—in the home—means that the ‘self’ the mother performs is most often in relation to her children, and her opportunities to create other selves through interaction with people for whom she is not a mother are limited.

Clearly, the several feminist waves have advocated for *all* women’s right to live in the public sphere—for women and mothers alike to live publicly and with the agency to define themselves. However, the claim has been made that feminism should also have fought for *mothers to know themselves on their own terms*. That is, even through several revolutions concerning women’s rights and roles in society, the expectation for mothers to maintain a private existence has remained. Judith Warner asks, “where did feminism fail [mothers]?” (19).

Feminists, including Friedan in later work, have certainly addressed the problems that Warner's question invokes. The challenge that feminism faces in addressing motherhood is a result of the ways that feminists have had to define the self, according to Patrice DiQuinzio. She argues that the unattainable role of mother (motherhood is natural, womanly, self-sacrificing, unconditionally nurturing; i.e. "essential motherhood," as noted above) presents a difficult challenge to feminists.

She first describes the problem of an ideology becoming hegemony: the "common sense" discourse of essential motherhood (ideology) goes without examination or question, and contains structures within it that preempt the attempt at such questioning (hegemony) (DiQuinzio 2). For instance, a mother who experiences negative emotions about her children will not, because of essential motherhood's principles of unconditional love, express those emotions to others because to admit such would compromise her viability as a mother (2-3).

DiQuinzio then situates feminism's role in the development (and resistance to) essential motherhood and explains why feminism has not been able to free women from the hegemony of essential motherhood. She argues that the problem feminism faces with defending and changing essential motherhood is the notion of individualism.

Individualism assumes that identity is characterized by a person's "essence" (7).

The essence of human subjectivity is a set of capacities, primarily reason, consciousness, or rational autonomy, which enable rational, independent self-determination and action. These capacities are distinct from embodiment, which is the ground of the accidental or particular attributes

that distinguish human subjects from each other but do not define subjectivity itself. (7)

In other words, while the body might change the *expression* of a person's subjectivity, it doesn't *make* the subjectivity. The mind (reason, logic) is separate from the body, and the essence of subjectivity comes from the mind. Individualism says that all minds have the same essence (same logic, reason).

Epistemologically, then, individualism assumes that a person can know (through that same logic and reason) anything. The body "gets in the way" of this potential (DiQuinzio 8), so practically speaking, our knowledge is limited or shaped by our bodies. However, according to individualism, "the more successfully subjects abstract themselves from or transcend their material, social, and ideological contexts, the greater the truth of the knowledge they then acquire" (8). Such an account of knowledge privileges social and political power, and puts people who are materially tied to their embodied existence (mothers) at a distinct disadvantage.

The problem, DiQuinzio argues, is that feminist theory has relied on a model of individualism to advocate for equality.

Feminism's ... challenge to sexism and male dominance explicitly relies on individualism to claim women's human subjectivity and equal entitlement. But feminism finds it almost impossible to theorize the specificity of women's situations and experiences, especially mothering, in individualist terms... For any gesture toward the specificity of women's situations and experiences constitutes a recognition of women's difference

and thus women's failure to meet the individualist criteria for subjectivity.

(11-12)

According to DiQuinzio, feminist accounts of mothering indicate that it cannot be theorized in individualist terms. Pregnancy and childbirth (which implicate the boundaries of self and representations thereof), dependences of the self (of child on mother, of mother on others), and transformations occurring to the self as a result of relationship of mother-child: none of these aspects can be theorized in individualist terms because of their reliance on the relationship between and the shifting notions of 'self' and 'body.' From a feminist perspective, DiQuinzio implies that mothering and mothers don't fail, it's the idea of individualism that fails.

According to DiQuinzio, then, the remedy for the irreconcilability between essential motherhood's unattainable ideal and real experience is the rejection of individualism as a paradigm for understanding the self. And indeed, the competition such individualism creates contributes to some of the problems that mothers encounter. For instance, the silence and invisibility of private mothering experience, as noted above, are often a reaction to or result of perceived competition. Silence becomes a screen to cover what others might judge to be unsuccessful or otherwise failed child-rearing. Therefore, when the only identity one has is of mother or caretaker, it makes sense that such a failure would be avoided in order to find or create value for oneself. Amy Rossiter writes, "A parent achieves success through the child, and in a highly competitive society one who has little personal success may have a great incentive to live through the children, and see him or her as an extension of self" (29). Rossiter's characterization of "personal success" might also be read as "personal identity." And thus we come full circle, where the mother

is not finding value in her own identity, but in that of her child. Escaping the model of individualism to allow for mothering to be defined atomistically and relationally becomes not only a project of advocacy, but a project of shifting a thoroughly established paradigm.

Overcoming the Unattainable Ideal

Overwhelmingly, scholarship that concerns itself with the social and cultural plight of motherhood calls for change: change in perspectives and change in practice. As DiQuinzio shows, such changes won't be easy to make; regardless, the call for change resounds. For instance, scholars argue that motherhood cannot—and therefore must not—be understood as a role excised from relationship and context. One such argument describes an “ecological perspective” toward understanding motherhood. An ecological perspective removes the focus on understanding motherhood only in terms of its effects on children and on society, which often essential motherhood and other “romanticized” notions of motherhood tend to do. That is, we need to consider “motherhood [not simply] as instrumental to children’s development [but also] to motherhood as an identity in a particular set of intimate relationships in a particular subculture and at a particular time in history” (Gerson, Alpert, and Richardson 31-32). Changes to perspective also will require the revision of academic disciplines and theories that reinforce and reify the problems of unattainable motherhood⁸ (Eyer 230). Changes to practice will require parental activism

⁸ Diane Eyer, author of *Motherguilt*, cites attachment parenting as one such theory that reifies the problem of essential motherhood. Eyer characterizes attachment parenting by the eschewing of conventional parenting practices (like the use of a stroller or crib) for those that provide infants and children a sense of “attachment” or constant security (like the use of slings and a co-sleeping arrangement) (Eyer 230). Eyer’s characterizations

in the political realm; they must fight for government-subsidized or employer-supported childcare (C.f. Eyer 240-241, Kitzinger 229-230, Rossiter 279). Such change requires policies and/or legislation that would create material value for the work that women perform as mothers, making the time spent raising children and “keeping house” just as socially valuable as the time a woman’s partner spends in the workplace (Crittenden). For such material changes to perspective and practice to emerge, though, mothers’ actual, material experiences must be allowed to publicly shape the “real” notion of mothering (C.f. Rossiter, Maushart, Warner, and Douglas and Michaels).

As Adrienne Rich argues, women’s experiences have historically been shaped by waiting:

Women have always been seen as waiting: waiting to be asked, waiting for our menses, in fear lest they do or do not come, waiting for men to come home from wards, or from work, waiting for children to grow up, or for the birth of a new children, or for menopause. (Rich 39)

The implicit message here is that the waiting should cease and action should begin. The unfortunate reality remains, however, that Rich’s argument was launched first in 1976, and yet writers and scholars continue to consider and theorize the plight of mothers today, over a quarter-century later.

The potential exists for mom blogs to enact some of this change—or, at the very least, to allow a larger public to witness motherhood from the perspectives of women

focuses on how attachment parenting theory values a mother’s (or father’s) physical closeness and such physical closeness can limit a parent’s ability to work outside the home or take time away from young children. Both Hays and Warner make similar arguments about attachment parenting; however, there are other understandings of attachment parenting that focus less on the physicality of the attachment (Cf. Sears).

who are doing the work of everyday mothering. And the existence of mothers writing their experiences in public spaces like blogs can indicate that mothers may be finally done waiting for motherhood to be revised *for* them. However, to what extent do mothers actually engage with the unattainable expectations set forth for them by larger cultural narratives? This dissertation examines the blogs of three mothers juxtaposed with the framework of the ideals and problems set forth in this chapter to determine if, and if so, how, mom blogs are revising or preserving the conventional notions of motherhood.

Chapter 2

Diary-Style Blogs and Online Communities

The same body of scholarship that identifies the problems with public expectations of mothers also argues that the remedy requires mothers' authentic experiences shape a "real" notion of mothering (Cf. O'Reilly, Crittenden, Hays, Warner). This dissertation ultimately seeks to understand the work of mom bloggers and their accounts of their personal mothering experiences. To do so, I will examine a small sample of mom blogs to determine their potential as online communities, as well as place those writers' texts within the context of the claims about motherhood that I outlined in Chapter 1. However, to understand those rhetorical strategies and their contexts, it will be instructive to consider the genre of the mom blog more carefully. Thus, this chapter briefly examines the history of the diary-style blog, as well as the potential for communities to arise among mom bloggers (both readers and writers).

The Rise of Personal or "Diary-Style" Blogs

Early discussion of blogging as social phenomenon, taken up by the "first generation" of bloggers, often describes different genres of blogs that have emerged since the first bloggers (Dave Winer, Cameron Barrett, Jesse James Garrett) began regularly updating their web sites with links and brief observations. Blogs weren't initially narrative-style accounts of daily life, as they are often equated with now.

The first blogs, like *CamWorld* and *Infosift*, were determined by two important author functions: 1) the authors (sometimes called editors) spent time surfing the new frontier of the Web, finding "links to both little-known corners of the Web and to current

news articles they [felt were] worthy of note” (Blood “Weblogs” 8), and 2) the authors had to know how to write the code for their own sites. These author functions resulted in the early “link log” or “filter-style blog”; as a genre or a text that is determined by conventions and values, the patterns of structure were outgoing links and accompanying commentary “characterized by an irreverent, sometimes sarcastic tone” (Blood “Weblogs” 9).

Rebecca Blood, author of *The Weblog Handbook* and of *Rebecca’s Pocket*, a blog she began writing in 1999, argues that the link-log genre is an invaluable mode of participation and social tool that can transform the public’s relationship with the media. She cites Douglas Rushkoff’s *Media Virus* to argue that the broadcast media as we understand it (television, radio, film, print publishing) is a “corporate possession,” one in which the everyday person is unable to participate (Rushkoff qtd. in Blood “Weblogs” 9). Blogs, Rushkoff posits, highlight the difference between the corporate-owned media and the participatory nature of social media. The difference is in how we characterize the individuals who consume the messages of each. For corporate-owned media, consumption is by an audience, and an “audience is passive” (qtd. in Blood “Weblogs” 9). Blogs, because they are produced and consumed by essentially level participation, rely on “the public.” What Rushkoff calls for is a media oriented to the public because “a public is participatory” (qtd. in Blood “Weblogs” 9).

The ways in which the filter-style blog as a genre supports a participatory public, Blood argues, is in the expectation that these entries will do two things: 1) the authors will find more obscure, less mainstream resources on the Web, and will then 2) provide “alternative views” and original reflection on those sources (9). Blood explains these

recurring modes in the filter-style blog “remind us to question the vested interests of our sources of information and the expertise of individual reporters as they file news stories about subjects they may not fully understand” (“Weblogs” 9-10).

Potentially more publicly participatory is the diary or journal-style blog, which Blood calls a free-style blog. The free-style blog is characterized by an author without coding skills who uses programs like Blogger or Typepad (blogging tools that don’t require users to hand-code their sites) and publishes whatever she likes, generally in narrative style. The evolution of the free-style blog appears to have its roots in the filter-style blogs that early bloggers maintained. Joe Clark explains the relationship this way: since many of those early bloggers spent their days surfing and writing the Web, “their lives [*were*] online” (Clark 59).

You can write up what you did with your real-life friend yesterday, but you can’t link to that experience. You *can* link to what your online friend *blogged* yesterday. The annotated-list-of-links weblog form, then, becomes one and the same with the diaristic form for webbloggers in the Internet demimonde: links *are* diaries because life is the Web. (Clark 59)

In other words, the authors of the early filter-style blogs were narrating their lives, since their lives were spent exploring the internet. The divergence in genre occurs, Clark explains, when people who don’t “live” online begin blogging (59). That is, the early filter-styled blogs were maintained by writers whose daily lives were filled with online activities: reading, exploring, programming. Clark argues that the value of the filter-style genre—the exploration of new and interesting ideas on the Web—is potentially lost with the free- or diary-style blog. With the free-style blog, there is no expectation for the

blogger to find or link to new items online; there is no re-media of news or commentary (Clark 59). Instead, the free- or diary-style blog might not include any links or news except for what the blogger ate for breakfast that day.

While Clark finds diary-style blogs less valuable than the filter-style blogs, Rebecca Mead recognizes how such writing is meaningful in a different way. She writes, “most of [these diary-style] blogs are...intimate narratives rather than digests of links and commentary; to read them is to enter a world in which the personal lives of participants have become part of the public domain” (49). Mead emphasizes the way the diary-style blog allows the personal (the “intimate”) to enter public spaces.

The difference between writing such things for a diary that no one reads and sharing intimate stories with a public audience provides a point of controversy for some; that is, the sharing of private details publicly in the diary-style blog is often considered inappropriate or discomfiting (Cf. McNeill). However, according to analysis by Herring et al., the diary-style or “personal journal” blog is the most common, which would indicate that most bloggers are comfortable sharing personal details with a larger public or that they are unconcerned with what others might deem inappropriate public writing. In Herring et al.’s study of the discourse of weblogs, these personal journal blogs comprise nearly three-quarters of their particular study corpus (Herring et al. 6). They debunk the myth that filter blogs are more popular:

Although filter blogs in which authors link to and comment on the contents of other web sites are assumed by researchers, journalists and members of the blogging community to be the prototypical blog type, the blogs in our sample are overwhelmingly of the personal journal type

(70.4%), in which authors report on their lives and inner thoughts and feelings.

While this particular statistic may appear questionable, as their corpus totaled only 199 blogs⁹, the authors note that it may be more remarkable because of their method for eliminating blogs for the study: “we excluded journal sites such as LiveJournal.com and Diaryland.com from our data collection, so that their popularity would not overshadow the other blogs in the sample.” So, while it might be questionably appropriate for writers to publicly share the private details of their lives, it’s clear that many bloggers eschew such expectations.

Diary-style Blogging as Immediate (Exhibitionism/Voyeurism)

Research that examines the blog genre generally shares two methodological elements: 1) the study corpus often is made of (or emerges as) a selection of “free-style” blogs (Cf. Herring et al.), and 2) the researchers often use the memoir, diary, autobiography, journal or other personal, private-style writing as a generic point of reference to understand the blog genre (Cf. Karlsson, McNeill, Herring et al., Serfaty). This latter point is often extended to argue that the main difference between the free-style blog and its print antecedent is that the diary was not meant for public consumption¹⁰.

⁹ Some may argue that this sample is insignificant compared to the total number of blogs that existed at the time (2004), considering there were an estimated 70 million in July of 2005, according to Duncan Riley of *The Blog Herald*: “Blog Count for July [1995]: 70 million blogs.”

¹⁰ The diary’s roots as a public and often spiritual genre are briefly discussed in McNeill, but a full genre analysis of the diary or personal journal are not within the scope of this dissertation.

However, most blogs are meant to be public. Miller and Shepard find that a culture of voyeurism and exhibitionism accompanied the rise in the popularity of blogs. In other words, because current public American culture welcomes self-revelation, and because all genres evolve out of kairotic circumstances, Miller and Shepard argue that it makes sense that the diary-style blog genre would evoke the presentation of personal or private matters for public consumption.

Miller and Shepard describe the rise in voyeurism and exhibitionism as related to an increased inclusion of the private and/or personal sphere in mainstream media and politics. Two of Miller and Shepard's examples that describe the private/personal infiltration are from MTV. During Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign, MTV hosted an informal forum where he was asked whether he wore boxers or briefs (and Clinton purportedly answered); Miller and Shepard also cite the introduction of *The Real World*, arguably television's first reality show which aired on MTV, as further evidence for "destabilization" of the public and private spheres. Miller and Shepard use Clay Calvert's term "mediated voyeurism" to describe this destabilization of the private and public spheres that blogging has accompanied or emerged from. Calvert, author of *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture*, defines mediated voyeurism as

...the consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently real and unguarded lives, often yet not always for purposes of entertainment but frequently at the expense of privacy and discourse, through the means of the mass media and Internet. (23)

To explain this definition. Calvert uses *America's Funniest Home Videos* (now simply called *America's Funniest Videos, or AFV*), a television show that showcases videos sent in by viewers that were not originally produced for a wider audience (23-24). The show is comprised of a host and studio audience watching videos sent in by “regular” people who have recorded particularly funny (or often unfortunate) events while making home movies. A similar phenomenon, mediated exhibitionism, describes the act of making one’s private life public—as with the submission of the home video to *AFV*. This mediated exhibitionism “serves voyeurism” (Calvert 81).

Miller and Shepard call those who make themselves into a spectacle—those who engage in mediated exhibitionism—“willing objects” and cite another telling cultural example from the 1990s where willing objects offer up their personal lives for consumption: the rising popularity of the memoir. According to Miller and Shepard, “four of fifteen top-selling hardbacks in 1997...were personal memoirs by private people”; without writers who are willing to share intimate details of their lives with the public, the public would not have personal accounts of others to observe. Blogs, Miller and Shepard posit, become another complex, nuanced model for the private citizen to make her life public: as with the memoir, mediated exhibitionism is the main purpose of the diary-style blog genre. However, Miller and Shepard argue that mediated exhibitionism does more than to simply provide others with the proverbial peep show. They cite Calvert, using his argument that the exhibitionism of memoir and other personal genres supports “self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control” and that such rhetorical action is apparent in blogging (Miller and

Shepard). Diary-style blogging, then, according to Miller and Shepard, is more meaningful than simply its function as spectacle.

The memoir or confessional genre is often cited as the precursor genre to the diary-style blog precisely because both share the generic classifications of delivering this intimate, personal content that Miller and Shepard recognize. Examples of this claim can be seen in works such as “Teaching an Old Genre New Tricks: The Diary on the Internet” by Laurie McNeill and “Desperately Seeking Sameness: The Process and Pleasures of Identification in Woman’s Diary Blog Reading” by Lena Karlsson. Further, the claim that blogging invites the delivery and consumption of intimate content is extended in these texts to support the notion that blogging is a mechanism for the construction of (an authentic) self.

McNeill explores the transformation that the diary genre undergoes when it moves from print to screen (26). McNeill argues that the online diary or journal, which she calls the “generic cousin [of the] Weblog” (24), provides writers with the means of building communities and constructing identities (27). However, the vantage from which McNeill approaches her exploration and argument is decidedly skewed—and she begins her article with a distinct awareness of her own bias:

Something about the online journal ... makes me distinctly uncomfortable.
 ... Some journals make me feel guilty, as if I have been looking at texts I should not be reading, that are too personal and not intended for me to see.
 ... I am cross when the diaries are badly written, and occasionally offended by their contents. ... I read with an entirely unscholarly sneer. (24)

McNeill's disdain for online diary writing, she acknowledges later, is a result of her bringing her "book culture values to bear on texts not meant to be read this way" (25). That is, McNeill, as an English scholar, has been taught to value writing that is "marketable": texts that are well-edited in Standard English and include content that has been deemed relevant and important via the gate keeping functions of conventional publishing (25).

McNeill acknowledges that her discomfort with the genre is a function of what makes them online journals in the first place. That is, the advantage bloggers have over print or conventional memoir/autobiography is in their ability to create intimacy through the apparent immediacy of their posts—through their rawness, the (seemingly) unedited or unfiltered quality of the ideas presented and the authentic rhetoric. That is, since the writers "can post entries immediately after writing them, they have less opportunity to 'tamper' with their texts, less time for hindsight to 'alter' the 'true' version of experiences" (McNeill 37). Additionally, the authenticity of a blogger's writing is reinforced by the periodic or serial nature of the posts: "by allowing...readers to receive the diary serially, reading each entry as it is posted...the Internet further seems to break down the division of textual and lived lives and selves" (McNeill 40). The temporal immediacy of blogging heightens the sense readers have of a writer's authenticity, a definite value in a voyeur's economy.

Lena Karlsson, author of "Desperately Seeking Sameness: The Processes and Pleasures of Identification in Women's Diary Blog Reading," surveys blog readers to further understand the compulsion to read online diaries, concluding that the issue of immediacy (concerning time and authenticity) is the most influential for certain blog

readers. Using what she admits is a non-scientifically selected random sample (141), Karlsson surveyed the readers of four diary weblogs, three of which were part of a blogging called “Rice Bowl Journals” that connects Asians in diaspora (141). The fourth site whose readers Karlsson surveyed was loobylu.com, written by Claire Robertson of Australia, whose readership is significantly larger than the other three. She finds the claim of interactivity (where readers are compelled to read and participate because they can be “co-creators” of the blog by leaving comments) to be ultimately less applicable to her particular study. Instead, she finds that the “temporal and affective dimensions of diary blog reading emerge as central to the *reading* experience” (139).

Karlsson’s findings echo McNeill’s assertion that the online diary’s success is in part due to the immediacy of publication; further, it is this immediacy that distinguishes the online diary (Karlsson’s term is “autobiographical serial”) from the print memoir. Here, “immediacy” refers both literally and figuratively to the generic aspects of the blog: the entries are posted immediately upon their production; also, the entries are seen as authentic and un-mediated, or as close to the writer’s true self as writing can support. Karlsson writes, “the considerable time lag between the scene of production and the scene of consumption of the paper diary removes readers from the combined rhythmical regularity and continuity of its production” (143). Karlsson’s respondents indicate that they place large value in a blog’s “regularity/order.” Also, they contend that this regularity creates a feeling of “living alongside the writer”; that is, the more consistently a blog is updated, the closer that particular text is to representing the “REAL” (Karlsson 146). Blogs allow for (or give the impression of) a closeness between writer and reader.

Blogs as Social Support/Community Building

In “Rhetorical Community: The Cultural Basis of Genre,” Carolyn R. Miller argues that a rhetorical community isn’t one based on shared demographics or explicit interaction; instead, a rhetorical community is one in which the members share genre(s). The shared genre structures the potential for action within the parameters of agreed upon roles, rules, and resources (73). She explains that the rhetorical community is “invoked, represented, presupposed, or developed in rhetorical discourse” (73). Miller and Shepard later argue in “Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog” that the blog is a genre or a specific type of text that users produce by employing existing, agreed upon (though shifting) rhetorical expectations and conventions based on a discourse community’s needs and values.

Additional arguments can be made about the potential for blogs to foster interaction and community through features such as comments and links. However, there is disagreement about the nature of that interaction and the relationships that have the potential to develop, specifically in the realm of mom blogs.

In the foreword of *Mothering and Blogging: The Radical Act of the MommyBlog*, Judith Stadtman Tucker argues that while blogging is “both a broadcast and a participatory medium,” and that it is most certainly a social practice, it is not a *relational* practice—blogging does not by its own virtues allow for or foster the necessary “intimate ties” between participants that create real relationships¹¹. She assumes that relationships must involve some element of intimacy, though she does not characterize what sort of

¹¹Tucker does acknowledge that blogging has the potential to create real relationships: “the practice of blogging can lead to the formation of genuine and important friendships, on- and off-line” (10); however, it is not a function of the blog or practice of blogging because the required “degree of mutuality” does not exist in the online space.

intimacy (emotional, physical) would be required. She also explains that while comments are often open for readers to contribute to a particular discussion or post, the blogger still retains control, which prevents the necessary mutuality required for intimate connections to exist. In this claim, she assumes that all bloggers actively vet and delete comments they would disagree with. In such cases, the blogger controls comments through moderation and manages the rhetorical presentation of the original content or “self”; these controls shape the kind of interactions the blogger will have with readers as well as those that readers may have with other readers. Tucker claims this a lack of mutuality creates a kind of hierarchy between the writer and the reader:

The asymmetry of communication rights and content control in blog-based social interaction raises important questions about the nature and meaning of blog-dependent bonds. The emotional content of relationships made in the maternal blogosphere is undeniably real, but the point of connection is largely imaginary—that is, the mother-blogger, who leads the dance, imagines she will attract readers who understand what she’s talking about and why it matters, and readers imagine they can get to know the mother-blogger through her abbreviated, episodic narrative and voice. (11)

To make this point, Tucker compares the blog to another online genre, the online message board, where self-presentation is an “improvisational free-for-all” and where “equal weight is given to [all] participants’ presence” (11-12). The blog is more like a stage, Tucker explains, where the post or entry is the proscenium and the comments become the audience (12). The blog, and the maternal blog specifically, Tucker argues, is “a performance of the self, a practice through which the mother recreates the setting and

substance of her life through a few well-crafted lines of text” (12). Tucker’s arguments may well reflect her experience with blogs; she admits “[she’s] not a habitual blog reader,” though to prepare to write the foreword to *Mothering and Blogging* she spent “several weeks randomly visiting mother-made blogs” (15). She claims,

I felt strangely detached from the authors ... [and while] the renditions of maternal life I discovered in the mamasphere were vibrant and completely recognizable to me—and among the most engaging blogs, the blogger’s personality came through loud and clear. But did I ‘connect?’ No. ... I felt like an interloper. (15)

Tucker’s brief time spent with blogs may be the reason she felt like an outsider; it may have also been her position as researcher that prevented her from seeing “the lives of other mothers as real and full of meaning” (15). It may have been Tucker’s inability or refusal to participate with the bloggers (by blogging herself, or by engaging in discussion in the comments) that prevented her from finding value in the women’s writing. Tucker also does not acknowledge that her own inability to feel an intimate connection to the writers and other readers does not mean that others readers share her feelings of detachment.

However, not all scholars agree that interaction and community membership requires explicit material participation and leveled hierarchies. Mary Chayko, author of *Connecting: How We Form Bonds and Communities in the Internet Age*, theorizes a community-building phenomenon that doesn’t require explicit interaction or feedback. Her discussion of community building in online spaces deals with users *imagining themselves* as members of a particular grouping—Tucker’s inability to imagine herself as

a member of the community of bloggers then may have prevented her from understanding the potential for “real” relationships to develop via blogging communities. Chayko argues that technology can be a significant site of action, interaction, and community building through sociomental bonds (Chayko 9-10, 164-165). Such bonds, where interaction occurs in the minds of the members rather than via physical interaction, serve to supplant the material intimacy and immediacy we normally require to feel connected to others (Chayko 2). Those communities formed via technological and mental connections don’t necessarily look like or act like traditional communities; however, Chayko questions whether traditional is necessarily ideal or better (144). Additionally, she concludes that “[all] communal life **has the potential** to offer members a sense of belonging, of not being alone, of being understood, of being harmed, of warmth and pain and, inevitably, of physical separation” regardless of whether the community is a PTA or Red Sox online discussion group (144).

Blogging communities might be characterized as “communities of the mind,” as Chayko terms them, where members rely on participation with others via technology and media “to construct a sense of connectedness” (141). While communities centered on social media are different than those built around physical or geographical locality, in online communities the locality becomes *conceptual* (Chayko 27). According to Chayko, the members of groups connected via social media like blogs are *conceptually local* to one another (27). Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organization*, describes a similar idea to that of Chayko’s conceptual localities. His term for groupings of people who use social media to connect and share is “communities of practice.” Shirky characterizes these groups as “inherently cooperative”

in that they “offer...advice, feedback, and encouragement” specific to their shared interests (101-102). Those shared interests might be writing Harry Potter fan fiction or following the Red Sox. Shirky’s term “communities of practice” defines any group of participants who engage with the community because of personal interest and sustain their engagement with the community because of feedback. The feedback does not necessarily have to be in the form of “talk back,” but instead might be in the form of a site meter hit count, which indicates how many visitors a blog has in a given period and where they are reading from.

Scholars have linked the highly personal content of the blog with its potential to support social interaction and community building. In *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs*, American Studies scholar Viviane Serfaty claims that blogging and blogging’s antecedent genres, the diary and the autobiography, are acts of exhibition in service of self-identification, which in turn serves the provision and construction of social support and community.

McNeill claims that the highly personal nature of this kind of writing invites and fosters “personal connections” to a writer’s readership, whose participation as readers “confirms [the writer’s] individual life assertions” (26). She claims that scholars that connect personal writing, social interaction, and community building are based in theory and scholarship from the life-writing genre, which encompasses the memoir, autobiography, confessional, and conventional diary genres—those genres which scholars have identified as ancestor genres of the blog (Cf. McNeill, Karlsson).

For example, Nancy K. Miller, author of *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives*, argues that life writing is an explicitly social in that “it takes two to

perform an autobiographical act—in reading as in writing” (2). Her larger argument is that life writing, in its inherent sociality, is not about voyeurism or exhibitionism in the conventional sense, nor is it about self-serving “naval-gazing” narcissism (Cf. Hochman for an argument about mom blogs specifically as narcissistic and selfish). Instead, Nancy Miller proposes we revise the notion of life writing and memoir specifically to understand it as “a prosthesis [or] aid to [social] memory” (14). Further, the act of reading another’s life writing is an act of “making sense of [one’s] own past” (12), as well as situating one’s own experience within a larger or dissimilar context. That is, reading memoir requires a kind of participation from the reader to “write” his own story alongside that of the writer’s. Miller explains that the memoir as personal history can evoke a shared memory between the reader and writer, where the reader must harken back to his own history to share the memory; conversely (and simultaneously), the reader may also be confronted with significant dissonance he must negotiate (10-12). Therefore, the highly personal nature of life writing, memoir, and the diary-blog, while it appears private and not suitable for public consumption, actually works to create identification among readers with the writer.

McNeill uses the genre of the confessional text to argue that the relationship between the reader and writer of blogs is predicated upon highly personal, revealing content. The reader’s role in a confessional text is one of confessor “who must be in place to absolve the teller” (McNeill 27); without the reader as confessor, the confessional cannot serve its purpose for the writer, which is to be released of shame and pardoned of transgressions (McNeill 27). Joanna Gill, author of “Someone Else’s Misfortune: The Vicarious Pleasures of the Confessional Text,” argues that the very content features of the

confessional text that scholars like McNeill and Tucker have discomfort with and misgivings about—for instance, the taboo “oversharing” of those topics not generally broached in mixed company (much less highly public spaces)—are crucial to a confessional text’s successful reception. However, Gill notes, the confessional is also carefully arranged, drawing on rhetorical strategies that “compel the reader’s attention” (Gill 83). For instance, confessionals frequently employ hindsight, episodic structure, epistolary structure (letter format), apostrophe (direct address), and self-conscious reflection (Gill 83-87). These textual features, Gill posits, allow readers to see themselves as “not furtively intruding on someone else’s ‘naked suffering’” (83). Instead, the confessional is “a textualization, a mediation, a narrative of an experience” (83). These rhetorical features of the confessional text deliver highly personal content in a way that assuages the voyeurism to which readers might otherwise have aversion and allows them to find spaces of identification with the writer¹². The content of the diary-blog often contains similar rhetorical strategies to the confessional (McNeill 27).

Additional textual features of the blog allow for the reader to adjust her expectations of individual writers. These additional textual features also provide screens or frames that can work like the rhetorical strategies Gill cites that create the “textualization” of the confessional/memoir. McNeill argues that readers’ expectations for blogs based on the personal information revealed in these additional features can also

¹² It is interesting to note here that Gill’s characterization of the rhetorical framing of memoir with such strategies creates the *opposite* effect of immediacy: such strategies (epistolary, flashback, etc.) create distance. That McNeill finds diary-style blogs to employ similar rhetorical strategies of distance contradicts earlier arguments about the use of immediate experience to *decrease* the conceptual distance between writer and reader. However, the blog has additional features that the print version of memoir does not. For instance, immediacy is created the blogger’s ability to update the text at will and the reader’s ability to receive notification of those updates automatically.

contribute to the construction of community. These additional features, or sidebar content (a term that is used by blogging services like Typepad and Wordpress), often include an “About Me” or biography, FAQs, a profile page, as well as several mechanisms for navigating past posts (sometimes called archives, this feature allows readers to browse by topic or by date) (McNeill 30-31). In some ways, the sidebar content reflects those strategies identified in the confessional (for instance, McNeill notes that the “About Me” page sometimes serves as a reflective “apologia” [31]). Such mediation provides the reader with a method for identification, according to McNeill; the inclusion of “About Me” pages creates a sense of “accessibility” of the writer to his readers (32). The accessibility of the writer, “[her] sense of responsibility to respond to and address readers’ concerns ... means [she] has both joined and created communities” with those readers (32).

In addition to the sidebar information, McNeill recognizes other generic rhetorical strategies within the posts of bloggers that construct intimacy between writer and reader (and between readers). These strategies construct intimacy by giving readers the impression that the blogger is accessible and by encouraging readers to identify with her. One example of such a strategy is the use of local details, either geographic or conceptual (i.e. a writer referring to a local restaurant, or a writer referring to a personal political affiliation) (33). Another example is in the use of “explanatory asides,” which will help readers who may not be immediately familiar with an allusion or reference feel invited or included in the discussion (33). Also, the blogger has the option of including links to external sites “to help the reader feel a part of [the blogger’s] personal [life]” (33). So, specific rhetorical strategies used to present the content, along with the extra features that

many blogs contain, create the opportunity for readers to connect personally (or to feel personally connected) to the blogger. These personal connections—or sociomental bonds, as Chayko terms them—can create the foundation for community.

Scholarship in this chapter has established that blogging, especially diary-style blogging, has the potential to support the emergence of meaningful communities through rhetorical practices that establish immediacy and intimacy. Additionally, claims have been made via anecdotal evidence that mom blogs support communities whose members' discussions complicate and interrogate the conventional expectations of motherhood (Cf. Friedman and Calixte, Townsend, Wilkins). This dissertation seeks to test these claims through the careful examination of the content and comments of three carefully selected mom blogs (which will be introduced in the following chapter). The definitions of online communities provided in this chapter (by Chayko, Shirky, and Miller and Shepard) provide the criteria I'll use to measure whether the mom blogs studied in this dissertation do indeed represent community, and if so, how the members of this community address normative motherhood.

Chapter 3

Methods of Analysis

In order to characterize the rhetoric of mom blogs, I use methods from network studies, feminism, and qualitative textual analysis (grounded theory and content analysis). I designed this study specifically to include analysis of both the content of the blogs (the entries) as well as the comments left by readers; scholarship on blogging has not yet attended carefully to the text of the readers' comments. Because one aim of this dissertation is to characterize the potential for community to emerge among a group of bloggers/readers, inclusion of the comment text—the interchanges between readers and the blogger as well as among the readers—is crucial.

Using Network Models to Limit the Large Corpus

My goal was to select three mom blogs to serve as a cross-section of the larger grouping of mom blogs. I sought a sample from which any emergent rhetorical practices were not a result of direct insularity among closely connected writers or of interactions among previously existing acquaintances, but rather could indicate that their interactions—reading and responding to one another's blogs—was an effect of shared discourse particular to those mom blogs.

The number of blogs whose content regularly contains discussions about mothering is extraordinary; *Technorati*, a service that tracks blogs and their links and tags (technorati.com), reported on July 5, 2011, that there are over 6,000 blogs whose authors use the word “motherhood” to describe their blog content. *Technorati* reports only numbers that represent authors who have registered their blogs with the *Technorati* site,

so the total number of mom blogs is easily far more than 6,000. To find a manageable number of representative blogs to study, I first determined the characteristics of blogs that would best serve to answer my research questions. Therefore, I needed to include blogs by authors who self-identified as blogging about mothering; further, I needed to make certain the blogs I studied were not the more temporary, flash-in-the-pan style of blogging (where a writer begins to maintain a blog but then, for whatever reason, does not sustain it). Additionally, I needed to include blogs that afforded readers and other bloggers the connections to one another that would allow for interactions to develop that might support an online community. I developed the following requirements for the representative bloggers I would examine:

- Topic—the blog should be written primarily as a parenting-style blog and the writer should self-identify as a “mom blogger.” There has been resistance to the terms “mom blog” and “mommy blog” by women who find the label too limiting and/or belittling (see the introductory chapter of this dissertation). Thus, including writers who self-identify primarily as mothers and who write primarily about parenting and mothering would prevent me from naming them or labeling writers in ways they would not name or label themselves.
- Longevity—the blog should have been in existence for at least one full year. One year is an arbitrary measurement which assures me the writers who are included have sufficient commitment to writing about their mothering experiences.
- Regularity—the blog should have been updated regularly (at least once per week). Regularity of posting is often cited as evidence of participation or interaction among bloggers.

- Comments—the writers must have “open comments” so that readers could respond to the writer and to other commenters.
- Connectivity—the blog should contain outward links to other blogs such that other bloggers/readers can use that site as an entry to other blogs. Blogs without a blogroll do not visibly or materially support the movement of readers from one blog to another. The purpose of links is (1) to show what the blogger is reading and (2) to encourage her audience to follow those links and read those other writers as well. Also, a blog without links suggests that the blog is not influenced by other sites on the web. Because this dissertation seeks to study the emergent rhetorical practices surrounding mom blogs, I needed to study blogs whose writing could potentially be traced back to a larger shared discourse; blogrolls suggest shared discourse, since they represent a blogger’s (supposed) endorsement of other writers—the assumption is that the blogroll is made of blogs that the writer reads regularly and finds valuable.

Because connectivity was the most difficult criterion to discern, I began the process of finding blogs for the study by first creating visualizations of the links between mom blogs. To find linked mom blogs—those that had shared readership or that linked to one another—I used bloggers’ rankings on *Technorati*¹³ and then their blogrolls¹⁴. I

¹³ *Technorati* allows users to search blogs by tag (or topic) and also by popularity, which is measured by the number of incoming links a blog has.

¹⁴ It’s important to acknowledge here that blogrolls have been criticized; some bloggers have argued that blogrolls are often bloated with “courtesy” links that don’t represent a blogger’s real reading preferences. The term “flogrolling” was coined to describe paid linking practices, mostly employed by popular bloggers. For instance, a 2005 discussion on *Crooked Timber* (available: crookedtimber.org) considered Steven Johnson’s indictment of Jason Kottke, a highly-ranked blogger, who was selling link-space on his blogroll. Henry Farrell, author of the initial entry on *Crooked Timber*, was concerned that

searched *Technorati* for “motherhood.” I needed a popular weblog with an exceptional number of incoming links to provide a starting point for finding other writers who were part of the network of mom bloggers. In particular, I used the category “motherhood” in my search, knowing that the bloggers listed in the results have ascribed *themselves* to that category (see the introductory chapter of this dissertation for the importance of my sample bloggers self-identifying as a mom or “mommy” blogger).

At the top of my initial search at *Technorati* was *dooce* (dooce.com), a blog written by Utah-based Heather Armstrong. She gained notoriety in 2001 after being fired for writing about her boss and workplace on her website, and in 2003 she gave birth to her first child, which shifted the focus of her blog writing significantly. Armstrong was, arguably, the first and most influential mom blogger¹⁵. While her blog exhibited longevity and regularity of posting, Armstrong did not publish links to other writers¹⁶: there was no static blogroll and no regular links to other writers within her entries. Armstrong’s *dooce* was a hub, no doubt, but only in terms of incoming connections; in terms of the network, her site worked a little like a dead end. Navigation from

the natural economics of the blogosphere might be skewed, since a blogroll conventionally had been interpreted as a list of blogs that the writer visits with regularity—the blogroll stood as a kind of authentic endorsement of other particular writers. As a result, that Kottke was taking money in return for listing particular links in his blogroll was seen as potentially disingenuous, as readers of Kottke would not know that his blogroll served as link-for-pay. Other concerns about blogrolls have included the ways in which blogrolls often are continually *added to*, but infrequently *weeded from*. Bloggers may hesitate to remove a link from their blogroll lest the removed writer notice and feel slighted. Therefore, often a blogroll will include links to writers the blogger has (for whatever reason) quit reading.

¹⁵ Armstrong was named number 26 on the Forbes 100: Most Influential Women in Media in 2009 (Blakeley).

Armstrong's site to another mom blogger (or any other blog) was impossible. The only outward links Armstrong offered were to paid advertisements.

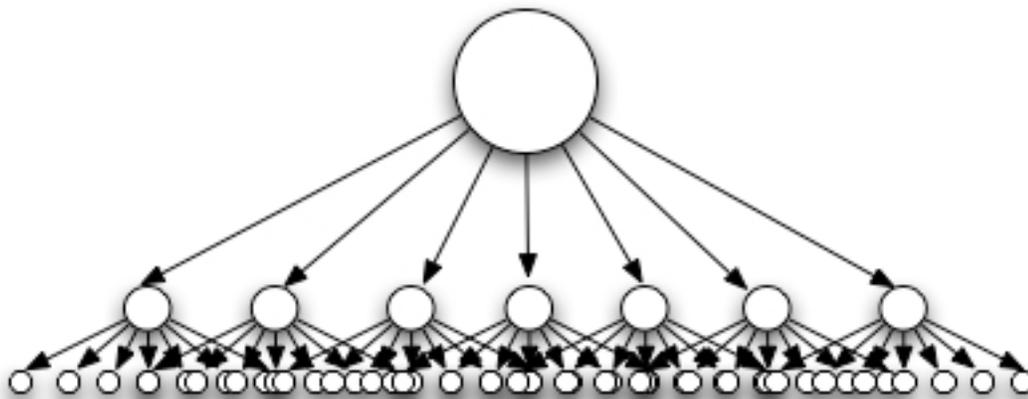
The next highest-ranked blog that published a blogroll was *Her Bad Mother* (herbadmother.com). Written by Canadian blogger Catherine Connors, *Her Bad Mother* fulfilled my determined initial specifications (topic, longevity, regularity, connectivity, comments).

Yet while *Her Bad Mother* fulfilled the specifications, it was a well-known blog. Connors, like Armstrong, had found success as a result of her blog, using her influence to build *The Bad Moms Club* (<http://thebadmomsclub.com>), a multi-authored blog with extensive advertising. Additionally, Connors had been interviewed for the Hochman piece in *The New York Times*, had been interviewed for a piece in *The Washington Post*, and had made several television appearances. My concern was that the stakes for her writing might be different than for those moms whose blogs were lesser known. I imagined that her rhetorical practices might be motivated by increasing traffic to her commercial blog, rather than by her participation and interaction with other mom bloggers. Therefore, I used Connors's blog as the starting point to find other, lesser-known writers whose rhetorical practices would be less (directly) shaped by a larger media or commercial audience.

In order to find a smaller network of writers whose readership consisted of "regular" moms, I used Connors's blogroll to construct an initial network of blogs from which I would choose the corpus. I used a network-mapping program, Graphviz, to chart the ways in which each blog in *Her Bad Mother's* blogroll was directly connected (or not) to one another through the blogs listed in their blogrolls. Graphviz allowed me to

copy and paste the names of the blogs from *Her BadMother's* blogroll, as well as the blogrolls of each of those blogs into a text editor, and with minimal manipulation, the program rendered an image of the network, showing which of the blogs were most connected, which only appeared once, and the directions of all the connections.

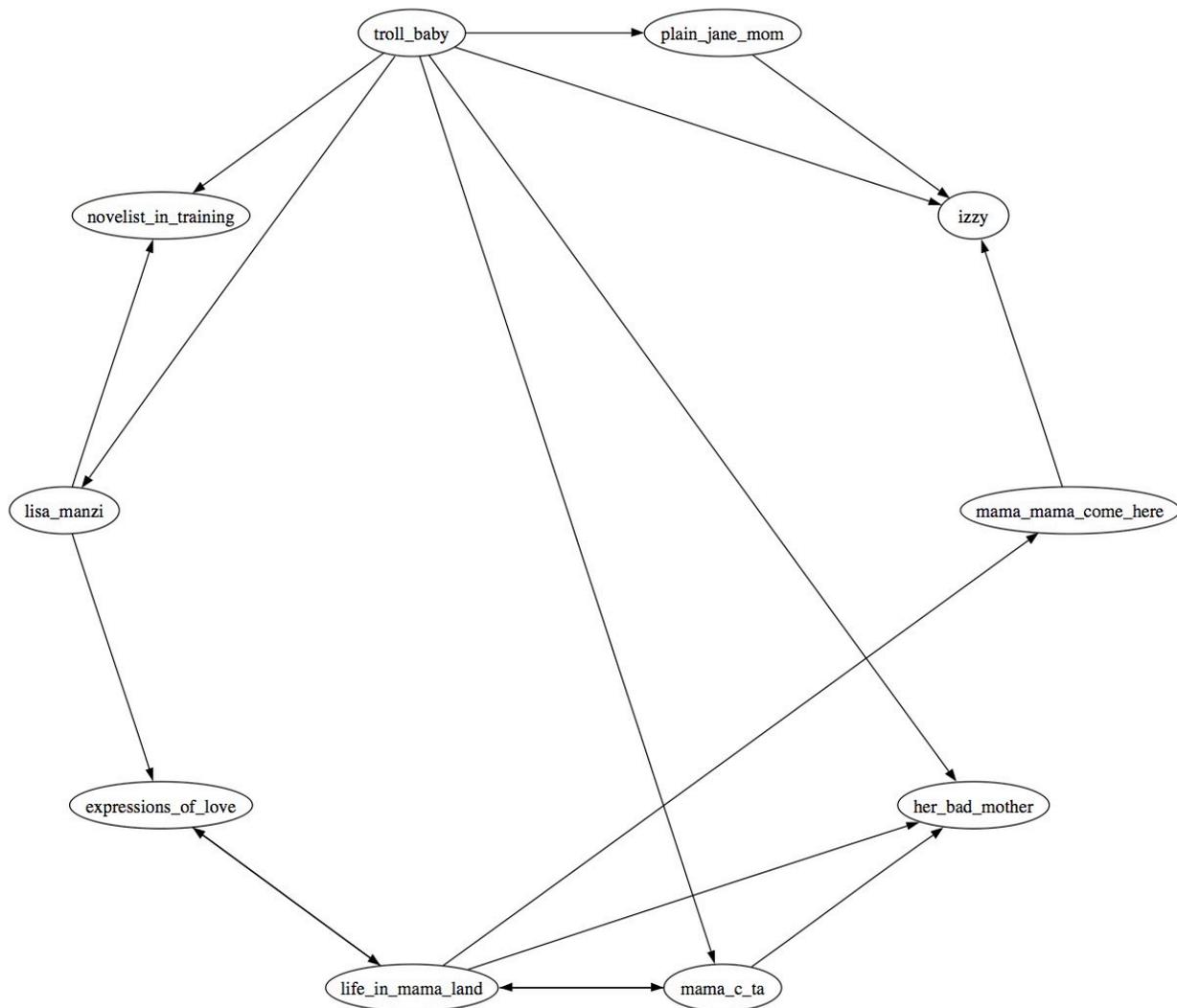
Figure 1. Flattened Hierarchical Model of one Blog's Blogroll Links



Note. The large circle at the top represents *Her Bad Mother*, the highest-ranked mom blog with outbound links at the time of the study. The second row of circles represents the blogs listed in *Her Bad Mother's* blogroll. The small overlapping circles represent the blogs on the blogrolls of writers listed on *Her Bad Mother's* blogroll. The smallest circles and their connections made up the initial corpus of networked writers, which totaled over 3,200 unique URLs.

Figure 1 represents the process by which I collected and assembled the initial network of bloggers. This graphic is oversimplified, though, in that it shows an artificially flattened hierarchical relationship between the blogs and not the circular relationships. That is, Figure 1 represents the outbound links I collected from *Her Bad Mother's* blogroll and from the subsequent blogrolls one each of those blogs; however, it does not show how some of the blogs in the second and third levels contain links to one another. Once I compiled the blogs from that third level, many of them linked not only to other blogs in the third level, but to blogs from the second row and sometimes back to *Her Bad Mother*.

Figure 2. [Truncated¹⁷] Circular Representation of Links from *Her Bad Mother*

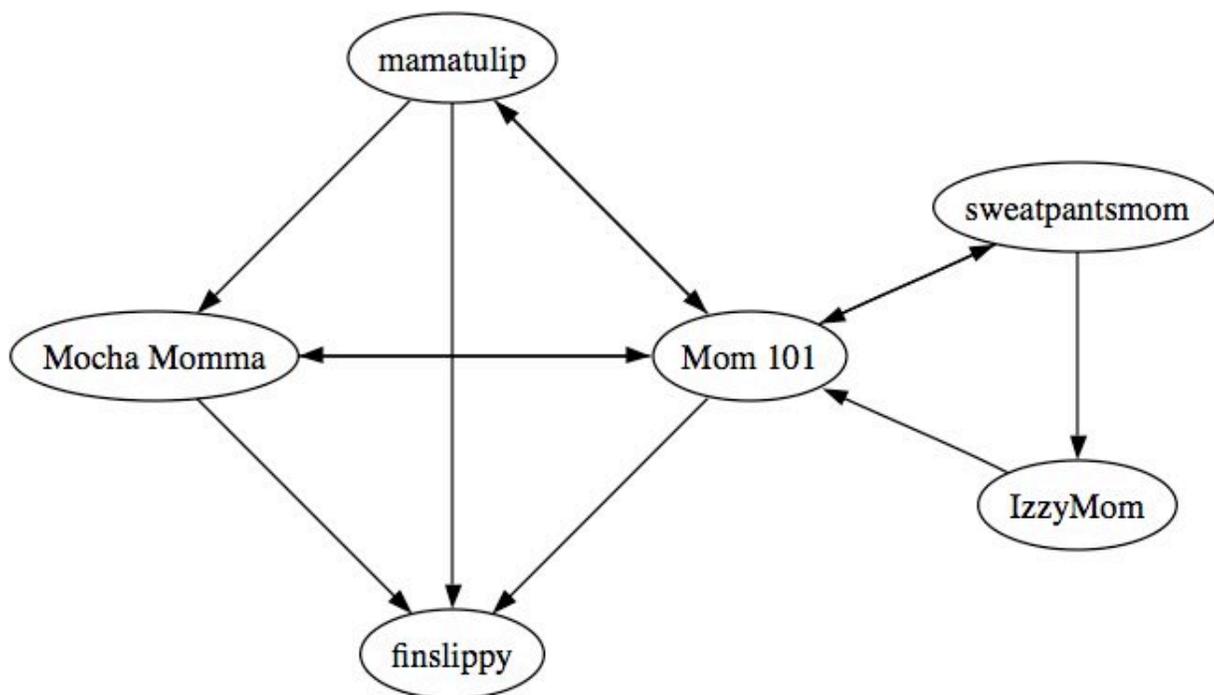


¹⁷ I could not include the graphic of the initial network simply because it is too large an image. Even when I omitted the blogs to which there was only one link (a full two-thirds of the network), the network still had nearly 1,000 unique blogs, making for an unwieldy graphic—albeit one that looks similar to the one in Figure 2, where some writers are clearly more connected via incoming links than are others, and some writers’ participation in the network is represented only through outbound links.

Note. An example of a truncated, circular representation of the network from Figure 1, where mapping the links from *Her Bad Mother* shows us how bloggers might be influenced by blogs they don't read directly. For instance, *Life in Mama Land* reads *Her Bad Mother*, and *Expressions of Love* reads *Life in Mama Land*. Therefore, it's plausible to imagine that the writer of *Expressions of Love*, through her reading of *Life in Mama Land*, is having her discourse shaped by those bloggers that *Life in Mama Land* reads (and is influenced by) such as *Her Bad Mother* as well as *Mama C-ta* and *Mama Mama Come Here*.

To create a cross-section of the network, I arbitrarily chose a group of blogs that had a moderate number of incoming links: the six blogs that had incoming links from 18 other bloggers in the network (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. The Six Blogs with 18 Incoming Links



Note. The blogs in this mini-network each had, in total, links from 18 other blogs in the initial network. This graph shows the primary or direct links between the blogs; it does not represent all the existing secondary (or tertiary, etc.) links that further connect the writers to one another.

From the network shown in Figure 3 above, I selected the blog with the most incoming links (*Mom-101*) and two of the blogs with the least incoming links (*sweatpantsmom* and *IzzyMom*) to examine. I selected these three blogs as the cross-section of the larger grouping of mom blogs. *Mom-101* represents the mom blogs that have many incoming

links and whose individual readers do not all read the exact same set of blogs.

Sweatpantsmom and *IzzyMom* represent those individual readers whose incoming and outgoing links have both shared as well as differing elements. Notice that *Mom-101* and *sweatpantsmom* link to one another, but *Mom-101* does not link to *IzzyMom* even though *IzzyMom* does link to *Mom-101*. Additionally, *sweatpantsmom* does link to *IzzyMom*, but *IzzyMom* does not link to *sweatpantsmom*. This sample would allow me to make the preliminary argument that any emergent rhetorical practices might be the result of both *direct and indirect* interactions among these writers as they read and respond to blogs. That is, because the links are not all mutual, any emergent rhetorical practices might also indicate that the discourse is not simply the result of insular reading and writing among a small group of bloggers; instead, any patterns in rhetoric might be considered a product of the larger mom blog milieu.

An Introduction to the Blogs Studied in this Dissertation

Blogs, obviously, are unlike print texts in that they have no finite end. The entries are updated at the whim of the author, comments are added (and sometimes deleted), and the design of the banner (the title bar at the top of the page) as well as other elements of the blog can change, and often do. Therefore, the blog-as-text (the sum of the entries, comments, and the overall design) is never quite the same on any given day. The effect of blogs' dynamism on research is that, quite simply, the texts that scholars are attempting to study are fluid. In service of practicality and necessity, I limited my analysis of the three blogs to posts and comments from the year 2006. Therefore, the introduction of each of these writers remains within the context of their 2006 entries (for instance, the

age of their children, their geographic location, their career status, etc., all reflect their lives in 2006).

Liz Gumbinner writes *Mom-101*. She is the mother of an infant, Thalia, who turned one in the fall of 2006. Gumbinner works in advertising and marketing, and she often must go out of town for her job. She characterizes herself as a mother of “advanced age” (she was 37 when Thalia was born), and she lives with her stay-at-home partner, Nate, in New York City, though at the end of 2006 she and her family move to Los Angeles. Her tagline, “I don’t know what I’m doing, either,” as well as the title of her blog (*Mom-101*) indicate that she approaches mothering as something to be learned, not as something she knows how to do instinctively (or well). Her entries in 2006 deal with negotiating the challenges of being a work-outside-the-home mother (WOHM), which often causes her to feel as though she is less of a mother (or that she *should feel* as if she is less of a mother). Additionally, she writes about her job, about living in New York City, and about conceiving and being pregnant (she becomes pregnant with her second child in the fall of 2006).

Marsha Takeda-Morrison, author of *sweatpantsmom*, is a work-at-home mother (WAHM) of two daughters, Kira and Kiyomi, who are in elementary school. Based in the Los Angeles area, Takeda-Morrison and her husband, Rigel, both work as graphic designers. Rigel works outside the home, designing marketing posters for the film industry. Takeda-Morrison is Japanese-American, and in August of 2006 she and her family travel to Japan to visit her family. Takeda-Morrison tells stories about her daughters (their achievements and humorous things they say and do), about encounters she has with other mothers and her grouchy neighbor, and about her confessed mothering

transgressions—which are often hyperbolic and humorous. Her tagline, “I just *look* like I’m wearing pajamas,” communicates the kind of ironic humor Takeda-Morrison often employs in which she admits awareness of mothering etiquette and expectations, yet eschews them irreverently.

Izzy Dean, author of *IzzyMom*, is a web designer based in Florida. The tagline of her blog, “Where it’s always amateur night,” indicates she sees herself as an inexperienced mother and that she welcomes the “performances” of others who are new or inexperienced. In 2006, her older daughter started kindergarten and her infant son turned one. Topics she turns to frequently are issues of body image, specifically the changes her body undergoes as a result of pregnancy and giving birth. Additionally, Dean writes about miscarriage, the challenges of partnered parenting (in other words, negotiating the shared duties of parenting with her husband), and the mothering mistakes she makes.

Analysis of the Entries

One aim of this dissertation is to characterize the relationship of these mom blogs to conventional narratives of motherhood. Since my assumptions about mothering, blogging, and rhetoric, inform the methods I chose, I here address those assumptions and situate my position as a researcher-participant.

My initial motivation to study mom blogs and their relationship to conventional motherhood was reactionary. Having read Hochman’s piece in *The New York Times* in 2005, and having had been an active mom blogger myself for about a year at the time, I was interested in redeeming some value for the mom blog. Hochman’s characterization

of blogs about family life and parenting is scornful: He writes that such bloggers “seem most likely to complain and marvel about . . . their own [lives]. The baby blog in many cases is an online shrine to parental self-absorption.” Around that same time, I was finding my own blogging (about the intersections of mothering and being an academic, but mostly about mothering) to be useful. Writing about daily struggles helped me to keep them in perspective—writing about challenges and successes made me reflect on them in ways I might not have if I did not have an audience to share them with (and often helped me reflect on them after I’d written an entry). In other words, Hochman’s criticism of what I was doing as “self-absorbed” came as a little bit of a shock. Blogging had been valuable to me; it hadn’t occurred to me yet that others might not find it so.

In conducting research for the literature review on motherhood and in exploring research methods in rhetoric, I’ve discovered that my motivation and methods are distinctly feminist, though I did not recognize them as such at the outset. Most obviously, the research questions of this dissertation “acknowledge and validate women’s experiences” (Kirsch qtd. in Schell 9). I focus on the everyday or ordinary texts of women’s lives, which are often overlooked as valuable or useful (Rawson 44, Calafell 109-110). I consider these women’s “experiential knowledge[s]” as a potential foil for (or in opposition to) existing cultural expectations (Ryan 90), and I examine the possibility that these women are re-inventing not only *their worlds*, but also the cultural narrative of motherhood, to be folded into larger cultural narratives of motherhood (Ryan 90).

I am acutely aware that my own subjectivity as a mother and as a blogger affects the trajectory of my research. While I certainly am “taking [these women’s] experience[s] seriously,” I am also very much conscious of the ways I identify *with* them (Letherby 70).

I am aware that, as a mother, I feel frustrated that my role is defined by others via their judgment of me based on an ideal that I am unable to attain. I struggle to understand who I am when, to so many of my acquaintances, I'm only known as "Hannah's mom" (or Jackson's, or Joshua's). And so it is an easy interpretive move for me to make, as a reader, to see in other mothers the struggle to simply *be* someone. Therefore, I attempted to analyze the blog entries in a way that forced me to "clear out of my own way" and read the texts (slightly) more objectively than I would simply as a reader-blogger; the best way I knew how to do that, as a trained compositionist, was to write about their writing—to describe their writing.

To conduct an analysis of the bloggers' writing that would allow me to use *description* of topic and rhetoric as data, I used a form of grounded theory as defined by Auerbach and Silverstein. I chose their particular model of grounded theory based on their book *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis* because they use their own research with the Yeshiva University Fatherhood Project as a model throughout. That is, because their model is built around a research project in which father-scholars investigate fathering and fatherhood—the constructions of the roles in various cultures; the social, political, and economic challenges of fulfilling those roles—I imagined their method could easily be appropriated for a similar study by a mother about motherhood. Additionally, grounded theory, as it is defined by Auerbach and Silverstein, allows me to conclude with hypotheses based on the texts I studied rather than forcing me

to create a hypothesis and test it (7). My treatment of the blog entries, then, is a kind of flexible narrative of the patterns¹⁸ of these bloggers' representations of motherhood.

I should mention here that grounded theory has been questioned by feminist scholars. For instance, in *Feminist Research in Theory and in Practice*, Gayle Letherby cites the incongruence of grounded theory as a research method with feminist theory. She explains, “As feminists we cannot argue that theory emerges from research, since we start from a theoretical perspective that takes gender as a fundamental organizer of social life” (Kelly qtd. in Letherby 67). However, my use of grounded theory here is indeed in service of critiquing existing theory (Letherby 67), in that I begin with a literature review of motherhood. Additionally, my use of grounded theory serves to describe how the mom blogs address existing ‘theories’ of motherhood. My hope is that my use of grounded theory, with my acknowledgment of conventional motherhood as the starting point (as an “organizer of social life”) and my focus on careful description of the bloggers’ rhetoric as my data, will allow grounded theory to coexist with the feminist leanings of this dissertation.

I acknowledge that there are many ways of interpreting the entries of the blogs (Auerbach and Silverstein 32), but in order to answer the first question of this dissertation, which asks how mom blogs address conventional expectations of motherhood, I read specifically for entries whose content dealt with their mothering practices. That is, identifying the entries that dealt with mothering practices allowed me to focus on the relevant texts (Auerbach and Silverstein 37).

¹⁸ Auerbach and Silverstein define “theory” as “a description of a pattern” found in the text (31).

Once I identified the entries that addressed mothering specifically, I constructed a list of “repeating ideas” (Auerbach and Silverstein 37) in the entries. However, rather than construct an anticipatory glossary of codes out of what I anticipated would be repeating ideas, I took extensive narrative notes on each entry, and I did not compare my notes on the entries until I completed my notes for the whole year. This strategy served to prevent me from pigeonholing entries into “matching” those I’d already examined. I then characterized the entries by topic (or main storyline), by their relation to conventional motherhood ideals, and by their most prominent rhetorical strategies and effects.

Once I’d completed notes on each writer’s 2006 entries, I returned to my notes to determine which ideas (either in topic, treatment of conventional motherhood, or rhetoric) could be grouped as similar or repeating.

I then applied the list of repeating ideas to the concerns about and effects of normative motherhood, as I outlined them in Chapter One, to determine if I could develop any themes or relationships (Auerbach and Silverstein 38-39) between the repeating ideas in the blog entries and the problems of normative motherhood. That is, the list of the bloggers’ repeating ideas juxtaposed with the concerns raised by scholars of motherhood allowed me to determine whether or not, and if so how, the bloggers were engaging with or addressing conventional motherhood. I constructed several themes from the writers’ topics and rhetoric, and discussions of those themes comprise Chapter Four.

The last step in my analysis of the entries is the development of theory based on themes that emerge from the repeating ideas. In the concluding chapter (Chapter Six), I discuss what it means that the writers engage with certain ideas in particular ways and how their work addresses conventional motherhood.

Analysis of the Comments

To fulfill the second aim of this dissertation, which is to characterize the interaction between/among bloggers and readers of these three blogs and to determine if their interaction can be defined as a community, I conducted a systematic two-part analysis of readers' comments from the year 2006. Because the total number of comments on these three blogs (combined) exceeded 10,000, I needed a method that allowed me to look broadly at a range of entries' comments as well as examine the comments carefully for rhetorical strategies; I chose to use content analysis, which provides for varied approaches to textual analysis including word frequency as well as interpretive coding.

I began by examining the comments on the entries with the most comments. This allowed me to characterize the interaction between readers (and the readers and the blogger) on the entries which earned the most feedback; additionally, it allowed me to judge which kinds of entries were the most compelling to readers, which is meaningful in characterizing the nature of these writers' audiences. I used word frequency to measure these comments, and determined that for particular kinds of entries, readers' responses could be easily characterized by their use of repeated words.

The second approach I used limited my close reading analysis to the first four months of 2006 for each blog. By limiting the close reading to the January-April period for each blogger, I was able to examine and code each comment carefully using content analysis, which allowed me to identify rhetorical patterns in the readers' responses.

Content analysis has its disciplinary roots in the social sciences where it is used to analyze large sets of texts (for instance, a year's worth of letters to the editor, a

president's library of speeches, or a decade's worth of song lyrics) with the purpose of assessing or characterizing larger trends in cultural values (Weber 14). The characterization of such cultural or social trends is the result of creating meaning about the intended audience, the writer (or "sender"), or about the intended message (Weber 9). Content analysis provides "a set of procedures" (Weber 9) for conducting a rhetorical analysis of a large corpus of texts in service of identifying cultural or social values. If I identified shared values in the readers' comments, such evidence might indicate the potential for an emergent community among the readers and bloggers.

Defining the Units

I identified the unit of analysis as the individual comment. According to Weber, my unit definition most closely aligns with the *paragraph unit* (23). Units are defined by the nature of the coding (what questions the researcher wants to answer) as well as the resources (time, for instance) of the researcher. Often content analysis defines the word or phrase as the unit because such units can be coded electronically with little variation in meaning and reliability. However, because each comment has a single author, and because comments are often relatively short (averaging between 50 and 75 words), I opted for assigning each comment a single code. Additionally, my motivation in coding the comments was not so much to describe the *topical* content of the discussion (though topical content is important to the second question that drives this dissertation), but instead to describe the *nature of interaction* that occurs in the comments of the mom blogs. Therefore, using the entire comment as the unit of analysis allows me to describe the *overall rhetorical effect* and surmise the purpose of a commenter's contribution. So, while the paragraph unit is argued to be less reliable and less able to support precise

results than smaller units (such as words or phrases), the limits of time and labor as well as my purpose in coding overall rhetorical effect that required I use a broad-stroke method.

Defining the Categories (Constructing the Codes)

I used the entries from January through April 2006 of *sweatpantsmom* written by Marsha Takeda-Morrison as the initial sample to construct the code categories. My method included reading an individual entry, writing a brief synopsis or summary of the entry, and then reading each comment carefully. As I read the comments, I took notes of the rhetorical action(s) or effect(s) of the comment. In other words, I asked myself, “What is the commenter doing in her response? What is the effect of this comment?” I began making a list of the rhetorical effects that emerged from the comments, constructing a descriptive glossary of the commenters’ rhetorical actions. I read entries and described comments until there was saturation; that is, when I recognized that I was using the same descriptions to name the rhetorical effects and not adding any new descriptions, I compiled a list of codes based on those descriptions and began using that list as the initial tool for coding subsequent comments.

From that initial test coding, the following categories emerged:

Table 1

Initial Descriptive Coding Categories

Code	Definition (the commenter’s rhetorical action)
SIMILAR	offers a similar experience in the form of a narrative
ALLUSION	points readers to a discussion or topic that exists outside the original entry; often is the allusion to a discussion on another blog or even a conversation that happened “IRL” between the reader and the blogger; allusions sometimes are the in the form of a

	hyperlink, directing readers' attention to another page on the web
INTERROGATION	asks a question with the intent of getting more information about the blog entry
ENGAGEMENT	responds to another reader's comment in the same comment thread, showing that the commenter has not only read the blogger's entry but also the comments that came before hers
CONFIRMATION	shows agreement with the blogger's claims; can refer to any general statement that shows the commenter believes the blogger is "right" or "correct"
AFFIRMATION	gives value to the blogger's feelings or claims; can refer to any general compliment that the commenter gives to the writer (i.e. "You write wonderfully!")
ADVISEMENT	offers explicit advice; usually incorporates second person construction ("you") and modals ("might" or "should")
COMPLICATION	presents the blogger with another way of thinking about the idea/ideas in the initial entry
EXTENSION	continues the thread of conversation by adding information or comparable ideas that match the initial entry
OFF-TOPIC	comments on a topic or conversation that is unrelated to the discussion emerging from the initial entry
GRATITUDE	expresses thanks for the entry; the thanks can be for information provided in the entry, for the blogger having the courage to broach the topic, for the new perspective provided about the topic, etc.
PHYSICAL EMOTION	uses typographical symbols to express, non-verbally, an emotion or physical reaction, i.e. ;) for a wink, :) for a smile, (hug) to give the blogger a hug

During the initial test coding and category development, I assigned as many of the codes to the comments as were applicable. For example, here is a sample of the coded comments from Takeda-Morrison's entry on March 17, 2006 titled "Fudge you? Why, Don't Mind If I Do." In this entry, Takeda-Morrison talks about an English teacher she had who made her class use the word "fudge" instead of "fuck," but then the teacher became tired of hearing "fudge" and prohibited them from using "fudge" as well. This back story leads into the description of how Takeda-Morrison's own daughters, Kira and Kiyomi, use the word "frock" as an expletive and that she is now tired of hearing the pseudo-cuss word, which she admits makes her kind of a hypocrite. In the following set

of comments, readers share their own stories, offer opinions, and give examples of their own expletive pet peeves and weaknesses. Below I show how each comment was originally coded to include as many categories as were applicable. Additionally, I include the explanation for the use of the categories to illustrate the logic I used in applying the categories¹⁹.

liberal banana said...

I guess swear words are only what we make them. It still amazes me what kind of words get bleeped out of songs on the radio these days (and sometimes what doesn't). **[COMPLICATE: liberalbanana asserts that explicit words are explicit because of constructed meaning, not because of essential meaning; liberalbanana implies that Takeda-Morrison's impatience with "frick" and "frickin" are a result of this constructed meaning.]**

There's a Black Eyed Peas song that's called "Don't Phunk With My Heart" -- 'phunk' only sounding like a swear word -- and they had to record a radio version that's entitled "Don't Mess With My Heart." That is a bit ridiculous. **[COMPLICATE: liberalbanana provides evidence for her complication above, showing that even though "phunk" isn't explicit, its purpose as a stand-in is.]** Maybe you can suggest "Phunk" to the girls? **[ADVISE]** Ha. **[PHYSICAL EMOTION]**
3/18/2006 5:08 AM

Nancy said...

Good, blogger's working again today -- was on the fritz last night when I tried to comment. **[OFF TOPIC]**

That post was fudgin' awesome! **[AFFIRM/EXTEND: Nancy's use of the "fudgin'" to compliment Takeda-Morrison's entry is ironic; she extends the initial humor by using the word that Takeda-Morrison used as a child to replace the expletive.]** Brought back some fricken great memories. **[EXTEND: Again, Nancy ironically uses a word (here, "fricken,") that prompts Takeda-Morrison's post.]**

My mom would always use fake swear words when I was a kid -- frack, crud, and my favorite "son of a bird." It drove me nuts at the time. But I still will roll out the "son of a bird" around my kids once in a while.

¹⁹ Separation of categories such as SIMILAR, EXTEND, and COMPLICATE is sometimes fluid; I offer my explanation of application here to show my own logic and recognize that their application is arguable and potentially fallible.

[SIMILAR: Nancy tells a story of her own childhood and the negotiations she had with her mother concerning explicit language, as Takeda-Morrison does.]

3/18/2006 6:33 AM

Bobita said...

GA-FAWING!! **[PHYSICAL EMOTION]** What a great, funny post!
[AFFIRM]

Just this morning my TWO-YEAR-OLD daughter demonstrated her knack for mommy-vernacular. She was trying to zip closed the door to her princess tent and was heard to say, "DAMMIT!"

My 5-year-old son, without missing a beat said, "Don't say that word...that's grown-up talk!"

(Apparently, I have used the "don't ever say that word at preschool, its a grown-up word" explanation waaaayyyy to much!!) **[SIMILAR: Bobita provides her own account of negotiating explicit words with her own children.]**

I love your blog... **[AFFIRM]** I hope you don't mind if I add you to my blogroll. **[OFF-TOPIC]**

3/19/2006 11:44 AM

Contrary said...

My mother took a different approach to cussing. She really didn't care if we cussed at home, with only us there, but oh my Lord the consequences if you ever let one loose in mixed company. **[SIMILAR: Contrary offers her own account of negotiating explicit language as a child.]**

I suppose it taught us when it's ok to cuss and when it isn't, **[COMPLICATE: As liberalbanana above, Contrary points out that "cussing" is contextual and constructed.]** but I still have never let my kids say 'crap' or even 'that sucks'. I, on the other hand am a hypocritical potty mouth of the highest order. Fudgin' A! **[EXTEND: Contrary uses the word "fudge" as an expletive, extending Takeda-Morrison's original story about her use of "fudge" as a child.]**

3/19/2006 7:21 PM

Jess Riley said...

That was a beautiful post. **[AFFIRM]** It reminded me of how my 8th grade CCD class actually drove our ancient nun/teacher insane. Literally. We were evil little demons. **[SIMILAR: Jess Riley recounts interactions**

with a teacher in which the teacher is annoyed by the kids; Takeda-Morrison's entry begins with a story of how she and her classmates exasperated her teacher with their use of the word "fudge."]

Kool and the Gang: fudgin' hot! [EXTEND: Jess Riley uses the word "fudge" to describe Kook and the Gang, extending the joke that Takeda-Morrison makes about she and her fellow students using the word "fudgin' hot" to describe Kool and the Gang.] LOL!!!
[PHYSICAL EMOTION]
3/20/2006 8:55 AM

Heather O said...

"It's FreSh frEsHhh ... exciting ... ProfAniTies are so exciiting to me."
(little known Kool and the Gang, B side) [EXTEND: Heather O revises the lyrics to a Kook and the Gang song to include the word "profanities."]

One serious question, what in the fartknockers were you doing up at 350am? [OFF TOPIC]

My favorite word of the moment with a 2 yr old in the house and one on the way: poopsticks. [SIMILAR: Heather O provides a similar detail about her own use of bad words in front of her children.]
3/20/2006 4:32 PM

Tink said...

The substitute words for the cuss words aren't any better. You can still tell what word they really WANT to use and doesn't your brain automatically substitute it back in anyway? [COMPLICATE: Tink explains why substitute expletives might be offensive.] I mean, Cheese and Rice (Jesus Christ). [EXTEND: Tink uses the substitute expletives in ironic fashion.] ;) [PHYSICAL EMOTION]
3/21/2006 7:20 AM

Diana said...

I can never come up with substitutes for my incessant swearing, though I should now that my son is trying to talk... [SIMILAR: Diana admits she struggles with swearing as well.]

and dude, your comment on Dawn's page about your kids thinking they're part anime? [ALLUDE: Diana refers to an unrelated discussion on another blog; could also be OFF TOPIC] Cracked me the frig up! (Hey, that's a start.) [AFFIRM/EXTEND: Diana uses the substitute expletives

to compliment Takeda-Morrison; additionally, her use of those substitute expletives indicates she is making fun of Takeda-Morrison's indignance concerning these stand-ins for bad words.]

3/21/2006 12:18 PM

The above selection of comments shows how during the initial coding process, I could easily apply multiple codes to one comment.

Revising the Code Categories for Reliability and Validity

To ameliorate, or at least acknowledge, the methodological problems of reliability and transparency in content analysis (Weber 17; Auerbach and Silverstein 84; Krippendorff 129), I enlisted the help of a temporary research assistant to test the applicability of the initial set of coding categories and to test my coding reliability. Together the second researcher and I reviewed the code categories as I'd originally defined them. The researcher easily recognized the rhetorical patterns that characterized the codes. However, when she and I attempted to measure our *intercoder reliability* (Weber 17), we found when we compared our coded comments that we consistently had discrepancies. The discrepancies appeared to be a function of two problems with the coding method: 1) we were applying multiple codes to comments, meaning that one comment could carry as many codes as the coder deemed applicable, and 2) some of the coding categories had significant overlap in the meaning or rhetorical effect they were meant to define.

So, an example of the discrepancies in our original coding looked like this:

Tink said...

The substitute words for the cuss words aren't any better. You can still tell what word they really WANT to use and doesn't your brain automatically substitute it back

Tink said...

The substitute words for the cuss words aren't any better. **[CONFIRM]** You can still tell what word they really WANT to use and doesn't your brain automatically

in anyway? **[COMPLICATE]** I mean,
 Cheese and Rice (Jesus Christ).
[EXTEND] ;) **[PHYSICAL EMOTION]**
 3/21/2006 7:20 AM

substitute it back in anyway?
[INTERROGATE] I mean, Cheese and
 Rice (Jesus Christ). **[EXTEND]** ;) **[PHYSICAL EMOTION]**
 3/21/2006 7:20 AM

In the above example, the coding on the left is my application of code; the coding on the right is from the second researcher. Because we were able to apply more than one code, we don't match in number of codes assigned. Additionally, where I described the rhetorical action of Tink's first sentences as a COMPLICATION of Takeda-Morrison's entry, the second researcher interpreted those two sentences as having separate actions: the first as a CONFIRMATION or agreement with Takeda-Morrison's original post, the second as an INTERROGATION (probably because Tink frames it as a question).

As I revised the coding schema, I recognized several recurring overlaps in the ways codes were assigned; that is, there were several different codes that consistently were interchanged. I recognized that:

- INTERROGATION and COMPLICATION were related codes that often could be applied to the same comment; often commenters used a rhetorical question to indicate a new idea or different way of seeing the ideas presented in the blog post. Further, the act of interrogation or asking questions often has the effect of complicating—or acknowledging the complexity of—a discussion.
- AFFIRMATION, GRATITUDE, and the PHYSICAL EMOTION codes were often interchangeable; often the PHYSICAL EMOTION code was indicated by a smile [:]), wink [;)], hug [((hug))], or laugh [LOL!] whose effect was to affirm the blogger or her ideas; the GRATITUDE code, where the commenter thanked

the blogger for her entry, was also an expression of affirmation in that the commenter's thanks expressed a shared value.

- OFF-TOPIC and ALLUSION codes frequently were used interchangeably; this resulted from the ways in which commenters frequently alluded to conversations, issues, or other websites (via links) that were also determined to be irrelevant or impertinent to the main discussion prompted by the blog post.

Additionally, I had to make a more careful distinction between the EXTENSION and the SIMILAR codes, as sometimes the commenter's use of a similar personal experience worked to draw out or continue the blogger's original point. I revised the coding schema so that SIMILAR comments would be based on the recurring use of the first-person pronouns ("I," "we," and "me") and to apply the EXTENSION code where the comment was constructed to be rhetorically or generically comparable to the initial entry (for instance, a comment that adds to a joke or list by extending the punch line or list items offered in the blogger's initial entry).

Therefore, I reconsidered the original coding categories to account for the overlaps and confusion that the inter-rater coding revealed. I revised the original list:

Table 2

Revised Descriptive Coding Categories

Code	Definition (the commenter's rhetorical action)
SIMILAR	offers a similar experience in the form of a narrative; characterized by repeated use of the first-person pronouns "I," "me," and "my"
ALLUSION	points readers to a discussion or topic that exists outside the original entry; often is the allusion to a discussion on another blog or even a conversation that happened "IRL" between the reader and

	the blogger; allusions sometimes are in the form of a hyperlink, directing readers' attention to another page on the web
COMPLICATION	presents the blogger with another way of thinking about the idea/ideas in the initial entry; this includes asking questions with the intent of getting more information about the blog entry, which often opens new avenues for thinking
ENGAGEMENT	responds to another reader's comment in the same comment thread, showing that the commenter has not only read the blogger's entry but also the comments that came before hers
CONFIRMATION	shows agreement with the blogger's claims; can refer to any general statement that shows the commenter believes the blogger is "right" or "correct"
AFFIRMATION	gives value to the blogger's feelings or claims; can refer to any general compliment that the commenter gives to the writer (i.e. "You write wonderfully!"); may also express thanks for the entry; the thanks can be for information provided in the entry, for the blogger having the courage to broach the topic, for the new perspective provided about the topic, etc.
ADVISEMENT	offers explicit advice; usually incorporates second person construction ("you") and modals ("might" or "should")
EXTENSION	continues the thread of conversation using the same rhetorical tactics that the writer originally uses in the post; if the initial entry is joking, then the commenter offers a new punch line; if it's a list, the commenter adds new list items

The revision of the code categories improved the *face validity* of the coding, in that I was forced to make explicit how the definitions of the categories aligned with the codes for rhetorical actions (Weber 18). In addition to revising the coding categories to account for semantic overlap, I revised my approach of assigning multiple codes to single comments. Assigning multiple codes (or "multiple classification" [Weber 32]) presented a problem which compromised the coding reliability. Multiple classification is useful in that it acknowledges that text can have multiple meanings, interpretations, and therefore rhetorical effects (Weber 32-36). However, it also creates problems for research reproducibility and therefore validity. As such, I revised the coding process so that I was limited to assigning one code to each comment. To determine the code that would be

assigned, I counted the number of words within the comment that were devoted to each potential code and assigned the code for which there were the most words²⁰.

For example, the comment cited above, where our code assignments were different:

Tink said...

The substitute words for the cuss words aren't any better. You can still tell what word they really WANT to use and doesn't your brain automatically substitute it back in anyway? [COMPLICATE] I mean, Cheese and Rice (Jesus Christ). [EXTEND] ;) [PHYSICAL EMOTION] 3/21/2006 7:20 AM

Tink said...

The substitute words for the cuss words aren't any better. [CONFIRM] You can still tell what word they really WANT to use and doesn't your brain automatically substitute it back in anyway? [INTERROGATE] I mean, Cheese and Rice (Jesus Christ). [EXTEND] ;) [PHYSICAL EMOTION] 3/21/2006 7:20 AM

Would then be coded as such:

Tink said...

The substitute words for the cuss words aren't any better. [CONFIRM] **You can still tell what word they really WANT to use and doesn't your brain automatically substitute it back in anyway?**[COMPLICATE] I mean, Cheese and Rice (Jesus Christ). [EXTEND] ;) [AFFIRM] 3/21/2006 7:20 AM

Two things have happened that allow this comment to be assigned one code. 1) Because I combined the INTERROGATE and COMPLICATION codes, the second sentence of this

²⁰ I acknowledge that this particular coding choice, to assign a code based on the number of words dedicated to a particular rhetorical effect, does not guarantee that each comment is represented by its most effective or emphatic rhetorical effect. For instance, the number of words does not necessarily indicate that that particular rhetorical effect is the most emphatic (indeed, the opposite is often the case). However, in order to create reproducibility of the codes, I needed to a method that would allow the coding to be easily limited. Number of words is an easily quantified variable that increased objectivity of the codes assigned.

comment can be named either, and it still gets the same overall code. 2) While the first sentence might be questionable in terms of its rhetorical effect, because it does not have the majority of the words in the comment devoted to its effect, the code it gets assigned is unimportant. Therefore, the comment is coded as a COMPLICATION because it has the most words devoted to that particular rhetorical action.

The revised coding categories and revised approach (so that each comment received only one code) improved inter-coder reliability to about 90%, which reassured me that the codes I would assign to the remainder of the comments from the three bloggers would be reasonably accurate and reproducible.

The narrative grounded theory analysis of the entries comprises Chapter Four of this dissertation; the two-step content analysis of the comments comprises Chapter Five.

Chapter 4

Analysis of Mom Blog Entries: How Do the Bloggers Address Motherhood?

The first question this dissertation seeks to answer is: How do these mom blogs address the cultural expectations of “ideal” motherhood? As discussed in Chapter 1, scholars have called for more nuanced, first-person accounts of individual mothering experiences to inform public expectation, and the mom blogs—as the public portrayal of such personal, individual experiences—are well-positioned to offer such first-person accounts. So, in some ways the simple emergence of the mom blog resists the dominant discourse of mothering, especially in the sense that mothering practices are often expected to be private or relegated to the home. Therefore, the act of making mothering public can be characterized as the first way in which the mom blog resists dominant discourses. The dominant discourse insists that mothering be a private endeavor relegated to the home, so the public nature of these women’s blogs defies such expectations.

To further answer the question of how mom blogs address cultural expectations of motherhood, I examined the main content and rhetoric of the three mom blogs (note that the comments are excluded in this analysis and examined separately in Chapter 5). I treat the entries of these mom blogs as one performance of these mothers’ identities with the assumption that such identities are socially constructed through the presentation/expectation cycle of rhetoric. That is, I treat these entries as a negotiation of these personal writers’ representations of their mothering experiences, and I consider the content and rhetoric of the entries against the mothering ideals outlined by the

scholarship reviewed in Chapter 1. By first determining the topics they choose to write about, the methods in which they frame those topics, and their representations of themselves as mothers concerning those topics, I characterize which aspects of ideal motherhood these women embrace and resist. In other words, these writers' entries demonstrate which parts of ideal motherhood they identify with and which parts they recognize as distinct from their experiences. The topics most frequently addressed in these three mom blogs, collectively, include 1) negotiating their inexperience as mothers and their (perceived) mistakes, 2) negotiating their individual identities and the self-compromises expected of mothers, 3) struggling with body image and the physical markings of motherhood, and 4) judging other mothers and being judged themselves for their mothering or parenting choices. This chapter will examine the ways in which the bloggers address these topics, especially with regard to how their rhetorical performances reveal the ways they identify (or disidentify) with their readers and with the larger cultural narratives of motherhood.

Negotiating Inexperience and Mistakes (Perceived Mothering Incompetence)

One way in which these writers address the dominant discourse of motherhood is in their deliberate discussion of their inability to fulfill the ideal mother role. In doing so, they show how they do not (or, in some cases, struggle to) rely on instinct or biology, even though conventional narratives of motherhood often assume mothering is instinctive or built into women's biology. The acceptance of instinct or natural ability would preclude these mothers' asking questions and having discussions about their mothering practices; such acceptance would preclude the notion that experience or education is

valuable for mothers. In other words, if they believed that mothering was merely the act of allowing one's intuition and innate knowledge to guide decisions, there would be no reason to question or share experiences.

Additionally, each of these writers draws attention to her self-consciousness about how little explicit knowledge she has about mothering—clearly an “inexpert” mother cannot be a “perfect” one. The titles of each of the blogs suggest inexperience and incompetence. Liz Gumbinner's blog, titled *Mom-101*, alludes to the numerical system of ordering courses that educational institutions use. In such numbered systems, the 101 class characterizes the ubiquitous beginning or entry-level course. By titling her blog *Mom-101*, Gumbinner disclaims expertise—instead, she confesses a complete lack of knowledge. The tag line (or subtitle) of *Mom-101* reads, “I don't know what I'm doing either.” Gumbinner warns readers from the outset—in her blog's title—that she is learning as she goes. The final word of her tag line, “either,” implies that she imagines herself in the company of other mothers who feel equally unqualified to mother; or, the final word of the tag line might imply that she imagines all mothers are, to an extent, beginners. Either way, Gumbinner's title reflects one way in which she presents inexperience as part of her official ethos.

The title of Takeda-Morrison's blog, *sweatpantsmom*, creates a similar ethos. The title presents Takeda-Morrison to her audience as sweatpants-wearing; sweatpants connote comfort but also a certain indolence. Takeda-Morrison relies on the trope that one does not typically wear sweatpants if one is using her dress or appearance to convey a proper public impression—one does not wear sweatpants if one is ‘trying.’ Takeda-Morrison uses sweatpants as a metaphor for her style of mothering: laid back, lazy,

unconcerned—clearly not “perfect.” Takeda-Morrison’s tag line employs irony in this regard, however. It reads, “I just LOOK like I’m wearing my pajamas.” This rhetorical tactic of defense that Takeda-Morrison uses undermines the distinction she makes; it becomes moot whether or not she actually is wearing her pajamas. That is, what it *looks like* she’s wearing might as well *be* what she’s wearing. Further, in many cases the difference between pajamas and sweatpants is insignificant; both can indicate relaxation and, sometimes, indolence. At any rate, her blog title and tag line create an implied disclaimer similar to Gumbinner’s: she is not a perfect mom.

Izzy Dean, author of the blog *IzzyMom*, does not directly title her blog with an implied disclaimer as Gumbinner and Takeda-Morrison do; however, she does attach a tag line for this purpose. Her subtitle, “Where It’s Always Amateur Night,” creates the same effect that Gumbinner’s blog title does: one of inexperience. Whereas Gumbinner relies on an educational metaphor to present her inexperience, Dean relies on an entertainment metaphor. Additionally, Dean’s use of the entertainment metaphor suggests that her forum is shared and public: at amateur night, a range of performances occur, and the audience and performers share both roles.

The rhetorical effect of the titles creates a kind of two-way acceptance for the writers and readers. Because the writers situate themselves as inexperienced (or in the case of Takeda-Morrison, apathetic), they imply value in the mothering practice that is learning by doing rather than “knowing instinctively.” In addition, the writers accept that their own and therefore others’ mothering is necessarily imperfect. The metaphors that Gumbinner and Dean use, relying on education and entertainment respectively, also imply that the learning-by-doing process may result in missteps and mistakes, though in

the classroom (and certainly during amateur night) such missteps and mistakes can have value.

While the titles have much to offer concerning the ways these writers negotiate their imperfections, the content of the entries themselves are rife with examples of confessions. Gumbinner frequently uses her blog to mock, admit, and excuse her own parenting transgressions. Such an example is the entry titled “The No-Sleep Sleep Solution,” in which she begins with a list of those parenting goals she had before her daughter was born that, when faced with the harsh realities of parenting, she and her husband quickly abandoned. For instance, Gumbinner had resolved to not feed her daughter French fries, to have family dinners (not in front of the television), to read to and bathe her daughter every night, etc. (Gumbinner “The No-Sleep”). One of the resolutions that she originally made was that she would not co-sleep²¹ with her daughter. She illustrates the dialogue she had with her husband when they set this goal: “‘We’re not going to co-sleep,’ I distinctly remember telling Nate one night as I rested my third trimester cankles on his lap. ‘It’s not good for our relationship’” (Gumbinner “The No-Sleep”). The oblique reference to her own swollen ankles²² introduces levity to the entry. However, at the end of the entry, Gumbinner confesses that Thalia had been sleeping nearly her whole first year with her and her husband, and that the arrangement had been neither pleasant nor restful: “...the three feedings a night is starting to get to me... [as is] Thalia’s nasty new habit of sleeping horizontally which forces us to the edges of our inadequate queen-size bed while one lucky winner gets kicked in the face all night...”

²¹ “Co-sleeping” is also known as “sleep-sharing” in which the child sleeps in the same bed as the parents, as opposed to sleeping in a separate crib or bed of their own.

²² The term “cankles” is a colloquial portmanteau of “ankles” and “calves” to describe ankles that have no distinct transition to the leg.

(Gumbinner “The No-Sleep”). Gumbinner relies on irony to describe their sleep situation; clearly the parent who gets kicked is not “lucky” nor a “winner.”

While the larger point of Gumbinner’s post might be characterized as the difference between expectation and reality when it comes to parenting practices, she ends her post with a short dialogue between her and Nate to describe how it is actually *Nate* who is hesitant to put Thalia in the crib to sleep. That is, Gumbinner admits to a parenting transgression (in this case, co-sleeping out of self-described laziness) and then presents an argument that this transgression is not solely her fault.

Dean, who also often writes to describe her own imperfect mothering practices, manages to address the complexity of responsibility in ways similar to Gumbinner’s. In one entry, “It’s a Bird. It’s a Plane. It’s BLUNDERMOM!” Dean admits to several “blunders” she’s committed, humorously comparing herself to Britney Spears, whom she characterizes as having “less-than-stellar parenting skills” (Dean “It’s a Bird”). Dean builds humor into the entry using Spears’s then-recent public parenting blunders that had been the focus of tabloids and magazine television programming. Spears had been photographed driving with one of her young sons in her lap (rather than secured in a proper car seat), for instance (BBC News). Dean jokes that even though Spears is an “idiot,” she feels “sorry for her” because she herself has had to face up to mistakes she’s made as an imperfect mother (“It’s a Bird”). In this entry, Dean describes slamming her son’s hand in the door as she was leaving the house, letting him open a cabinet in the doctor’s office which resulted in the hinges pinching his fingers, and locking her son in the car with it running.

Interestingly, in this entry of Dean's, she makes a similar claim to that in Gumbinner's "No-Sleep" entry: these transgressions are not necessarily (or not only) her fault. However, Dean carries this line of defense into strange territory, arguing that even though many of these mothering "mistakes" were not the result of her own incompetence, she should still admit to them and feel guilty:

Now, in my own defense, 2/3 of what [I] confess to is really not my fault. I had no control over the circumstances but in typical sacrificial mom fashion, I blame myself anyway. Somewhere between conception and birth I solemnly swore to protect my children from everything bad, including circumstances beyond my control. So even though they're not my fault, I'm still guilty. (Dean "It's a Bird")

Dean's disclaimer, meant "in [her] own defense," instead reinforces the expectation that mothers are fully, wholly, responsible for their children's well-being and safety, even when circumstances arise that they are unable to control.

Readers can infer several different meanings from Dean's gesture toward the injustice of such a system where mothers are supposed to be responsible for that which they cannot control. The first is that Dean is serious, and that she is earnest in her claim that even though such blunders are "not [her] fault, [she's] still guilty." That is, readers may interpret Dean to mean that she finds herself at fault or responsible for the discomfort her son endured that day. Or, readers may understand that her use of the word "guilt" describes her emotional reaction, not a juried conviction—in other words, while she may not be technically responsible for her son's misfortune, she still feels something akin to the guilt one would experience if one were responsible. In other words, she feels

badly about the circumstances. A third inference readers can make is that Dean is actually interrogating the sheer ludicrousness of such a system wherein she is judged for actions and circumstances beyond her control. There are no other textual or rhetorical clues that point unequivocally to any of these interpretations. She writes later in the entry, referring to her son's last-minute move to place his hand on the jamb that resulted in her slamming his fingers in the door, "There's no way I could have known he would do that BUT...I still should have prevented it" (Dean "It's a Bird"). The lack of logic in this passage—she claims to not have known what her son would do but somehow still should have been able to anticipate his actions—might be attributed to any of the above interpretations as well. And while readers may be inclined to attribute Dean's repeated reference to this particularly problematic contradiction of motherhood as a rejection of the system, such an interpretation cannot be argued for certain based solely on textual cues. Therefore, Dean's entry "It's a Bird" can be characterized as one in which she offers confession and context, which alone represent a rejection of the "perfect mother" ideal; Dean's admitted inability to fulfill the role serves as a kind of resistance. While some readers may interpret her refrain of 'it's not my fault, but it *is* my fault' as a more subtle rejection of ideal motherhood that interrogates how responsibilities and expectations can unduly and unfairly be forced on mothers, for the purposes of this dissertation, such interpretations will be avoided,²³ since Dean repeatedly recapitulates her own feelings of responsibility and guilt.

²³ In other words, we will avoid attributing too much intention to the writer based on speculation, and instead attempt to make interpretations based on the textual and rhetorical evidence.

Another example of Dean's self-described lack is in an entry titled "Lucky 13." Dean writes a "Dear baby" letter, an epistolary genre that may have been pioneered²⁴ by A-List blogger Heather Armstrong of *Dooce*. The genre of the baby-letter blog entry may be characterized as a kind of online scrapbook—as the letters are often narrative, they carefully detail the child's milestones, and they tend to be less reliant on photographs than the scrapbook genre, which commonly relies primarily on photos and secondarily text (mostly in the form of captions). The blog entries are rhetorically complex in that they are formally addressed to the baby or child and employ second person ("Dear P, You're 13 months old today!" [Dean "Lucky 13"]), but are clearly not written *for* the child to read—they are for a public audience. In this entry, Dean catalogues certain details and milestones: his car seat facing front, his first words, his favorite foods. However, she ends the letter apologizing to him for being "lazy" and for not "properly socializing" him. She admits she doesn't take him to Gymboree for play dates as she did her first child, his older sister. Additionally, she admits to other questionably safe mothering practices: she lets him play with her Vicks inhaler, her lipstick, and other items out of her purse.

Along with its confessional nature, the "Lucky 13" entry exhibits humor as well. This comes in the form of self-deprecation, where Dean mocks herself lightheartedly. She writes, "Your separation anxiety really peaked this past month and was beginning to drive Mommy fricken bonkers" (Dean "Lucky 13"). Dean's tone is blithe as she describes dealing with her toddler's antics—to say that they "drive [her] fricken bonkers"

²⁴ While there may be no way to unequivocally claim that Armstrong is indeed the sole progenitor of the "Dear Baby" blog entry, Armstrong's "Dear Leta" letters, which she wrote every month to her first daughter until she was a toddler, are often cited as the inspiration for other mom bloggers to pen similarly styled entries to their own babies.

may be a euphemism. It is undoubtedly stressful for a mother whose child will not let her out of his sight; here, Dean's humorous description of what is most likely quite frustrating and inconvenient (separation anxiety) makes it appear less upsetting than it might actually be (for Dean and for other mothers experiencing similar challenges).

Takeda-Morrison's presentation of mistakes and transgressions are regularly couched in self-deprecatory humor as well. One example of such humor emerges in a series of posts she calls "MomSecrets," which are modeled after *Post Secret*, a community blog that solicits and publishes postcard-style confessions. While the *Post Secret* entries are often humorless²⁵ and always anonymous, Takeda-Morrison's appropriation of the genre relies on wit both in text and image. For instance, one entry is titled "Lying, Deceit and Self-Absorption - Some Moms Can Do It All!" The image of a shiny white molar is overlaid with the following message: "The 'Tooth Fairy' forgot to come last night because she was blogging" (Takeda-Morrison "Lying, Deceit"). She prefaces the postcard image with a short preamble in which she confesses that she told her daughter that the tooth fairy doesn't "fly in the rain" to explain why the tooth fairy missed visiting their house the night before. This brief entry and the lengthy title serve to confess several perceived mothering transgressions: the shirking of her responsibility to play tooth fairy, the revelation that she is dishonest with her daughter about why the tooth fairy did not swap her tooth out for money, and the admission that the real reason she forgot to play tooth fairy is that she was engaged in an activity that ostensibly requires her to ignore her children (blogging). That is, the perfect mother would have such an

²⁵ One postcard features a smiling bride with the caption: "I knew before I'd married him that one day I'd ask him to leave me."

event (tooth-fairy duty) at the forefront of her attention and would not be sidetracked by her own interests.

Takeda-Morrison posts a similar entry under the “MomSecret” category titled “Next Up: Stealing from Homeless People.” She calls it her “latest shameful parental transgression” (Takeda-Morrison “Next Up”). This entry includes an image of a pink piggy bank standing on a piece of loose-leaf paper stained with a coffee-ring. The text reads, “I took four dollars out of my daughter’s piggy bank to buy a cappuccino” (Takeda-Morrison “Next Up”). Again, the short entry and the text-heavy title work together, creating a humorous confession of mothering indiscretions that includes not only theft (good mothers should not be thieves, as they are to comport themselves as model citizens for their children to emulate), but more so theft from her children, which, through the allusion in her title, readers will recognize Takeda-Morrison finds to be nearly as morally bankrupt as stealing from homeless people.

The humor in these posts does not mask their confessional nature, however. By modeling these admissions after the *Post Secret* community blog, where the contributions are often horrifyingly private, Takeda-Morrison frames her own secrets as resulting from truthful events. That is, while hers are not horrifyingly personal—and hers are not anonymous—the association Takeda-Morrison makes between her post cards and those of the *Post Secret* community creates the expectation that her confessions are honest representations of her mothering experiences. In addition, Takeda-Morrison’s “MomSecret” posts illustrate a violation of ideal motherhood: she not only confesses her perceived mistakes and transgressions, but in some cases she made a conscious decision to breach those ideals. While earlier examples from Gumbinner and Dean illustrate

violations of perfect mothering that resulted from circumstance or difficulty, Takeda-Morrison's confessional "MomSecret" entries illustrate her deliberate violation of the expectations themselves.

Other posts of Takeda-Morrison's illustrate similar violations of ideal mothering practices. In "Regrets: Teaching Them How To Read Nutritional Labels," she writes about her daughters' objections to having to eat the school lunches. She admits she has tried to convince her daughters that the school lunches are healthy so that she doesn't have to pack them lunches from home; however, her daughters are unconvinced that corn dogs are "vegetables and protein" ("Regrets"). An ideal mother would insist on packing the children's lunches to avoid the children's consumption of high-fat, sodium-laden institutional meals. Not only has Takeda-Morrison refused to prepare her daughter's lunches, she has (allegedly, unsuccessfully) tried to get out of doing so by tricking them into thinking the lunches are healthy. Once again, Takeda-Morrison presents her readers with not only an admission of her mothering "failures," but she does so rather unashamedly. In fact, the title suggests that the most important transgression she has identified within this scenario is *being honest* with her daughters in the first place about nutrition labels. Clearly she doesn't intend that her honesty was a transgression. Instead, Takeda-Morrison's use of sarcasm and irony suggest that, in some cases, being a *good* mother often increases the challenges of motherhood.

Takeda-Morrison's rhetorical strategies in "Regrets," in addition to confession, include hyperbole and irony. Readers are not truly to believe that Takeda-Morrison is completely unconcerned about her daughters' eating habits (in fact, that she has taught them to read nutrition labels suggests the opposite is indeed true). Her presentation of this

scenario, however much of it is fabricated and/or exaggerated, still mocks the ideal mothering practice of obsessing over children's diets and points, if obliquely, to the time commitment required for mothers to do such obsessive work. That is, while Takeda-Morrison's presents herself as "too lazy" to prepare her daughters' lunches, such choices can be particularly time-consuming and unnecessary since lunch (however nutritionally questionable) is provided at school. Additionally, Takeda-Morrison's post might also be framed as a critique of school lunches. While the fact that institutions supply children's meals is helpful, it creates a conundrum for mothers who would like to pay more attention to their children's diets but are unable to because of time constraints. Such mothers are forced to sacrifice nutrition for convenience.

In presenting their 'mistakes' and their perceived incompetence, these writers reveal complexities of mothering. For instance, Gumbinner acknowledges the difficulties in co-parenting; Dean, the impossibility of completely protecting one's children; Takeda-Morrison, the potential contradictions that mothers encounter. In describing such 'mistakes' and in admitting the ways their own mothering doesn't (or can't) correspond to cultural expectations of mothers, these writers construct a particular ethos of disidentification from the ideal. Each mother performs an identity that does not completely align with many of the ideals that conventional motherhood prescribes.

Negotiating Identity and Compromising Personal Preferences

In addition to resisting the "perfect mother" ideal by presenting themselves as flawed and inexperienced, these writers also use their blogs to present and negotiate the difficulties of living as both a mother and as a person who has values, preferences, and

ambitions that exist decidedly outside the parameters of what “ideal motherhood” entails. In other words, these women’s experiences suggest that mothers are still expected to forsake personal goals, preferences, and convictions in service of their children’s needs and desires. These entries often contain humor and are also framed as confessions in that the writers “admit” to having particular preferences that do not resonate with their children’s.

In an entry titled “Coming Around. Though Not Entirely,” Gumbinner admits she has finally let her daughter, Thalia, begin watching the popular television show *Barney*. This entry possesses a kind of confessional quality, but the main thrust of the post concerns Gumbinner’s “giving in” to a preference of Thalia’s that Gumbinner abhors. She devotes much of her entry to an indictment of the purple dinosaur and the show’s content:

The kids on that show tuck their shirts into their jeans in that way that's sure to get you beat up behind the tire swings during lunchtime. The black kids look like they were cast from the Bryant Gumbel school of ethnic diversity, ready to break out into *Tie a Yellow Ribbon* any minute. Not one song has a modicum of soul to it, and the rhyming schemes surely have Mr. Geisel [Dr. Seuss] rolling over in his grave. The dance moves (*Jazz hands, everyone! Jazz hands!*) make me want to kick the choreographer in the face with his own 80s-era Capezios... (Gumbinner “Coming Around”)

Gumbinner continues this entry with a relentless catalogue of the ways the program is a cultural monstrosity. She includes hyperbole for effect; readers will chuckle at the image of Gumbinner kicking someone in the face for his inability to respectably choreograph a

children's show. However, her main point is not to indict the programming. Instead, the penultimate point of this entry is that Gumbinner's surrender to Thalia's interest in *Barney* is but one example of the ways in which mothers give up their own comforts and ideals in service of their children's preferences. Interestingly, this entry does not attend to the oft-cited concern that children watch too much television (and that mothers allow them to do so). Gumbinner does not mention the "evil" of television itself; instead, her concern about this particular program—and her concern that she has finally allowed Thalia to watch it—is that the show is culturally void, or worse, culturally inaccurate. In other words, the mothering ideal she struggles with in this entry is the expectation that she will abandon her own preferences in order to please her daughter. Gumbinner perceives this compromise as a failure: a failure of her own commitment to raising Thalia to appreciate culture via less mainstream and facile programming. This entry creates a similar tension to that of Takeda-Morrison's entry about her daughters reading nutrition labels: Gumbinner is expected, as a mother, to police her daughter's cultural encounters and ensure that she is exposed to appropriate cultural texts. However, even though *Barney's* programming is meant to be age-appropriate for toddlers, Gumbinner accurately describes the show's vision as fairly narrow and lacking real cultural diversity. By relenting to her daughter's demands, Gumbinner lets go of her own preferences in service of her daughter's, but in doing so she is unable to fulfill the expectation that she create appropriate cultural experiences for her daughter. This entry presents one example of how the expectations of mothers can present competing ideals.

Takeda-Morrison's daughters are older than Gumbinner's, and so the collision of her preferences with those that would be expected of a "good" mother manifest in slightly

different ways. In an entry titled “She Says Potato, I Say Pootie-Tang!” Takeda-Morrison’s older daughter Kira asks her what a “ho” is, and Takeda-Morrison assumes Kira is asking about the colloquialism for “whore,” which prompts a multi-layered rant on her blog. In this rant, she worries about her own inability to protect her daughters from sexual culture, as she herself listens to artists like Missy Elliot²⁶; also, she admits to not being ready to address sex and reproduction with her daughter yet. Her worries, however, create an ironic tension: if she really were not ready to talk about sex with her daughter, then she would put more effort forth in shielding her from sexual culture. At the end of the entry, Takeda-Morrison reveals that Kira’s question is about the gardening tool, “hoe.”

Takeda-Morrison’s entry reveals the tensions that mothers experience when part of their identities (in this case, her preference for rap songs with sexually charged lyrics) do not align with what might be expected of an ideal mother’s preferences (in this case, the expectation that mothers make sexuality discrete from their mothering). And while those “ideal preferences” for a mother might not be easily defined, they certainly can be defined against what they aren’t; in this case, mothers are not expected to enjoy (or expose their children to) R-rated content.

Another entry from Takeda-Morrison’s blog illustrates an additional example in which she must sacrifice her own preferences and contentment in service of her children’s happiness. In “The Happiest Place On Earth. The Happiest Place On Earth,” she writes about a trip she and her husband make to Disneyland with their daughters. She

²⁶ Missy Elliot is a popular R & B songwriter and recording artist whose lyrics are often characterized by both literal and figurative references to sex.

prefaces the entry by explaining how she and Rigel, her husband, detest this amusement park:

For our two girls, a day at Disneyland could only be matched in excitement by the sight of Santa Claus eating ice cream in our living room. I'm not as thrilled by the place, and Rigel even less - crowds, long lines and the close proximity of pasty men wearing tube socks with sandals never fails to put him in a bad mood. In fact, there's only one thing that could possibly make him crankier than a day at Disneyland. TWO days at Disneyland. (Takeda-Morrison "The Happiest")

However, because their daughters are invited for a two-day-long, all-expenses-paid birthday party at Disneyland, they compromise their own comfort and preferences to accompany their daughters on the trip. The sacrifice takes its toll; Takeda-Morrison jokes that "at the end of our second day I felt like I had aged more than a few years. I came up with the following equation: 1 Disneyland day = 20 human years" ("The Happiest"). However, at the end of her entry, she has a moment of reflection where she decides that the compromise, in this case, might have been worth her and Rigel's general misery. She writes,

I find it easy to get cynical about Disneyland and the whole Disney empire, but I have to admit that seeing that initial look of joy on your kids' faces when you first walk through those front gates is worth having to stand in line for two hours for a ride that lasts sixty seconds, or having to

pay seven dollars for a cup of burnt coffee and a soggy churro. (Takeda-Morrison “The Happiest”)

While Takeda-Morrison appears to end with a change of heart, closer inspection of this final paragraph might indicate otherwise. The emphasis of her penultimate sentence is not that Disney was *worth* the inconvenience and discomfort; instead, the emphasis (the bulk of her rhetorical effort) is on those very inconveniences: she and Rigel suffered through two-hour long lines for roller coasters that they didn’t ride, and they spent an extraordinary amount of money on unsatisfactory food. Had Takeda-Morrison chosen to end the entry with a more level (less hyperbolic) statement about her daughters’ smiling faces, her intent may be more easily discerned as one of inscribing value to the sacrifices she and Rigel made those two days at Disney Land.

Izzy Dean writes about the attempt she makes to participate in her daughter’s Parent-Teacher Association, an effort to both get out of the house and to help at her daughter’s school. Her efforts, however, are thwarted by having to bring her infant son along to the meeting. First, he runs loose during the meeting, which prevents Dean from being able to focus on the discussion (further, he is a distraction to the other parents and teachers). Then she must leave the meeting to change his soiled diaper. Circumstances force her to change her son in her mini-van outside, and during the operation it begins raining, leaving her soaking wet and unable to return to the meeting (Dean “No Good Deed”).

This post represents the ways in which mothers’ autonomy is often limited. Dean’s narrative draws some irony in that the choice she attempts to make for herself—to participate in her daughter’s PTA—is one that would otherwise be considered a “good

mom” choice. That is, she is choosing to participate *for the benefit of her daughter*, not necessarily for the benefit of herself (mothers often seek participation in social arenas that place them in the company of other mothers such as the PTA, Girl and Boy Scouts, youth-group leadership, and sporting activities; this sort of social involvement creates an outlet for mothers to interact with other adults in a child-friendly and enriching atmosphere). However, that Dean makes the choice to participate and then is forced to compromise or sacrifice that choice as a result of her son is what drives this particular entry.

She uses humor and second person to engage her readers, presenting the course of events as though the reader were the one experiencing Dean’s day. She writes, “after doing his hooting, squirming and shoe removing routine, your one yr old proceeds to run down the aisle, leaving a faint whiff of something. Could it be...? Why yes! It’s poop!” (Dean “No Good Deed”). Dean’s use of “you” (instead of narrating the story in first person, as most of her entries do), also creates a bit of narrative distance from herself. That is, she has removed herself from the experience and the story, which adds humor, but also creates the impression that Dean is observing her own decisions and actions, and reflecting on the fact that her efforts to participate—to get out of the house, to ‘have a life’—are useless.

These public negotiations of identity are marked by a complex tension that pulls them in multiple directions: expectations of social propriety, their children’s desires, and their own preferences. Gumbinner characterizes her compromise with Thalia’s preference for Barney as a result of weakness on her part; Takeda-Morrison’s entries about her daughters’ trip to Disney Land reveals how she and her husband must, in this instance,

sacrifice their own comfort and desires. Dean's attempt to attend a PTA meeting is thwarted by—among other things—her son's desire to run wild during the meeting and his offensive diaper.

Struggles with Body Image and Appearance

Body image and changes to the postpartum body are common topics for these three writers. Dean, Gumbinner, and Takeda-Morrison thread these discussions with self-consciousness and harsh self-judgment, often based on comparisons with other women and/or cultural expectations of the woman's body. Confession and humor emerge as rhetorical methods used to broach the subjects of physical appearance; often both confession and humor are achieved through the use of 'TMI.' TMI is a rhetorical term that means "too much information" which has developed out of online discourse to describe people's use of details that would otherwise be considered too private to share publicly. Often these bloggers share details and observations about their bodies that would not be considered appropriate to share in mixed company. Additionally, they generally concern themselves with the ways in which motherhood has been both the cause of their body changes as well as the reason they are unable to rectify those changes.

Gumbinner finishes the month of January 2006 with an entry that consists solely of three haikus, one of which includes an example that some readers might characterize as too much information. The post, in its entirety, reads:

My boobs are so huge/Like a hot LA porn star/Alas, I'm just fat
So much useless crap/She will never ever need/Damn you,
marketers.

Tell me how on earth/Can I be someone's mom now?/Hell, I did
acid! (Gumbinner “New Mom Haiku”)

The first haiku is entirely devoted to her changed body—those changes that are the result of carrying and birthing a baby. Gumbinner marvels at the increased size of her breasts. She ends the haiku with a lament, however. Unfortunately, her larger breasts are the result of an overall increase in weight, which is another (often temporary) consequence of giving birth.

Gumbinner’s treatment of this topic relies on humor and self-deprecation. The reference to her “boobs” being as big as those of an “LA porn star” contains humor in several ways: first, the reference to her breasts with the more cartoonish, colloquial “boobs” can be construed as lighthearted and flippant; second, the notion of pornography is generally incongruous with motherhood, so the out-of-place nature of the allusion will provide readers with a bit of an unexpected jolt; third, and possibly most hidden, is the juxtaposition of porn with Gumbinner’s *new* motherhood. That is, mothers who have just given birth are generally contraindicated for sex, given that their bodies must recover from labor and delivery. In other words, readers can assume that the last thing Gumbinner’s breasts remind her of is pornography. In addition, Gumbinner’s final line of the haiku provides an anachronistic “Alas!” to playfully represent her regret that it is merely the extra weight she is carrying that has resulted in the larger breasts. However, the playful use of “Alas” creates tension with the more denigrating, serious-sounding self-criticism she ends the haiku with (“I’m just fat”). So while the strict structure of the haiku’s syllabic count requires her to use a one-syllable word for “overweight” or “bigger than I was before I had this baby,” her choice of the more terse word “fat” is meaningful:

to speak of oneself as “fat” might indicate a bit of self-loathing that another, more accurate term, such as “post-partum,” would not.

Izzy Dean tends to write more often about her body and her concerns/perceptions of it than do the other two writers. Dean writes about the changes her body has undergone as a result of motherhood; specifically, she is concerned about the difference in her body hair: she compares her new eyebrow hair to “Abe Freaking Vigoda” and Groucho Marx. According to her physician, these changes are a result of breastfeeding: “I mentioned [the increased body hair] to my doctor who explained to me that when you’re breastfeeding, your estrogen levels remain low and that’s what causes [hair to grow in new places]” (Dean “Giving Birth”). Dean, also relying on TMI for humorous effect, continues the entry by describing darkening hairs on her face, new hair sprouting on her forehead, as well as an increased volume and range of her pubic hair.

Because Dean uses humor to frame her discussion of body hair, she partially veils another more complex claim: her changing body is the result of sacrifice. She quips, “I want to keep nursing but I’m afraid when I’m done I’ll look like Chewbacca” (Dean “Giving Birth”). Dean articulates her belief that, based on what her doctor tells her, nursing her infant is the cause for Dean’s increasingly hirsute body; she articulates that in choosing to feed her baby, she sacrifices her body. Because Dean frames the choice with an exaggeration—she will indeed not grow hair to cover her entire body like the *Star Wars* wookie character—it is uncertain whether her concern is genuine or simply meant to bring levity to the situation.

Dean’s entry titled “Homer-butts and Muffin Tops” also confronts issues of her appearance. In this entry, Dean laments the state of fashionable low-rise jeans and the

ways they are unflattering to women's, especially postpartum mothers', bodies. She advises readers to avoid the phenomena of "Homer-butt" (where the backside appears to be very low and square-shaped) and "muffin top" (where the tight waistline of low-rise jeans causes the stomach to spill-over) that result from such styles (Dean "Homer-butts").

However, a tension emerges between finding styles appropriate to the "mom body" and the urge to appear as though one *does not have* a "mom body." For instance, Dean writes, "low rise jeans are NOT flattering to 99% of the female population. They may save you *from looking like your mother* but you are forced to compromise in other ways" (Dean "Homer-butts," emphasis added). Then, at the end of the entry Dean describes a particular brand/style of jeans that are supposed to be specifically cut for the mother's body: "David Kahn's 'Soccer Mom' jeans ... are supposed to be more mom-bod friendly while still being a hip, low-rise style" (Dean "Homer-butts"). Dean exhibits an inclination to mask her "mom-bod" with the same low-rise style she indicts for being unflattering at the beginning of the entry. The implication is that the "mom body" itself is the most unflattering marker and is to be avoided; indeed, looking like one's own mother is levied as the utmost offense.

Dean writes another similar post in which she complains that the new stretchy styles of jeans are not made for mothers. In this entry, her argument begins with protests about the cut of the skinny jeans; she claims she "looks like a denim drumstick" when she tries them on (Dean "I Bit the Bullet"). However, her ultimate objection is that the elasticity of the new denim allows her jeans to fall down, and that she cannot "properly" pull them up with a "24lb baby on [her] hip" (Dean "I Bit the Bullet"). She writes that the

resulting shape of her body is unflattering: “Ultimately, I have one side up and the other side drooping down. It’s not my best look” (Dean “I Bit the Bullet”).

Takeda-Morrison engages with her mother-image using humor similar to Dean’s self-deprecating approach; additionally, she grapples with the conflict of *being* a mother and *looking like* a mother, which she frames as disagreeable as well. In an entry titled “The Grass is Greener,” Takeda-Morrison takes her daughter to the dentist, where she encounters another mother who has her hair done and is wearing fashionable, well-pressed clothes. She sets up the post with a list of “attempts” she’d made before leaving for the dentist, all of which indicate (humorously) that she doesn’t believe any amount of grooming would actually make a difference. She describes her “morning routine: 1. Start to brush hair and give up after realizing it will take heavy machinery to finish the job. 2. Start to apply makeup and give up after realizing it will take heavy machinery to finish the job” (“The Grass”). The implication is either that she is so hideous, or that it has been so long since she last groomed herself, that any amount of reasonable effort will not make a difference; further, context in the post indicates she blames motherhood that her too-far-gone appearance has reached this state.

Seeing the other woman at the dentist’s office, whom she assumes is a mother as well, Takeda-Morrison is appalled at two things: 1) she is appalled that her own appearance, stained jeans and a rumpled T-shirt, has become unimportant to her, and 2) she is appalled that she is judging herself based on appearance, and that she is doing so by comparing herself to another mother. Takeda-Morrison writes,

The question is, when did I go from being that woman [the other mother in the dentist’s office] to *this* woman? And frankly, was I ever *that* woman? I

honestly feel like the day I popped my first child out nine and half years ago strangely coincided with the day that all personal grooming products mysteriously vanished from my home. And the last time I actually ironed a piece of clothing? Let's just say that it was taffeta and I was getting ready for the Junior Formal. And I guess the bigger question is, *why was I comparing myself to a stranger in a dentist's waiting room?*

Here, Takeda-Morrison addresses what might be considered the larger issue facing women and self-image: the problem of measuring one's own image against another's. Mothers, who are not only "responsible" for their own self-keeping but also for uncooperative, efforts-thwarting children, might in some ways be at a increased disadvantage in such comparisons. That is, circumstance and situation often dictate appearance: how much time, resources, and effort a woman can contribute to grooming can proportionately affect how "groomed" she appears; to compare a woman who has ample time and resources to a woman who does not is an unfair comparison. And clearly, such disproportionate comparisons don't merely exist between women who are mothers and women who aren't; however, because mothers generally have significantly less time to devote to themselves, such comparisons have the potential to be compounded.

Judging Motherhood; Being Judged as Mothers

Comparison and judgment emerge as larger motifs in these women's writings—they are not limited to judging bodies. These writers struggle with the judgments that other mothers and society lay upon them; however, often they write about their own judgments of other mothers as well. This creates an interesting phenomenon that might be

akin to hypocrisy; though careful consideration may reveal that such seeming hypocrisy is the result of the complexities that result when real mothers attempt to be “ideal” mothers.

This complexity is most directly addressed in a post titled “The SanctiMommy,” where Gumbinner writes about seeing another mother and her three boys in a gift shop. The boys beg and whine to their mother about getting candy bars before breakfast, and the mother complies with their pleading. Gumbinner immediately judges the mother:

And I couldn't help myself. I rolled my eyes big--really big--with the hopes that anyone looking in my direction at that moment could see just how awesome I am.

Oh my God - I acted like a Sanctimommy. (“The SanctiMommy”)

Gumbinner describes a “Sanctimommy” as the mother who judges other mothers based on a list of visible markers that would indicate they are lazy, unable to care for her children properly, or otherwise make bad decisions about the rearing of their children. Gumbinner gives examples of such visible markers: feeding children junk food, allowing children to use pacifiers after a certain age (or choosing to let children use pacifiers at all), failing to dress children with proper cold-weather attire, choosing (or not) to circumcise, failing to breastfeed, failing to use organic produce to make homemade baby food, etc. Gumbinner explains that the Sanctimommy does not have a “party line” opinion on such visible markers; however, the Sanctimommy feels as though her opinion on such matters, whatever her opinion is, is “right.” Gumbinner writes, “[The Sanctimommy] has read every baby book, and has decided that *her* expert of choice is *the*

expert and that heeding any other parenting theories is akin to worshipping false idols” (“The SanctiMommy”).

The larger argument of Gumbinner’s entry is that she is ashamed of feeling judgmental toward the mom in the gift shop, though she also uses the entry to examine her shame. She attempts to rationalize her inclination to judge others, claiming that such an inclination serves to make her feel as though she is doing a good job of mothering her own child. She reasons that her judgment of other mothers isn’t really about *them*, it’s about *her* creating a world in which she can feel good about herself:

I’m sure some degree of judgmentalism is natural; an easy way to level our own insecurities about the choices we make as parents. *Well I can't be all that bad--my daughter might not own a winter jacket yet, but at least I don't let her go to the playground with snot running down her face like SOME people.* (“The SanctiMommy”)

Her characterization of such judgments as “natural” is an attempt to diminish the competition or hostility that finding fault with others can bring to bear. However, according to Gumbinner, her own rationalization is not sufficient in this particular situation with the mother and boys in the gift shop. She writes, “when [judgment] is taken to the level that I took it to yesterday--a big dramatic eye roll for the benefit of bystanders over a candy bar--well that's just wrong. It's not who I want to be” (“The SanctiMommy”). It appears that the distinction, though Gumbinner is not explicit about this, is in the audience for the performance of the judgment. If the audience for a performance of a judgment is one’s self, and the purpose of the judgment is to make oneself feel as though her parenting skills are satisfactory in comparison with another’s,

the judgment is not hostile. However, Gumbinner remarks that her eye roll was intended to *show others* that she was a better mother—she wanted others to recognize that she knew better than to give children candy bars before breakfast—distinguishes another audience for her judgment. The eye roll was intended to *perform the judgment for someone other than herself*, and because the judgment is a performance and not simply an internal mechanism for self-measure, Gumbinner feels as though she has crossed a line. She draws exactly where that line is later in the post, describing the true problem with mothers who judge other mothers. They are unable to see themselves critically: “the Sanctimommy is quick to deem others unfit mothers based on (really, in the end) superficial decisions like the cleanliness of a child's nose or the YoBaby [an organic yogurt for babies] in the grocery cart, she's reluctant to look as closely at herself” (“The SanctiMommy”). By allowing her judgment to serve as a performance for others, Gumbinner’s judgment lacks reflection and self-awareness. It might be argued that to *internally* compare one’s self to others has the same dangers—that such comparison and judgment, even though not a public performance, can be unreflective and uncritical. However, this is the distinction Gumbinner makes, and her use of her blog entry to be explicitly self-aware and critical of her own actions serves to illustrate how she herself is making this distinction of good and bad use of judgment. Gumbinner ends her entry with a vow:

I'm going to try and do better. When I find my eyebrows suddenly raised an inch above their normal resting position upon seeing a five year-old with a pacifier, or a toddler taking a sip of her parents' Coke, or a little boy sporting a mullet (oh God, this one is going to be the hardest) I'm going to

remember my mother's other great advice: *Will this matter in a year? In ten years?*

In a way, Gumbinner's public *confession* of her transgressions serves to absolve her the perceived offense. Additionally, she includes humor throughout the piece—her reference to the mullet as the most difficult (though in reality probably the least harmful) mothering choice to abstain from judging—which creates allows her to keep the post from becoming too didactic or over-critical (of herself, or of others).

However, Gumbinner has at least one other 2006 post in which she makes judgments of parents based on details she gleans from their children. And while she manages in this post (titled “Earlybird Special, Here I Come!”) to mock herself for such judgments, she is less critical and self-aware than her post above would perhaps indicate she'd like herself to be. In this post, she describes seeing a young boy (she estimates he is 9) eating with his parents and wearing an Eminem T-shirt. She writes, “Now I like Eminem. I appreciate the irony, this character he's created, the wit and rhythm of his rhyming schemes. But he does sing lyrics like *I'll slit your motherfuckin throat worse than Ron Goldman*” (“Earlybird Special”). Gumbinner infers that since the boy is wearing the T-shirt, the parents also allow the boy to listen to Eminem's music, which is probably a fair assumption. However, she also assumes that because Eminem's lyrics are violent and filled with profanity, there are no conditions under which it would be suitable for a 9-year-old boy to be exposed to them, or if there were, she does not she allow for such conditions to exist for this particular family. She simply judges the parents as negligent or, possibly worse, ignorant.

The second judgment she makes is of parents of a young girl, whom she estimates to be 15. Gumbinner sees the girl walking through a hotel lobby with her father:

She was adorable, clean-cut with pink capris grazing her narrow calves and her long straight hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was holding her dad's hand, but you could sense just a hint of that brazen teenage rebellion brewing up in her. And then I noticed the tattoo around her ankle. A chain of green-black stars with the clean lines of new needlework. My first thought was: How old is that girl? My second thought was: What the hell is that father thinking? (“Earlybird Special”)

Here, Gumbinner assumes that it is negligent and irresponsible for a parent to allow his teenage daughter to get a tattoo, even though there are only slim chances of such a choice creating real harm or danger for the child. It seems Gumbinner works especially hard to frame the daughter as young and vulnerable; Gumbinner chooses to present particular details about the girl, such as her ponytail and her holding her father’s hand, to portray her as childlike and innocent. In so doing, Gumbinner may appear more justified in her judgment of the parents’ neglect and reckless parenting choices.

Gumbinner ends the entry by mocking herself for such judgments: “Oh my God. I’m going to start collecting Hummels and saying ‘cockadoodie’ any moment now, aren’t I” (“Earlybird Special”). Her allusion to stereotypical mannerisms of older women allows her to blame these judgments on a kind of generational divide—in other words, she imagines that her judgments stem from her own values that do not match those of younger parents. The irony of this entry though—and an irony Gumbinner may not have

intended—is that she simultaneously betrays herself as otherwise quite “hip,” especially in her ability to quote lyrics from an Eminem song.

The analysis of these mom blogs shows that several patterns emerge in the content: they blog about their perceived inability to properly mother, about making compromises, about struggling with body images, and about judging (and being judged by) other mothers. The content of their entries alone indicates that these mothers feel tension regarding the expectations of normative motherhood—they are judging themselves against an ideal which they cannot attain. While none of the entries makes direct arguments against those unattainable expectations, these writers’ public presentation of their perceived failures, of compromises in values, and of their self-consciousness concerning their bodies indicates that they do *not* accept those expectations at face value. In the following chapter, I will examine the comments on these blogs to determine if there are patterns in the readers’ rhetoric with regard to the topics the bloggers address.

Chapter 5

Analysis of Mom Blog Comments: How do readers respond?

In "Rhetorical Community: The Cultural Basis of Genre," Carolyn Miller presented the notion of a rhetorical community as a space in which participants create or acknowledge connections among themselves via shared values. However in "Rhetoric, Community, and Cyberspace," Zappen and his co-authors argued that in the space of online environments, a rhetorical community does not necessarily involve shared values. Instead, they argued that in online spaces, rhetorical community involves multiple perspectives: the online rhetorical community serves as a "public space or forum within which diverse and sometimes conflicting beliefs and values can be articulated and negotiated" (Zappen et al). Based on their study, an online rhetorical community is based on participants' public negotiation of the self as it intersects with others' self-negotiations within the context of larger cultural values, both shared and unshared. Therefore, they assert that online rhetorical community is not only based on the expression of similarities or shared affinities, but on the inhabiting of a shared online space where the inhabitants explore and negotiate their own and others' values. In light of these two differing presentations of the characteristics of a rhetorical community, I conduct close examination of the comments that readers leave on these mom blogs. Such an examination can reveal whether these blogs primarily exhibit Miller's view or the view of Zappen et al. The comments can show whether the bloggers and their

readers share values, or whether they negotiate conflicting beliefs in this online space.

Examining the comments that readers leave on these mom blogs—their number, frequency, and rhetoric—will determine whether the bloggers and their readers primarily share values or negotiate differences as well as the degree and nature of any consent or dissent. Readers' comments reveal how they react and respond to the bloggers' presentations of motherhood, and how readers relate to conventional images of motherhood. This chapter will provide insight into whether any rhetorical practices and norms appear to be established, and if so, it will characterize those practices and norms.

I used two approaches in gathering data on these comments. In one approach, I identified the entries that earned the most comments and then analyzed those comments with relation to the initial entry to understand how readers responded. The entries that have the most comments compelled readers to respond, more so than entries that elicited fewer comments. The topics of these high-comment entries, their rhetoric, and the nature of readers' responses on such entries can help identify any commonalities in readers' and bloggers' values and concerns. In other words, identifying which topics and/or delivery styles are most compelling, as well as the ways readers respond to those entries, can reveal what is most important to the readers, their positions and opinions concerning topics related to motherhood, and potentially the cultural work achieved by blogging (both the writing of and responding to blogs) about motherhood.

In order to identify the entries with the most comments, I used a spreadsheet program (Microsoft Excel) to track the number of comments on the three bloggers' 2006 entries. The spreadsheet program allowed me to sort the entries to note those entries with

the highest number of comments. Then I noted the topics of those entries as well as whether there were any noticeable rhetorical approaches in the presentation of those topics (such as humor, irony, hyperbole, etc.). For some of the entries' comments, I was able to use word frequency to measure or characterize the nature of the readers' responses. I imported the comments from each entry and generated a visual representation of the comments using Wordle, an online program. The more times a word appears in the text, the larger it appears in the visual representation. For the entries' comments that could be easily characterized by word frequency, I used this method to show, broad-stroke style, how readers responded. For other entries, however, the use of word frequency did not provide meaningful insight on how readers responded; on those entries, I read through the comments and noted any patterns in content and rhetoric.

The second method I used for gathering data to characterize reader comments was to examine recurring rhetorical patterns in the first four months of comments on each blog. These entries often have fewer comments than those in late 2006, as these three writers' blogs were fairly new in early 2006. By limiting my analysis to the early 2006 entries, I kept the number of comments I had to analyze manageable, yet I still had a defined set of entries and comments that contained a range of topics and rhetoric. In my analysis of the January-April comments I describe distinctive rhetorical details and patterns that readers rely on in composing their responses to the bloggers. At the end of the analysis, I'm able to analyze the results of each of these approaches (examining comments on popular entries and examining comments on a range of entries with an average number of comments) to note whether there are any overlapping patterns or

remarkable differences. I use these two approaches so that I can thoroughly describe the discourse without having to analyze over 11,000 individual comments.

High-Comment Entries

To identify those entries with the most comments, I recorded the number of comments on each of the bloggers' entries along with a short description of the entry. Then I took note of those entries whose number of comments was remarkably higher or lower than the average. To get a broad impression of what readers were saying in the comments on these high-traffic entries, I used a combination of methods. The word cloud generator, Wordle, revealed the highest frequency words in these comments; these, considered within the context, often reveal the most recurring message from the readers' comments on a particular entry. However, for some entries, word-frequency did not reveal meaningful themes in readers' responses. So for those entries, I read each comment to note which rhetorical approaches and/or ideas emerged as patterns.

High-Comment Entries for Liz Gumbinner's Mom-101

A line graph (see fig. 1) illustrates the relationship between the number of comments and the date of the entries in 2006 for Liz Gumbinner's blog, *Mom-101*. There is a clear increase in comments during the first three months, which is likely a result of the blog being new and relatively unknown in January and February. (The average number of comments per blog entry for January and February alone is about 8.) The spike in number of comments on the entry for January 29 (25 comments) results from Gumbinner's use of that entry as her "about me" page, where she directs readers from the

main page to learn more about her and her blog. Therefore, comments on that entry continue to accrue as new readers link to that entry from the main or front page. Aside from the January 29 entry, most early entries have few comments, relatively speaking. However in May and June, the average number of comments for that year begins to even out, hovering around the 40 mark. In the line graph in Figure 1, the spikes and drops in comment numbers are visible.

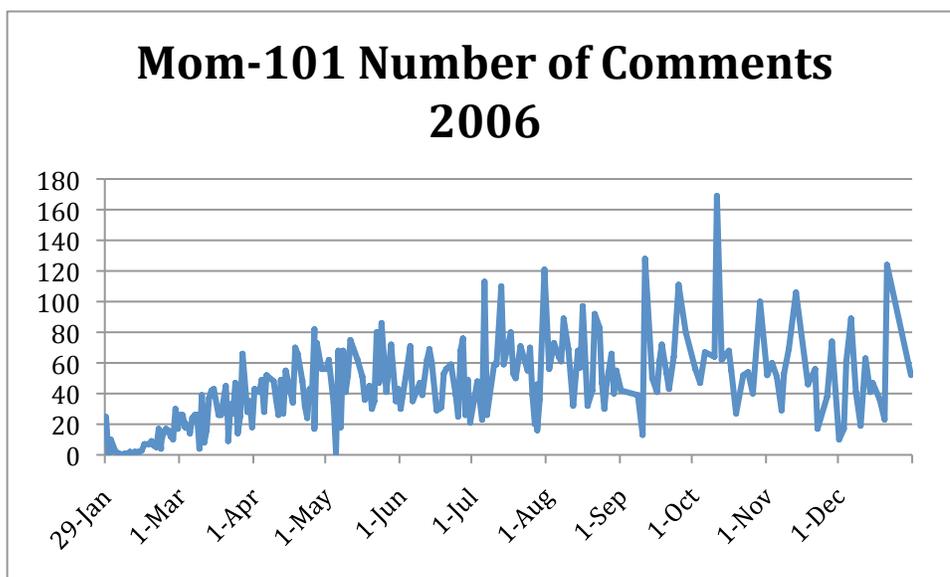


Fig. 4. The trajectory of comment numbers for the year 2006 from Liz Gumbinner's blog, *Mom-101*.

The first pattern I identified in the entries with high comment numbers involves confession. When Gumbinner confesses what she perceives to be “bad” mothering, readers respond in large numbers. Gumbinner's entries on being a work-out-of-the-home-mom (WOHM) often have more comments in which readers either reassure Gumbinner that she is not a neglectful mother or commiserate with her. The first small jump in

comments occurs in March when Gumbinner begins a series of posts about leaving her then-infant daughter, Thalia, in order to travel for work. On March 15 in an entry titled “City of Angels and High Colonics,” Gumbinner lists the advantages of traveling to Los Angeles for work and ends the entry with one disadvantage: “Feeling guilty for those thirty seconds when I get so caught up in life/work/Coppola Chardonnay that I forget I have a baby” (Gumbinner “City of Angels”). The readers who comment on this entry largely encourage Gumbinner to **enjoy**²⁷ herself—in essence, many comments reassure Gumbinner she should not feel guilty about traveling for her job. The readers repeatedly comfort Gumbinner.

Gumbinner posts a similar entry in April, describing how another business trip has her traveling, and this time her daughter, Thalia, gets sick while she is away. She and Thalia’s dad argue over the phone about the best treatment for Thalia’s fever, and Gumbinner is left feeling ineffective and impotent as a mother (Gumbinner “Epiphanies”). Readers leave a total of 82 comments, most of which express regret and commiseration (“hard” [i.e. difficult] and “sorry” emerge as high-frequency words). Again, readers use the comments to reassure Gumbinner that they *sympathize* with her mothering travails.

Comment numbers also jump when Gumbinner posts an entry that earns simple congratulations or compliments. For instance, on March 27 Gumbinner (after much waffling) decides to post a photograph of herself and her daughter. This entry, titled “Mom-101, International Woman of Mystery (Or maybe she just has a really big hairy mole),” has 66 comments. According to word frequency in the comments, readers

²⁷ See Appendix A for the world clouds generated from the comments of these entries.

overwhelmingly responded affirmatively; the most frequent word used in those comments is “beautiful,” and words like “pretty,” “adorable,” and “cute” emerge as well. Here, readers’ comments illustrate their *approval* of her and her daughter; this approval manifests as basic flattery of the images that Gumbinner posts.

Other examples of entries with an exceptional number of comments are “Born Smiling” (7/6/06), an entry dedicated to Thalia’s first birthday; “She Spawns Again - God Help Us All” (10/11/06), an entry announcing her second pregnancy; and “D.O.B 9/11” (9/11/06), an entry describing the tension of having a September 11th birthday in New York City. These entries discuss celebration, and the readers respond enthusiastically with affirmations. For the birthday posts, the words “happy” and “birthday” emerge as the most frequent; the comments on the entry marking Thalia’s birthday, which contains several photographs from Thalia’s first year, also repeat the words “beautiful,” “sweet,” “lovely,” and “gorgeous.” Comments on the entry about Gumbinner’s 9/11 birthday contain words like “hope” and “celebrate.” High-frequency words from the entry announcing her second pregnancy include “congratulations” (several iterations, including different spellings and truncations, i.e., “congrats”), “wow,” “excited,” and “happy.” Again, these examples from comments on popular entries show that readers extend flattery, overt approval, and support.

Another kind of entry that readers tend to comment most on are those for which Gumbinner constructs a joke or word game that readers are able to extend or reproduce mimetically. While the word frequency doesn’t help to illustrate the nature of these comments, I note that the purpose of these comments appears to be participation with Gumbinner (and her other readers) in the joke or game. Two examples of this kind of

high-comment entry are “Jesus is da Bomb Pop” (5/30/06) and “Too Young For Chutes and Ladders, Too Old To Just Sit There While You Drink” (7/13/06). In the first entry, which has 72 comments, Gumbinner describes seeing a large sticker on the ice cream man’s truck about Jesus: it reads, “Jesus: My Lord and My God.” The sticker, placed among the pictures and advertisements for various ice cream treats, struck Gumbinner as incongruous and inappropriately proselytizing. She then jokes that she can pen better, more “appropriate” stickers for the ice cream man’s truck:

Love thy neighbor - buy him a Chipwich

Jesus is King Kone

*Covet not thy neighbor's Choco Taco. Get your own, \$1.35. (Gumbinner
“Jesus is da Bomb Pop)*

Commenters offered other potential sticker slogans, such as “And as a sign of peace, Noah sent forth a DOVE BAR, ” “The meek shall inherit the remaining Chocolate Eclairs,” “Pope-sicle. Redemption on a stick,” and “Honor thy Dreamsicle & Bullet Pop.” Readers’ contributions to Gumbinner’s joke indicate they wish to *participate* with Gumbinner in making the joke; their contributions use Gumbinner’s original joke content and structure, which also indicates that readers find the original joke to be humorous and worthy of expansion. Their replication of her original joke serves as an approval or affirmation of Gumbinner’s humor as well, in the sense that imitation is often characterized as a form of flattery.

The entry “Too Young For Chutes and Ladders, Too Old To Just Sit There While You Drink” is motivated by the emails that Gumbinner receives from Babycenter, “a pregnancy, baby, toddler, kids” site; this entry garners 110 comments. The emails, which

she receives automatically, apparently deal with milestones and offer advice for Gumbinner based on the age of her daughter, who is about a year old. Gumbinner complains about the emails that are meant to give her “game ideas” for playing with Thalia, ideas that include playing peekaboo. To make light of the notion of naming games that a one-year-old would enjoy, Gumbinner creates a humorous list of games that Thalia would probably play. This list includes “Put Things in your Mouth You Can Choke On,” “Poke the Dog,” and “I Like to Put My Fingers in My Poo.” Readers respond by offering other ideas for “games” that their children enjoy playing—games that would never be officially recognized as such: “the tub game of filling the bucket full of water and dumping it outside the tub,” “Pull all the toilet paper off the roll,” “water spitting,” “Smother Your Sister,” “roll over and crawl away with poop on my butt,” “Get Naked!” and “Throw the plate of food.” The comments on this entry serve the same purpose as the previous example about the ice cream truck; readers imitate and extend Gumbinner’s original joke. In this case, however, the ruse of describing the difficult antics of toddlers as “games” they play includes another dimension, one in which readers are able to contribute their own experiences of raising toddlers, using the joke model to admit that their children behave questionably and make life difficult in general. Therefore, this example shows how readers value Gumbinner’s joke-making enough to participate and extend her original joke, as well as use the joke to provide commentary about their own travails, which are similar to those that Gumbinner uses in her original entry. Their shared experiences serve to unite them.

Another kind of entry that carries a higher-than-average comment count involves those in which Gumbinner voices outright uncertainty and/or asks her readers directly for

advice. Two examples of this sort of comment increase occur in July and August, when Gumbinner begins to consider the option of having a second child. In the first example, titled “When My AARP Membership Kicks In, I’ll Totally Sneak You Guys Into the Theater With Me” (7/17/06), Gumbinner shares with her readers that she feels unsure of herself as an “older” mother (she was 37 when she had Thalia, her first child) and how her age is an important factor in their decision whether or not to have another child. This entry receives 80 comments, yet the word frequency method for characterizing this set of responses is not useful—the most common words used are “just,” “right,” and “time,” which are not meaningful outside their context. However, examining the comments individually shows that readers respond overwhelmingly with their own insight concerning the choice to have more than one child and the issue of maternal age. Readers write, “I remember that dilemma...we just decided to go for it,” “two [children are] sometimes easier than one...[but] you’ll end up with whatever’s best for you guys,” and “I’ll be 51 when Hailey gets out of High School. I want a second one too and have the same concerns.” Readers also give advice: “How about just leaving it to chance for a year and if nothing happens then get serious about it (if you still want a second)” and “go for 2!!!!” That readers are forthcoming with their own experiences concerning the choice to have a second child—a decidedly personal choice— illustrates that there is a certain amount of trust that exists among readers and between the readers and Gumbinner. Additionally, because readers take risks in presenting their own personal experiences publicly on Gumbinner’s blog, they imply that she is important to them. If readers did not care about Gumbinner’s struggle to choose whether or not to have a second child, they would not contribute their opinions and their own stories.

Comments on the entry titled “#2” (Gumbinner 8/21/06) have a similar effect to those in the previous example. This is an entry that also deals with the question of whether to have a second child; however, instead of focusing on her age, Gumbinner worries about the changes her body undergoes with pregnancy. She admits she that has just returned to her pre-pregnancy weight after having Thalia (who is about a year old at this point), and she describes unpleasant experiences from her first pregnancy: bed rest, back pain, hair loss, and depression. She expresses reluctance to gain weight and to endure a similarly unpleasant nine months, though she also acknowledges that many women would be thankful to bear children as easily as she and that the reasons for her indecision may seem petty to some.

The broad nature of the 92 comments on this entry cannot be characterized using the word frequency method. However, examining the comments shows that the readers have a range of advice and personal stories to offer. Many readers comment that Gumbinner should not feel guilty for her mixed emotions: “I don't think that any one can blame you for feeling nervous about thinking about #2 especially after being on bed rest so long,” “you're not an insensitive jerk. You're honest. And, of course, when it comes to this topic, there are about 47 kabillion completely valid perspectives,” and “I don't blame you the slightest.” Other readers offer their own perspectives on pregnancy: “I hated being pregnant and I wasn't even on bed rest. I don't think [your concern that pregnancy is uncomfortable is] despicable at all, I think there are a lot of women who don't enjoy it, even when they love the holy living hell out of their babies,” “Part of me would love a 3rd child, but all the other parts of me would protest STRONGLY. Pregnancy sucked,” and “I had much the same experience... No exercise, no sex, no long walks...[I was] like

a big fat incubator.” As with the example concerning her advanced age and the choice to have a second child, the discussion surrounding the effects that pregnancy and childbirth have on a woman’s body—trivial or superficial as they might seem to some—is highly personal and involves issues that are generally not considered public topics: weight gain, sex, depression, etc. However, readers openly share their own body and pregnancy experiences to show Gumbinner that her own discomfort and displeasure with pregnancy is not abnormal. Therefore, Gumbinner’s readers not only offer up their own quite personal experiences to show Gumbinner that she is not alone in her experience of pregnancy, but readers also use confessional rhetoric, as Gumbinner does, to show implicitly that pregnancy is, for some women, difficult: pregnancy can be uncomfortable, create significant undesirable changes in the mother’s body, and can at times be dangerous to the mother’s health. Such confessions are clearly outside the standard narrative of motherhood, and the fact that readers offer them in the comments on Gumbinner’s blog shows that readers trust Gumbinner and the other readers and feel safe against judgment.

The final kind of entry that garners many comments for Gumbinner is the entry in which she complains about other moms. Two examples from Figure 1 above, August 23 (83 comments) and November 13 (106 comments), show that readers respond in large numbers when Gumbinner asserts her opinion about other mothers’ practices. The first example, from August 23 titled “Today, Yesterday,” narrates an event in which Gumbinner takes her toddler daughter to watch a children’s act on NBC’s *Today* show plaza. After she, her husband, and her daughter were comfortably seated in the audience (picnic-style on the ground), two other women came over with several children and

rudely pushed their way onto the blanket, practically sitting on top of Gumbinner and her family. Readers respond by commenting that one of the rude women (who is pictured in one of the photos Gumbinner posts) looks overweight (“[She] could eclipse the sun,”), that she “[has] her ass hanging out on TV,” and that she “[has] an ugly back.”

Additionally, many readers comment on how beautiful/adorable Thalia is in the photograph that Gumbinner includes of Thalia in the camera monitor. Readers pick up on Gumbinner’s disgust for the other women and work to affirm Gumbinner’s opinion by finding other complaints about them. These kinds of comments create a “circling the wagons” effect, where readers establish alliances with Gumbinner and one another by making negative remarks about the rude women. In disparaging the women who offended Gumbinner, Gumbinner’s readers are proactively aligning themselves with Gumbinner’s complaint. Such comments demonstrate a *coalition of support* for Gumbinner.

A second example of an entry where Gumbinner levies a complaint against another moms is titled “The SanctiMommy” (11/13/06). This entry begins with Gumbinner describing her own judgment of another mother, who allows her sons to eat candy bars in the morning before breakfast. She witnesses the interchange between the boys and their mother in a store, where the boys beg their mother to purchase the candy and the mother relents. Gumbinner then spends the balance of the entry both berating herself for judging other mothers in this way (she is enacting the Sanctimommy role when she judges the other mother harshly for her parenting choices) and berating women who make hasty judgments about *other* mothers.

The 106 comments on “The SanctiMommy” are too varied for a word count to assist in determining how readers broadly respond. However, many readers admit to

serving their children “unacceptable” breakfasts (Diet Coke, Kraft singles, Marshmallow ghosts, doughnuts and chocolate milk) and write that they make what would otherwise be considered “bad” parenting choices. Other readers admit to being SanctiMommies for particular parenting choices; that is, they list pet peeves that they cannot help but judge harshly: kids with messy hair, spanking, moms who don’t breastfeed. Comments on this entry show the conflicted identity that motherhood creates for women. The discussion of varied mothering choices often is fraught in that an individual mother understands her own situation as unique and not accurately judged by others, yet she still feels guilty based on the judgment of others. Additionally, the same mother who endures the unfair judgment of others will often also judge other mothers for their choices. However, aside from the fraught nature of judging, the comments on “The SanctiMommy” further illustrate how readers use their chances to respond for offering support, sharing their own personal narratives, and confessing their own transgressions—all serving to demonstrate solidarity with the blogger.

High-Comment Entries from Marsha Takeda-Morrison’s sweatpantsmom

Just as Gumbinner’s blog comments are “slow” during the early months of 2006 and then grow steadily beginning in the late spring, Takeda-Morrison’s *sweatpantsmom* follows a similar growth pattern (see fig. 2). Her average number of comments per blog entry for 2006 also hovers around 40 once the numbers level off; however, in the late summer her entries and comments decrease significantly during a trip to Japan when she posts less frequently.

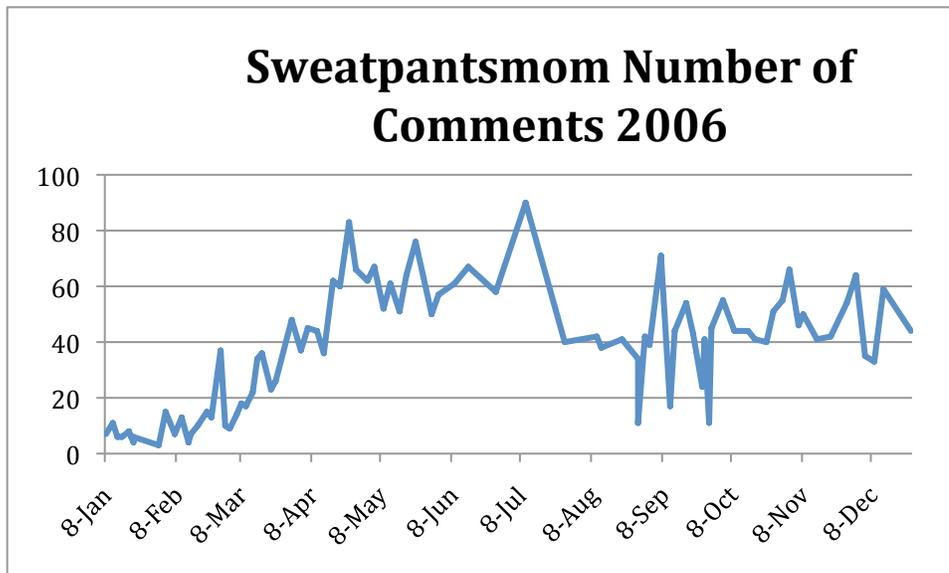


Fig. 5. The trajectory of comment numbers for the year 2006 from Marsha Takeda-Morrison's blog, *sweatpantsmom*.

Spikes in Takeda-Morrison's comment numbers appear to be less severe than Gumbinner's; additionally, Takeda-Morrison doesn't have any entries whose comment numbers exceed 100. There are, however, similarities between Gumbinner and Takeda-Morrison's entries that gather the most reader response.

For instance, in three of Takeda-Morrison's entries that earn the most comments, Takeda-Morrison describes a complaint about or judgment of another mother. On February 27, 2006, Takeda-Morrison recounts an exchange she had with a mother from the children's elementary school. This other mother was joking about a conversation she'd had with her older daughter, who was confused about the difference between the words *Asian* and *Caucasian*. The mother tells Takeda-Morrison that she defined Asians as having "dark skin and slanted eyes," which distinguished them from Caucasians. Takeda-Morrison, who is Japanese-American, finds this other mother's characterization

of Asians to be offensive; further, she finds it even more troubling that parents are still teaching their children to stereotype ethnicities in this way (Takeda-Morrison “Contrary to Popular Belief”).

In the 37 comments on this entry, readers respond with either a story that illustrates their own experiences with racism or some sort of indignant “what on earth was she thinking?” comment to show they agree with Takeda-Morrison’s reaction to this mother’s insensitivity. Some readers call the other mother an “idiot” and “ignorant.” Other readers talk about their own ethnicities and describe encounters with people who have been insensitive. This particular popular entry has comments that affirm Takeda-Morrison’s indignation; such affirmation creates a sense of both approval and support. Additionally, these comments, where readers disparage the other mother, create a similar effect that emerged from Gumbinner’s post about the women who invaded her space during the *Today* show event. That is, Takeda-Morrison’s readers defend her by critiquing the other mother, in effect demonstrating their allegiance with Takeda-Morrison.

Another example of an entry whose topic concerns Takeda-Morrison’s judgment of another mother is titled “It’s Time to Rumble!” and is represented by the spike in comments in late April (see fig. 2). In this entry, Takeda-Morrison describes an encounter with another mother, this time in the supermarket. Takeda-Morrison writes, “It seems this mom was busy, busy with her part-time job and vigorous workout schedule. You see, she works out *three hours a day, every day*, and parenting her child was getting in the way of her quest for killer abs and a taut ass” (“It’s Time”). During this encounter at the supermarket, however, the other mother says to Takeda-Morrison: “Hello! *You’ve gained*

some weight!” (“It’s Time”). Takeda-Morrison suggests this mother is selfish, irresponsible, and rude.

In the 83 comments on this entry, respond in similar fashion to those comments described in the previous example; namely, they indict the other mother and affirm or agree with Takeda-Morrison. Much of the indictment/affirmation appears in the form of the “comeback,” where readers offer Takeda-Morrison a snappy retort to the woman’s comment about her alleged weight gain: “I see you’re still ugly,” “I can lose weight but you’re stuck with that face forever,” and “bite me, skank whore.” Again, as readers leave comments meant to be offensive to the other mother, they demonstrate their own support for and alliance with Takeda-Morrison.

A final example of an entry in which Takeda-Morrison presents the judgment of another mother appears on November 2, 2006. This entry, titled “Somebody Tell Me I’m Doing the Right Thing,” describes Takeda-Morrison’s experience with the same mother’s daughter, who spends time at her house for Halloween that year. Takeda-Morrison observes that the woman’s daughter, M., acts strangely around food, and Takeda-Morrison muses that the girl’s mother probably doesn’t allow her to eat normally. She also describes the woman’s rude pick-up and drop-off practices: she sends her daughter to the door to tell Takeda-Morrison to come out to the car and then does not come to the door to help her daughter gather her things or to properly say “thank you.” Takeda-Morrison ends the entry with the plea she uses for the title: “Somebody tell me I’m doing the right thing”; that is, Takeda-Morrison implores her readers to affirm that despite her better judgment of this other mother—from whom she would like to disengage

completely—her positive involvement with the daughter is productive and worth her sacrifice.

Readers' comments on this entry (63) tend to either simply affirm Takeda-Morrison's decision to embrace the daughter even though the mother is unpleasant, or to affirm her decision by recounting a similar experience with neighborhood children whose parents are absent or negligent. Readers show simple affirmation in comments like, "I think you are wonderful for feeding...er-accepting this little girl in your home," and "You are absolutely doing the right thing." Readers also show more detailed affirmation by explaining that they have had similar experiences, either as a parent or as a child. One reader explains that she understands Takeda-Morrison's position as a parent: "We have a kid living in our building that has a very weird mother and consequently he has NO social skills. ... But for some reason my son likes him and maybe that kid will actually learn something new by playing with my son." Another reader provides perspective from the child's point of view: "When I was a kid ... my house was a MESS. Not a physical mess, but a mess in every other sense of the word. My Dad was on drugs, blah. blah. blah. And there was a family that took me in..." These entries, in which Takeda-Morrison provides a complaint about another mother, tend to get more comments than her other entries, and her readers tend to respond in ways that affirm Takeda-Morrison's opinion or actions. In this case, because many comments draw on personal experiences in constructing comments, a level of trust must exist for readers. Readers feel safe in discussing their own childhood and their own experiences with difficult 'other' parents; or, they may feel that Takeda-Morrison's dilemma is worthy enough for them to take a risk and leave a comment that reveals their own vulnerabilities. Either way, readers trust Takeda-

Morrison (and her other readers) enough to open themselves up in order to sympathize with and comfort Takeda-Morrison.

Other entries that earn many comments are those in which Takeda-Morrison posts confessions of her transgressions as a mother. These posts, which she calls “MomSecrets,” are generally short and include a postcard-style visual and caption. Two of these entries, both from the month of May, humorously describe small parenting “mistakes” that she has made. One MomSecret entry, titled “Next Up: Stealing Shopping Carts from Homeless People,” earns 67 comments. In this entry, Takeda-Morrison confesses to taking money from her daughter’s piggy bank to purchase an expensive coffee drink. Readers respond by offering similar confessions of their own; for instance, one reader writes, “I told my daughter it was raining 2 days ago because I didn't feel like going outside. The sun was shining!” Another reader confesses, “I can completely relate since I took [money] from the birthday envelope for a Diet Dr. Pepper!” Similarly, the MomSecret entry titled “Lying, Deceit and Self-Absorption—Some Moms Can Do It All!” reveals that Takeda-Morrison forgot to leave money from the tooth fairy, and then she lied to her daughter to explain the tooth fairy’s failure to exchange the tooth for money. Readers joke that Takeda-Morrison is “going to hell,” but they also offer their own stories of having forgotten tooth-fairy duty. One reader confesses, “Yep been there done that twice!” Another writes, “Do you know how many times I have forgotten that damn tooth fairy?!” The confessional nature of Takeda-Morrison’s entries appears to prompt readers to share their own confessions. In so doing, readers again demonstrate their trust in the other participants of the conversation as well as place value in Takeda-Morrison’s discussion of what is for her an effect of mothering: the struggle to remember

the small—and in this case seemingly insignificant—details of raising children among the large number of responsibilities and tasks that must be attended to.

Another kind of entry that sparks discussion with Takeda-Morrison's readers presents polarizing parenting discussions. The entry for which Takeda-Morrison gains the most comments in 2006 discusses her decision to limit the number of planned, organized activities that her daughters participate in during the summer. This entry, titled "The Girls of the Summer" (7/10/06), describes two camps of parents: those who plan their children's entire summer with camps and classes, and those (The Slackers, with whom she identifies) who forget to plan anything and then let their kids watch television and play in the backyard all summer. This entry begins with a photo of her daughters, and many readers simply comment on how beautiful the girls are. But many readers also weigh in with their own opinions of how unhealthy it is for children to be constantly occupied with structured activities. Some readers side explicitly with Takeda-Morrison, insulting parents who send their children away for the summer: "Camps are for wimpy parents who can't stand to be with their children for three whole months." Another reader claims the term slacker for herself as well: "I'm on Team Slacker." Another reader admits to structuring some, but not all, of her daughter's time: "We're half-n-half around here. Girlie is attending a day camp at the zoo for a few weeks this summer so that I can write and the rest of the time, she's practicing for the Spongebob Quote-Off with your daughters." This same reader insists later in her comment, however, that she is a "slacker at heart," which suggests she might want to be seen as taking Takeda-Morrison's side even if it appears she isn't. What's interesting concerning the polemical nature of Takeda-Morrison's entry, though, is that while some readers might gently disagree (for

instance, the reader who admits her daughter will spend some time at a camp during the summer), there is a distinct lack of overt disagreement. One reader admits to being “in the minority,” saying, “I actually do plan camp, because I know if I don't I will have to BE camp.” However this reader doesn't take offense to the other readers who comment that “It's called summer break for a reason,” meaning that parents should allow kids a break over the summer from overly structured time. Another reader creates a third category: “The ones who spend countless hours scouring for activities and then curse every time I have to drag my ass out of bed to get them to the activities.” So while this reader admits to structuring her children's summer break, which is the kind of mother Takeda-Morrison rails against, this reader finds a way to make fun of herself for it: by showing how making plans for her kids then becomes a burden for her when it comes time to taxi them around town. Remarkable is the way this reader offers up a disagreement, but then also willingly reveals the weakness in her own position. By admitting her own logical weakness, the reader seems agreeable to Takeda-Morrison's opinion. In the comments on this polemic entry, readers show agreement when Takeda-Morrison provides her opinion; or, if their own experience is different from Takeda-Morrison's, readers mitigate their difference so as to still demonstrate approval or affirmation of Takeda-Morrison's opinion.

Another example of a polarizing entry that sparks discussion for Takeda-Morrison's readers is titled “Don't Worry—After a Few Drinks I'll Come Down Off My Soap Box” (9/18/06). This entry presents Takeda-Morrison's explanation for her decision to send her children to public school. Because they live in Los Angeles, Takeda-Morrison believes this choice is, for people who have the means to send their children to private

school, a radical one that requires justification. Her justification shows that she believes in the community school model, where geography and proximity are important to a school's success; additionally, her girls benefit from the cultural diversity at the public school. Her larger point, though, is that children will succeed academically when parents participate in their children's education, regardless of where they attend school.

Readers largely agree with Takeda-Morrison, citing themselves as example "products" of public schools, concurring that public schools are successful when parents and communities are actively involved and that private schooling in many areas is simply a way of re-segregating. Some readers who cite having pre-school aged children thank Takeda-Morrison for her entry, saying she gave them something to think about as they make their own decisions about schooling for their own children. Only four comments of the 54 total provide outright dissent. For instance, one reader argues that the public education system is broken; another argues that private schools are sometimes a better choice in faith-based schooling situations. However, in the overwhelming majority of the comments on these two examples of polarized discussions, readers demonstrate how their experiences and opinions are in line with those of Takeda-Morrison's. For instance, one reader explains that her daughter's "giftedness" is keeping her from placing her in public school, but she tempers her comment by saying she's "really on the fence" and she ends her comment by telling Takeda-Morrison "Now you've got me thinking..." Takeda-Morrison responds to this reader, explaining that her own daughters tested gifted and that the public school they attend is able to accommodate their educational needs. Another reader admits that her daughter attends a Montessori school, but asks Takeda-Morrison "Can [they] still be friends?" This same reader wonders what she might be able to do to

participate in the local public schools even though her daughter doesn't attend, which illustrates that Takeda-Morrison's initial entry persuaded readers that community participation is important for public schools to succeed—even readers whose children don't attend. The comments on this entry demonstrate readers' representations of opinions and experiences as similar to those of Takeda-Morrison's; additionally readers whose experiences and opinions are different still frame their comments as being considerate of (and thoughtfully considering) Takeda-Morrison's position. In other words, readers who have similar experiences and opinions as well as those whose experiences and opinions differ both present their comments in such a way that shows they value and respect Takeda-Morrison's position.

Another type of entry that readers respond to in large numbers involves those in which Takeda-Morrison showcases the talents and intelligence of her elementary school-aged daughters, Kira and Kiyomi. On these kinds of entries, readers generally provide Takeda-Morrison with simple affirmation by agreeing that her daughters are smart and talented. Two spikes in the line graph above (April 27 and December 13) represent these “kid showcase” entries. In the first, “Cheese *Is* the Key to Life,” Takeda-Morrison publishes Kiyomi's journal entry on cheese. Kiyomi's journal entry is a short treatise on how cheese is healthy and delicious (with the exceptions of cheddar and American varieties). Word frequency in these 66 comments provides meaningful information about the nature of the comments; words like “brilliant,” “smart,” “cute,” “LOL,” “funny,” and “hilarious” are some of the meaningful high-frequency words, which indicate that readers approve of Kiyomi's writing as humorous and intelligent. As with Gumbinner's popular entries of a celebratory nature, Takeda-Morrison's readers offer approval and, in some

cases, considerable flattery in their comments. This demonstration of approval and flattery illustrates that readers share values with Takeda-Morrison and that readers explicitly express these shared values with the blogger.

The second example where Takeda-Morrison's entry about her daughters garners high reader response is from December. The entry, "I Went to a Concert Where I Gave Birth to Someone on Stage," is a short description and video of Kira's first guitar recital/performance. Takeda-Morrison is proud, writing that the experience of watching her own child perform was more exciting than when she saw the Rolling Stones in concert. Readers comment using words like "cool," "proud," "pride," and "awesome," which indicate their affirmation of Takeda-Morrison's delight in Kira's musical display. As with the previous example of Kiyomi's cheese journal, readers show enthusiasm about Kira's accomplishment—participating by sharing in Takeda-Morrison's pride.

High Comment Entries on Izzy Dean's IzzyMom

The trajectory plotting number of comments per entry on Izzy Dean's blog, *IzzyMom*, is quite different from trajectories of Takeda-Morrison's *sweatpantsmom* and Gumbinner's *Mom-101* (see fig. 3). It appears that Dean has far fewer posts (30) during 2006 than both Takeda-Morrison and Gumbinner, so there are far fewer opportunities for readers to comment. However, Dean's average number of comments is the same as Gumbinner's (43), even though Gumbinner posts over 200 times over the same time period. One cause of high comment numbers on Dean's entries might be that readers continue to leave comments, and Dean continues to respond in the comments to her readers. This is the case for her September 11, 2006, entry, titled "Just What Your First-

Grader Needs...A Padded Bra,” which garners 125 comments, some from as late as 2010. However, careful perusal of Dean’s archive page indicates that originally she had more entries than are currently available—she has taken many of the entries down and archived only the most popular entries (Dean “Archives).

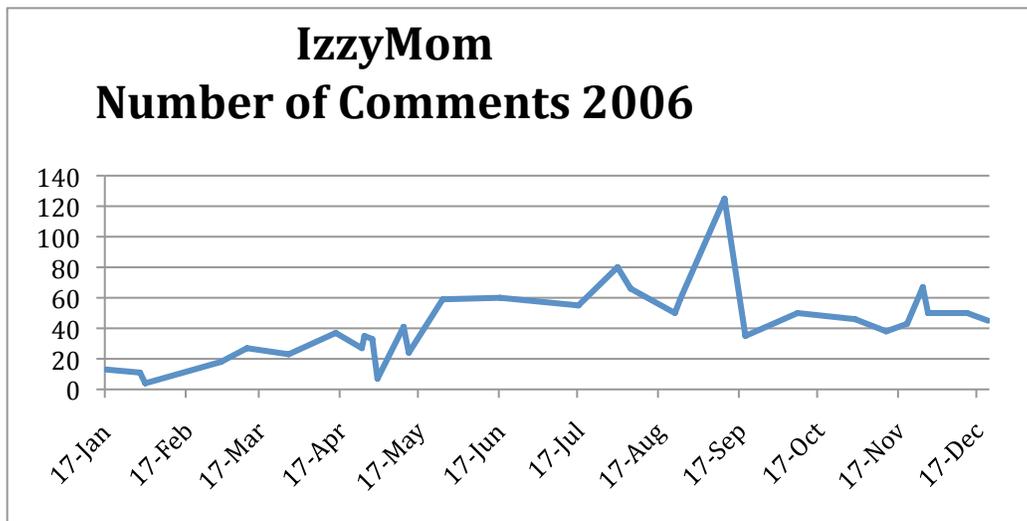


Fig. 6. The trajectory of comment numbers for the year 2006 from Izzy Dean’s blog, *IzzyMom*.

Because Dean has selected the most popular entries to remain published, the lack of significant comment spiking has explanation: she has already identified the entries on which her readers have commented the most.

Therefore, Dean’s existing 2006 posts—all of them—are “high-comment” entries, and they need only be considered briefly here to illustrate how her popular topic and comment patterns coincide with those popular topic and comment patterns of Gumbinner and Takeda-Morrison. The entry mentioned above, “Just What Your First-Grader Needs,” has the most comments (125) of all Dean’s 2006 entries. The topic for this post

is of a polemic nature: Dean rails against the “child lingerie” industry, arguing that young girls are over-sexualized and that the market for “sexy” bras and underwear for young girls exacerbates this problem. She is most concerned about the padded bras that are sized for girls as young as six years old, which she comes across in a Target advertisement from Australia. She writes that she is “incensed” and calls for her readers to contact Target Australia to protest. Many commenters on this entry affirm Dean’s objections, calling such products “perverted,” “toxic” and “disgusting.” Other readers, however, provide first-person experiences—from both perspectives of mothers and of young girls—who argue that their daughters are developing at younger ages (or that they themselves did) and need to properly and modestly cover themselves. One reader respectfully offers a differing perspective: “I agree we do not need to sexualize children but if your chest is flapping around under your shirt that is not modest.” This reader begins with the common ground she shares with Dean before offering another perspective on young girls wearing bras. Dean responds to this and other readers who argue similar cases for young girls’ bra-wearing, making the distinction that modesty does not require enhancement (in fact, to wear a padded bra at age six, Dean argues, is the opposite of modest). This particular controversy incites Dean, who, in the comments, participates vigorously—driving the number of comments up significantly²⁸. The nature of reader

²⁸ Gumbinner and Takeda-Morrison can be found participating in the comments of their own entries as well, and in these more popular entries the extension of the discussions in the comments reveals to their readership that reader comments are actually read and considered by the blogger, which I can assume encourages readers to continue commenting. The phenomenon of the blogger participating in her own comment section is tenuous; many bloggers try to respond to as many comments as they can; however, once the number of comments reaches a threshold, it becomes unreasonable for the blogger to respond as frequently.

response to this particular popular entry is varied: readers enthusiastically agree with Dean, demonstrating shared values and their approval of her disgust; other readers use respectful, diplomatic rhetoric to offer their own conflicting experiences.

Dean posts other entries in which she asserts her opinion vehemently, such as in the November entry where she complains bitterly about motherhood as the “always on” job (as opposed to fatherhood, which according to her, isn’t). Readers overwhelmingly support Dean’s complaint with agreement, offering examples from their own experiences with husbands who do not take initiative to help with the children and with housekeeping duties. The discussion in the comments extends to the problem of one partner (generally the mother—but universally the stay-at-home parent) worrying, planning, and taking initiative, while the other (generally the father—but universally the work-out-of-the home parent) is oblivious. One reader writes, “AGREED!! We have the same issue. I stress over money, and he buys whatever, wherever.” Readers share what might be considered private or vulnerable information about themselves and their relationships with their partners to demonstrate their shared experience with Dean. The contribution of this kind of personal narrative seems to show that readers commiserate with Dean; moreover, they find her struggles to be important enough that they would take the risk to share personal information with Dean and Dean’s readers.

Another pattern in Dean’s most popular 2006 entries involves topics of a personal nature, namely about her struggle with her body image. On these entries, readers share their own similar experiences with the changes their bodies undergo as a result of pregnancy and nursing. And Dean’s entries on her own body are generally self-effacing, humorous, and embarrassment-worthy; Dean’s readers leave comments using similar

rhetoric. Her readers show sympathy and work to comfort Dean by discussing their own embarrassing body issues using the same self-effacing and humorous rhetoric.²⁹

She also posts often about her son, P, who during 2006 turns one and reaches several “milestones.” In June, Dean writes an entry (“The Story of P”) detailing his birth story, which is a lengthy harrowing narrative in which her second child is born VBAC (vaginal birth after caesarian), and readers offer overwhelming congratulations. One reader writes, “Wow. Amazing. Beautiful boy... beautiful story...” Another reader celebrates and offers a brief similar narrative: “That was a beautiful story! A lot like my 2nd 9.8 VBAC boy!” Dean’s readers establish solidarity with her through sharing celebrations, offering flattery, and demonstrating that their experiences are similar to hers.

Dean also often writes of her struggles and perceived transgressions and incompetence; readers reassure her that she is not a “bad” mother and confess their own perceived mistakes and mothering failures.³⁰

Summary of Comments on High-Comment Entries

Tables 1 and 2 below summarize the analysis of those entries which earn the most comments for each of the blogs as well as the common response-types to those entry

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion of how readers respond to Dean’s entries on body image/issues, see page 46.

³⁰ The following section offers a more detailed discussion of Dean’s entries and the readers’ comments that concern confessions of “bad” mothering. I include this brief comment here simply to illustrate how her readers, on the most popular entries, work to affirm, sympathize, and confess during discussions of “bad” mothering as Gumbinner’s and Takeda-Morrison’s readers do.

topics. I have organized the tables to show how each topic is generally treated by readers (see table 1) and which topics are most popular for which bloggers (see table 2).

Table 3. Most Popular Topics and Their Most Common Responses

Most Common Topics for Entries with Above Average Comments	Blogs Represented	Most Common Response-types for Entry Topic
Complaint or judgment of other mother	<i>sweatpantsmom</i> (Takeda-Morrison), <i>Mom-101</i> (Gumbinner)	Affirmation; agreement
Confessions of “bad” mothering	<i>sweatpantsmom</i> (Takeda-Morrison), <i>Mom-101</i> (Gumbinner), <i>IzzyMom</i> (Dean)	Commiseration (narrative of similar experience); affirmation
Celebrations	<i>sweatpantsmom</i> (Takeda-Morrison), <i>Mom-101</i> (Gumbinner), <i>IzzyMom</i> (Dean)	Compliments; flattery; congratulations
Memes (humor/fun)	<i>Mom-101</i> (Gumbinner)	Reproduction/extension of humor; affirmation
Polemical/Controversial parenting choices	<i>sweatpantsmom</i> (Takeda-Morrison), <i>IzzyMom</i> (Dean)	Agreement
Personal struggles (body image)	<i>IzzyMom</i> (Dean)	Affirmation via similar experience
Uncertainty/Seeks advice	<i>Mom-101</i> (Gumbinner)	Support/affirmation; advice; similar experience

Table 4. Most Popular Entry Topic for Each Blogger

<i>sweatpantsmom</i> (Takeda-Morrison)	<i>Mom-101</i> (Gumbinner)	<i>IzzyMom</i> (Dean)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complaint about or judgment of other mothers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complaint about or judgment of other mothers 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confessions of “bad” mothering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confessions of “bad” mothering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confessions of “bad” mothering
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Celebrations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Celebrations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Celebrations
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Memes (humor/fun) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Polemic or controversial parenting 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Polemic or controversial

choices		parenting choices
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertainty/seek advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal struggles with body image

In order to determine what kinds of entries readers find most compelling to respond to, I examined entries that receive the most reader response. These bloggers' readers respond most to entries in which the blogger makes complaints of other mothers, confesses her own "bad" mothering, describes celebrations, makes jokes, broaches controversial parenting issues, expresses uncertainty, and describes struggles with body image. Additionally, I have observed patterns in the types of comments that readers leave on the most 'popular' entries; their comments tend to fulfill the following rhetorical functions: they provide the blogger with comfort, support, approval, or affirmation; they present similar experiences; and they commiserate or sympathize with the blogger. The effect is to reveal that readers feel trust in the blogger and the other readers; also, often it appears that comments show unity or alliance with the blogger or demonstrate identification with the blogger. Moreover, generally in their comments, readers seem enthusiastic about participating with the blogger and other readers.

Overall Commenting Strategies

When I examine a broader selection of the entries, I find that the same patterns emerge in the comments on entries that have fewer or average numbers of comments; additionally, the patterns in *popular* topics for each writer are also patterns in topics for all the writers. For example, while Gumbinner's most popular entries don't include those in which she discusses body image concerns, she does indeed post about such issues (as shown in the previous chapter).

For the year 2006, Liz Gumbinner of *Mom-101* posted a total of 222 entries, with a total of 9602 comments and an average of 43 comments per entry. Marsha Takeda-Morrison of *sweatpantsmom* wrote 86 entries, with a total of 3199 comments and an average of 37 comments per entry. Izzy Dean of *IzzyMom has* 30 entries, with a total of 1278 comments and an average of 43 comments per entry.

The time required to examine all the comments in the year 2006 for these three bloggers would be prohibitive; therefore, I arbitrarily selected the first four months of each blogger's comments for analysis. From this selection, I observe that readers provide these three bloggers with recurring kinds of comments—or comments that appear to repeatedly serve similar functions; additionally, I observe that the kinds of comments that readers leave on the most popular entries (affirmation, similar experience, etc.) are also the most recurring kinds of comments on those entries with an average number of comments.

The first kind of comment serves to affirm the blogger or the blogger's narrative, experience, parenting choices, etc. This affirmation may come in the form of a confirmation or agreement, in an expression of worth or value, in the expression of gratitude or thanks, or in the narrative of a similar personal experience that resonates with the blogger's initial entry (commiseration). Of the total comments from January through April 2006 on Takeda-Morrison's *sweatpantsmom* (868), I observed that 383 of them contain some kind of affirmation, 140 contain a similar experience (which serves to affirm), and 14 contain simple confirmations (explicit agreements without qualification). Gumbinner's *Mom-101*, whose total comment count for the first 4 months of 2006 is 910, affirmation appears in 347 of them, 161 contain a similar experience, and 36 contain

simple confirmations. Dean's *IzzyMom* has 202 total comments for this time period, and 46 of those comments contain affirmation, 80 contain similar experiences, and 42 contain simple confirmations³¹.

Additionally, readers will respond to the bloggers with what might be characterized as non-affirmation. To call many of these comments "disagreement" would be inaccurate; often differences of opinion are implicit, buried under rhetoric of affirmation, or couched in qualification. Often such conflicting opinions and experiences are positioned as the ways in which certain discussions and experiences are more fully complex, with additional perspectives introduced to the discussion; in other words, in the blog comments I analyzed, I did not find one instance in which the reader left a comment to say the writer was *wrong*. Instead, readers note difference through making additions to or extension of the initial entry. The numbers for these sorts of comments are fewer than those of a more directly affirmative nature: Takeda-Morrison has only 66 comments that interrogate or complicate her original entry and 238 that offer advice about or extend the original topic into a more complex discursive space; Gumbiner has 74 comments that interrogate or complicate her original entry and 271 that offer advice about or extend the original topic into a more complex discursive space; Dean has only 16 comments that interrogate or complicate her original entry and 84 that offer advice about or extend the original topic into a more complex discursive space.

³¹ The total number of comments coded for these categories does not equal the total number of comments. Some comments were coded as "off-topic" or as spam. These comments are not accounted for in this dissertation.

Examples of General Affirmation

Gumbinner posts a lengthy entry titled “The Man I’ve Become” in which she describes how cultural expectations of her as the mother collide with her actual mothering experience: she is the working parent; her husband is the stay-at-home parent. The impetus for the entry presents itself when she must take on the stay-at-home role while her husband, Nate, takes a vacation with some friends. She questions her knowledge of her daughter’s needs and preferences, yet ends the entry with an anecdote in which her mothering “instinct” kicks in: she is walking Thalia in the stroller, and a car careens, tires “shrieking,” towards them. Gumbinner describes her decision to physically protect Thalia as instinctive: “without thinking, I thrust Thalia's stroller with unimaginable force into the nearest protected doorway” (Gumbinner “The Man”). The end of the entry implies that the definition of “mommy” is automatically knowing what the child needs. In effect, Gumbinner has fashioned an argument for mothering—“good” mothering—as instinctive and natural.

In the comments, most of Gumbinner’s readers offer some form of affirmation. Some hone in on the “maternal instinct” trope on which Gumbinner relies. For instance, commenter Mrs. Chicky writes, “Like riding a bike, eh? Only more instinctive.” Reader T. responds, “Once a mom, always a mom. It becomes a genetic part of us.” Other readers affirm Gumbinner’s decision to work outside the home, thanking her for writing about her experiences so that they may feel validation for their own similar struggles with guilt. They thank her for showing how being a mom working outside the home is not detrimental to their abilities to mother. Much More Than a Mom writes, “I’m glad to hear

it [the mothering instinct] does come back. I'm SO SO SO incredibly freaked out about going back to work in April and letting a babysitter play mommy during the day.” Much More Than a Mom’s comment assumes that working outside the home somehow makes her less of a mother—Gumbinner’s blog post has presented this reader with reassurance that her own motherhood can remain intact even if she is not the primary caregiver.

Similarly, reader Jennifer thanks Gumbinner for this post: “It’s reassuring to know that I'm not alone.” Overwhelmed! echoes Jennifer’s gratitude, writing “Liz, this post speaks to me. . . . There are times when I feel so out of place as a mom because I'm not your typical mom.” Such comments illustrate the importance that readers place on feeling accord with other mothers, especially when their experiences are culturally framed as unconventional or un-ideal. These comments serve as affirmation—they assign value to Gumbinner’s writing—through the expression of gratitude.

Finally, Gumbinner has readers who question her, but they do so kindly. One reader gently chastises Gumbinner for judging herself harshly. The Queen Haline writes in a lengthy comment,

...it is clear to me that you need to be easier on yourself. Whether it is Nate or a nanny - you are a working mom - and you need people to help you raise your kids. You are not any worse of a mother for not knowing if she goes down at 9:30 or 10. Face it - you can't be everywhere at once.

The Queen Haline’s comment both affirms Gumbinner’s mothering practices as more than sufficient but also obliquely questions the system that makes her feel insufficient. By remarking that Gumbinner cannot raise her children alone—and that knowing about bedtime routines is not necessary for good mothering—Haline rejects the notion that a

mother's work can only be done in the isolation of the home, alone; additionally, Haline's comment rejects the notion that mothers must be all-knowing. So, while Haline's comment might be taken superficially as advice, the advice she gives is essentially for Gumbinner to refuse to judge herself against the conventional expectations that have been set out for her. The extent of Haline's comment—its complexity and its substantial interrogation of the social system that constructs mothers in ways that create guilt and uncertainty—places Haline as an outlier on the spectrum of comments on these mom blogs. However, the kindness and gentle quality of that interrogation is quite representative. Indeed, the rhetoric of Haline's comment, while the content essentially points to how Gumbinner is wrong, shows Haline's concern is with reassuring Gumbinner that she is a good mother, no matter what. Haline's comment ultimately serves to affirm Gumbinner's decisions and mothering practices.

In an entry about dealing with potential toxoplasmosis, Gumbinner's readers respond in overwhelmingly affirming ways. The entry, titled "It's True: Governments Do Get The Best Drugs," she writes about her fear that the disease will pass through to her fetus, and about the inconvenience of procuring the proper antibiotics that will prevent the fetus from contracting the disease. She explains that it took a month for her to receive the antibiotics because "they're available only by special request from the FDA" (hence, the title of the entry). Additionally, though, her post becomes a confession of her inability to bond with the baby, or fetus:

I haven't bonded with this growing being inside me. I haven't thought about names or nursery colors or whether it's a him or a her. I can smile and answer the questions (May fifth/22 months apart/Feeling better, thank

you) when asked, but deep down, I feel like I'm less planning for another child than managing the affliction known as pregnancy. (Gumbinner "It's True")

The overwhelming number of comments on Gumbinner's post offer "positive thoughts," which is a colloquial, secular version of "I'll pray for you in your time of need," though some readers do offer prayers. For instance, Chris writes, "sending you all the positive energy I have..." Similarly, reader chelle writes, "Totally sending positive vibes your way." Fairly Odd Mother says, "You know I will be thinking of you for the next few weeks and praying for the best." Reader markira exclaims, "Hugs & prayers for you!"

Additionally, many comments attempt to reassure her that "everything will be OK." Reader elphelba writes, "Everything will fall into place, just hang in there!" Many attend to the statistical evidence Gumbinner cites at the beginning of her entry to make this reassurance. Gumbinner admits that the chances of the parasite passing to the baby are slim since she probably contracted it before she was pregnant and since her obstetrician discovered her infection very early in her pregnancy. Reader surcie reminds her, "Clearly the stats are in your favor." These generic reassurances are, in some cases, tentative though. For instance, gingajoy writes to Gumbinner that "it's going to be ok. really. easy for me to say, but it seems that if your high risk doc is telling you to not worry about it, then..." The way that gingajoy trails off at the end of the line, using the ellipses to indicate her inability to unequivocally reassure Gumbinner, indicates gingajoy knows there is a way in which such reassurance is rhetorical, gestural.

As the comments extend for this entry, the nature of the reassurances and affirmations shift slightly. This shift might indicate that the readers are reading the comments that have been posted ahead of them, and instead of simply continuing to echo that they'll "think of her" or that "she'll be ok" as early commenters write, readers begin to share their similar experiences to illustrate how they endured feelings of separation from their fetuses in-utero. The Queen Haline describes how a diagnosis of gestational diabetes during her pregnancy actually allowed her to "bond" with her twins in utero, something she had struggled to do before the diagnosis. She writes:

I can share with you that I didn't feel all that bonded to my twin fetuses for most of my pregnancy. I was always waiting for the other shoe to drop. And then it did, I was diagnosed with gestational diabetes that couldn't be controlled by diet alone and I had to give myself insulin shots in the stomach three times a day and prick my finger five times a day. ...[But the experience] got me more in tune with the fetuses within.

Haline attempts to reassure Gumbinner by illustrating the ways her own encounters with gestational disease actually worked to make her feel closer to her fetuses. Haline's affirmation is more logically complex in that it extends her experience as one Gumbinner might juxtapose against her own and find value or usefulness in the difficulty, as Haline found she did. That is, her personal narrative includes affirmation and assurances by suggesting that the difficulties with her pregnancy were indeed the very circumstances that allowed her to grow closer to her fetuses; the implication is that Gumbinner may be able, with a small shift in perspective, to use her own difficulties with her pregnancy as a

vehicle for feeling closer to the baby. Haline does not suggest that Gumbinner adopt her perspective; she tells her story without being didactic.

Similarly, reader kfk writes about how she wasn't able to bond with her fetus until she had conclusive tests concerning her baby's genetic disorder: "I remember feeling exactly like you do when my triple-screen test came back positive for Down's Syndrome. It wasn't until further testing that I could start the process of bonding." It's not clear whether these readers are beginning to respond implicitly to one another's methods for reassuring Gumbinner, as they do not (in these examples) refer to other readers' comments specifically. However, once Haline and kfk offer their own personal experiences with the struggle to bond during pregnancy uncertainties, other readers begin to rely on the same rhetorical approach, the shared experience, to fashion their own reassurances.

Finally, readers express gratitude that Gumbinner shares these unpleasant and generally unwelcome sentiments. In a standard ideology of motherhood, it is unacceptable for pregnant mothers (and mothers in general as well) to admit that they do not "feel connected" to their fetuses or to their babies. The conventional picture of motherhood portrays mothers as feeling unconditional and constant love for their children, no matter the stage of development (Cf. Thurer, Crittenden, DiQuinzio, Finzi in Chapter One of this dissertation); therefore, when mothers feel anything except close bonding and love for their children (including their fetuses), they often question their mothering abilities. Furthermore, such admissions allow others to question the mother's abilities; therefore, such admissions are highly risky, creating significant emotional and social vulnerability for the mother who ventures to be honest about such feelings.

Therefore, readers are grateful to Gumbinner for her admission; they are grateful to not feel alone. For instance, Lumpyheadsmom expresses this gratitude, relieved that she is not alone in feeling detached from her fetus: “Not to take morbid pleasure in your situation (which sucks, ugh, I'm sorry), but it's nice to hear that someone else feels less connected to pregnancy #2. It doesn't make me feel better, necessarily, but at least I'm in good company.” Christina repeats the sentiment of Lumpyheadsmom’s comment, saying “I know that feeling of disconnect, though... I'm sure I'll feel closer to it once I feel it move, see it as a fully formed person on ultrasound, etc.”

Another example that shows how readers affirm the blogger can be seen in an entry titled “The Return of Aunt Flo” by Izzy Dean. Here, Dean describes the return of menstruation after pregnancy and breastfeeding. She is happy to attribute an emotional meltdown she endured earlier in the day to hormones, which she assumes have “returned” along with the advent of her cycle. She writes, “I knew it would return eventually but I was rather enjoying NOT having the bloating and the zits and the moodiness and everything else that comes with the arrival of my PERIOD” (Dean “The Return”). Though the physical symptoms are unpleasant, she expresses her relief that the symptoms of depression she’d been experiencing are probably not indicative of clinical mental illness. She implies that the problem of depression—its treatment and management—would exacerbate her emotional distress: “What a relief to know that I will not have to jump through the clusterf*ck of hoops known as ‘managed care’ to secure mental health benefits. That might unhinge me for real” (Dean “The Return”).

Overall, Dean’s treatment of these two topics, the return of menstruation (and its attendant symptoms) and the issue of depression, is flippant; readers tend to respond to

particular details in Dean's post in a way that mirrors Dean's tone and rhetoric. For instance, Dean writes that it had been 16 months since she'd had her last period, and readers are quick to offer details about their own "return," offering how long they went without a period and any specific circumstances that marked the beginning of their menstruation. Often those circumstances are presented with sarcasm or humor. For instance, reader Kristen announces, "[my period] came back ON my daughter's first birthday. Middle o' the night – no warning – oh, and we were on vacation having a beach party ICK." Kristen's specific description implies she was not prepared, nor was she particularly pleased, when her period did return. Her presentation of her own misfortune acts as a kind of self-effacement; she's allowing others to laugh at, commiserate with, and/or compare their own experiences to her own, which requires Kristen to place herself in a space of vulnerability. However, I might argue that Kristen is merely following Dean's rhetorical lead. In offering up her own vulnerability, Kristen implies that she values Dean's self-exposure. Kristen's comment creates a kind of rhetorical solidarity with Dean's original post.

Commenters focus on other minor details of Dean's post which makes some of the comments seem tangential. For instance, Dean ends this entry remarking that her hair is apparently done with the postpartum shedding that has, up until her writing of this entry, covered her bathroom floor. She calls it the "post-pregnancy haircarpet," and she is happy to report that she hopes "to be finding nothing but regular old pubic hair on the bathroom floor" (Dean "The Return"). While this is clearly a parting aside and not Dean's main topic, one reader chooses to respond only to this detail. Reader Dazed writes, "you must not have dogs. Our bathroom has more dog hair than people hair, I

swear they have meetings in there.” Dazed’s comment *only* addresses this portion of the entry; it may be the only portion of Dean’s entry that resonates with Dazed, or it might be that since Dean ends her post with the description of hair on the bathroom floor, this is the portion that Dazed keeps in her mind as she clicks through to comment. Most important, though, and most clear is that Dazed uses her comment to commiserate with Dean by explaining her own experience with hair on the bathroom floor. Commenter Dazed focuses on the portion of Dean’s entry that she herself can relate to and offer a similar story about. Also, I might characterize Dazed’s comment as self-effacing in the same vein as Kristen’s comment: both comments reveal private details and create a sense of vulnerability (the state of one’s bathroom floor—especially the dirty state—is decidedly private). Additionally, Dazed attempts to present her comment with humor, joking that her dogs “must be having meetings” in her bathroom to cause them to shed as much hair as they do. Dazed’s use of humor clearly matches Dean’s tone; her rhetoric provides an implicit affirmation for Dean’s plight.

Takeda-Morrison’s readers affirm and confirm her mothering experiences and practices as well; additionally, their comments take on the same biting humorous rhetoric that Takeda-Morrison uses to construct her entries. For instance, in the entry “Lying, Deceit and Self-Absorption - Some Moms Can Do It All!” Takeda-Morrison admits to 1) forgetting to “be” the tooth fairy for her daughter the night before as well as 2) lying to her daughter to deflect her daughter’s disappointment. On this entry, readers’ affirmation comes in the form of mocking, since Takeda-Morrison’s entry is decidedly self-mocking. Readers tease her, implying facetiously that the lie (or the forgetfulness that spurred the deceit), mark her as the “bad mother.” This teasing is directly in line, rhetorically, with

the self-mocking that Takeda-Morrison sets herself up for in the title of the entry. Reader Christina-the-Wench admonishes her, “You're going to mommy hell.” Reader TC makes a similar comment: “You are going to burn in heeeeeeeelllllllll.....” These readers do not mean their invectives literally, as the exaggeration suggests.

Other readers employ similar hyperbole to suggest that Takeda-Morrison is not alone in her forgetfulness and deceit. One reader, Lin, tells Takeda-Morrison to “join the club, chica” and asks, “doesn't it just make you feel like a piece of bird shit?” Another reader, SugarMama, confirms the shame associated with forgetting and lying: “Oh the guilt!” However, SugarMama’s final sentence in her comment addresses Takeda-Morrison and all other mothers reading: “We should all learn to just let it go.” Reader Misty echoes the notion of letting go, saying, “Don't be too hard on yourself.” And while these last two examples suggest that the readers are not confirming or affirming the initial point of Takeda-Morrison’s entry, the psychological work of these comments supports Takeda-Morrison in the struggles of mothering. That is, SugarMama tells Takeda-Morrison to “let it go” and Misty says she should be more gentle in her self-judgment. Such comments can be categorized as affirmative in that they indicate *value*; they indicate that the readers think Takeda-Morrison should forgive herself for her perceived mothering infractions.

A final comment confirms Takeda-Morrison’s blamelessness by interrogating the notion of the tooth fairy in the first place. Much like the performances of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, the tooth fairy is based on non-reality; the tooth fairy is, indeed, a lie in and of itself. For Takeda-Morrison to “forget to lie” and then feel badly for such an

omission is ironic. Reader J's Mommy indicates the absurdity: "I didn't think the whole tooth fairy lie was still around."

Examples of Layered Complexity and Couched Disagreement

It's important to note that even in comments that approach or attempt complex discussion, the readers still rely heavily on affirmation to frame such discussion.

Therefore, the comments that offer differing perspectives or disagreements still include rhetorical strategies of affirmation and approval. For instance, in Takeda-Morrison's post titled "Comforting," some readers overtly agree and others disagree. However, when they suggest disagreement, they construct their comments with diplomatic, agreeable rhetoric. In this entry, Takeda-Morrison laments the way another mother loudly questions the absence of seatbelts on the school bus. This other mother decries that the seatbelts' absence presents grave danger to the riders, most of whom are eight-year olds. So, the title of the entry ("Comforting") itself is sarcastic: Takeda-Morrison means quite the opposite; the other mother's lament has the potential to upset the children and other passengers on the bus. Takeda-Morrison characterizes the other mother as a clueless alarmist who is unaware that her loud outburst might cause the children to worry unnecessarily. The mother, according to the entry, worries at the top of her voice: "We would all just go flying out the windows! We'd all be dead!" Takeda-Morrison's depiction of the woman is humorous and presumably hyperbolic.

One reader, who simply identifies herself as Anonymous, makes a flatly affirmative comment, remarking, "Wow. did she tell them all about Bird Flu, and Mad Cow Disease after that?" This reader uses humor and hyperbole (as Takeda-Morrison

does) to indicate incredulity and disgust with the other mother. The incredulity and disgust indicate this reader share Takeda-Morrison's opinion.

However, other commenters on this particular post of Takeda-Morrison's assert their agreement with Takeda-Morrison, but also include gentle gestures indicating that they also empathize with the mother whom Takeda-Morrison's entry criticizes. For instance, one reader states, "I hope she gave them the STD talk too. Get em good and scared. (Though I must admit to confusion as to why there are no seatbelts on buses)" (Contrary, Comment "Comforting"). This comment employs hyperbole, indicating that the bus mother's poor judgment suggests she would also be unable to judge that 8-year-olds are an inappropriate audience for a discussion about sexually transmitted diseases. However, Contrary then uses parentheses to end her comment with the admission that she shares the bus mother's concern about the lack of seatbelts on school buses. So, Contrary begins her comment with an agreement that supports Takeda-Morrison's position, and in that portion of her comment she mirrors Takeda-Morrison's rhetorical use of humor and hyperbole. Her defense of the bus mother's motivation is presented placidly, as an afterthought.

Similarly, reader Dawn comments that it has occurred to her to be concerned about the safety of school buses. But she, like Contrary, emphasizes the stance she shares with Takeda-Morrison: "I too have had those thoughts, but not during a time when I want to scare a shitload of 9 year olds about the mortality of their futile lives" (Dawn, Comment on Takeda-Morrison's "Comforting"). Dawn's use of negation indicates that her concern about school bus seatbelts is overshadowed by the potential trauma such an announcement would wreak on children. Her use of the word "shitload" provides an

element of levity to her comment that employs a humorous rhetoric similar to that of Takeda-Morrison's initial entry.

At times, Gumbinner's readers layer their affirmations with complexity, as Takeda-Morrison's do. In a post titled "Don't Mess With a Pregnant Woman When Her Blood Sugar's Low," Gumbinner describes walking into a restaurant and witnessing one of the patrons roll her eyes disgustingly at the sight of Thalia, Gumbinner's toddler. Gumbinner's post contains anger (she considers asking the woman "what the fuck her problem is") and humor (she admits she has a childish urge to tell the woman she's ugly) (Gumbinner "Don't Mess"). The topic of this entry is complex: this particular patron's reaction to Gumbinner's entrance to the hotel restaurant is not uncommon—many mothers will recall experiencing a similar situation where their children were not welcome in a public space. When children are implicitly unwelcome in public spaces, then the parents are also implicitly not welcome—unless they can leave their children with a babysitter or other caregiver, which in some cases, for whatever reason, is not possible.

These complexities of content and form are taken up in the readers' comments. One commenter, Tania Thompson, writes that the disrespectful treatment of parents and children in public spaces is not a result of a lack of etiquette; instead, it is a result of people feeling entitled: "it's about the sense of entitlement that people like [the lady in the restaurant] have, that kids - and their parents - are somehow second class." Thompson suggests that the entitlement that some feel—entitlement to quiet, for instance—necessarily comes at the expense of another's ability to be in public, namely, parents'.

Many of Gumbinner's readers echo Gumbinner's indignation by leaving short narratives of their own similar experiences. For instance, Stephanie A. writes, "It always amazes me that people have the nerve to judge you for *gasp* going into public with a baby! I had a similar thing happen when I took Hugo to Target on a rainy day. Mind your own business, people!" Stephanie A.'s comment criticizes, using a bit of hyperbole, the cultural expectation that public spaces should only be accessible to those who are 1) not babies and 2) not bringing a baby. She ends her comment with a rather indecorous edict for people to "mind [their] own business!" Stephanie A.'s anger resonates with the anger Gumbinner presents in her entry, and she blames the individuals who preserve the expectation that children should be relegated to private realms.

Other readers make similar claims to that of Stephanie A.'s: it is the responsibility of individual people to accept that children are part of the public. Those who are unable to recognize children as part of a public are characterized by readers as "kid haters" and described by readers as evil and/or illogical. Readers' use of these over-generalizations and offensive epithets demonstrate to Gumbinner and other readers that they align themselves with Gumbinner; they are on her side. Indeed, it is exaggeration to use words like "haters" and "evil" to describe people who are annoyed by small children in public places. Reader Builder Mama responds that she and her husband have a friend whose wife is a "really cool person...that hates kids." Builder Mama characterizes this woman's attitude toward children as "pure evil." She recounts an event when she and her husband invited this particular couple over for dinner: this woman "bitch[ed] about how poorly children behave all the time and how relieved she is that 'they' (she) decided they weren't having kids. And this was all while my perfectly behaved 4-year old ate at the

table next to her.” Similarly, reader Nancy writes that she doesn’t “expect everyone to love kids, but hating them on first sight (especially when they've done NOTHING to offend) is just plain evil.”

Other readers reason that people who think such things do not consider the extended ramifications of their intense disdain. For instance, Christina says, “People who dislike having kids around amaze me. After all, we were all kids once. Someone had to put up with her sour ass kid face at one time.” In other words, Nancy’s point is that to hate children or to think all children are evil requires a kind of narcissistic turn of thought that either ignores one’s own childhood or imagines that one’s childhood behavior was somehow superior to all others’. Commenter Cynthia Samuels voices a similar logical conundrum: “I keep wondering how we're supposed to reproduce and get enough people to pay for other people's social security if nobody wants babies (or nursing mothers on airplanes) around.” Samuels argues that children are socially necessary for the continued support of communities; hating—or characterizing as evil—those who will directly or indirectly support us in the future is ethically problematic. Such readers follow Gumbinner’s rhetorical lead and engage with different avenues to explore this particular complexity of mothering.

A handful of Gumbinner’s readers provide an opposing perspective. Two comments specifically, one from a mother and one from a reader who appears to be a non-parent, argue that the rudeness of the woman in the hotel restaurant may have been, in other situations, warranted. The Queen Haline writes that she herself judges mothers for taking children into public places when it is inappropriate. She writes,

I have also been on the side of your lady friend - but only when someone walks in with toddlers/small children late at night. Last night I went for Indian food and at 9:30 PM an extended family with 3 babies under 1 sat down at the next table and the babies cried the whole time. (Of course they did. Their parents ignored their need to be in bed at that hour.) It is bad decisions like this that make all toddlers get a bad name.

Queen Haline's point is that children behave badly when the parents behave badly. And while Haline may have been correct in her particular case, that the children should have been in bed at 9:30 PM and the reason they were crying is because they were tired, she may have also been incorrect—the children may have been crying for other reasons the parents could not control. Haline does not have the full context of this particular family's situation, yet she still judges (harshly) the parents' decision to take their children into a public space. She assumes that the parents are “ignoring” their children's needs—a significant blunder according to conventional expectations of motherhood. A mother should know her children's needs, and a mother should at all times attend to those needs, not her own. In Queen Haline's case, if her assessment of the situation is accurate (the children cried because they were tired), Queen Haline's judgment enforces the conventional notion that the mothers of those children should have put their children's needs before their own. Haline assumes that this decision these mothers make—in service of their own needs and comforts (to have dinner prepared for them, to have someone else clean up dinner after them)—is a “bad” decision because it is not ideal for their children.

Reader Ericka offers a similar opinion to Queen Haline's. In her comment, she narrates her experience at an expensive restaurant that was ruined by small children. She argues that the cost of dining includes paying for a certain "atmosphere," and that such ambience is ruined by the uncontrollable behavior of small children:

if i'm in a really nice restaurant and paying through the nose to be there, i'm also paying for the atmosphere, and that atmosphere should not include screaming kids. especially not screaming kids doing their level best to splash all of the water out of the aquariums and/or climb the window blinds. especially not when we're attempting to celebrate an anniversary, we are usually on opposite sides of the country and it takes weeks to get a reservation at said expensive restaurant. yes, i'm still bitter. those shrieking minions of satan ruined a dinner that we'd looked forward to for months.

Ericka's objection to children in public places is based on one past experience in which many specific circumstances (her anniversary, the challenge of sustaining a long-distance relationship with her partner, the difficulty of securing reservations at this particular restaurant) combined to make her exceptionally upset that the evening was not otherwise perfect. Her characterization of the children who disrupted her anniversary dinner as "minions of satan" injects an element of humor into the comment—she may wish to temper her disagreement with Gumbinner and the majority of Gumbinner's readers by showing her dispute is good-natured. It is important to note that Ericka makes the distinction at the beginning of her comment that in certain spaces, such as IHOP, one can reasonably expect for there to be families, and therefore noise. Moreover, she implies

that mothers with children should relegate themselves to such “family-oriented” establishments. However, Ericka does not engage with the argument about entitlement that commenter Tania Thompson makes. Ericka’s comment essentially illustrates the issue of entitlement from the ‘entitled’s’ point of view—that because she’s spending the money to be in the expensive restaurant, her comfort and enjoyment are more important than those of the children and their parents. Also, later in her comment Ericka writes that “i too tend to eye children in public places suspiciously - they're loud and they occasionally smell weird,” which again may be interpreted as purposeful levity, inserted to establish that she is trying to disagree good-naturedly.

My examination of the rhetoric of the comments on these blogs indicates that readers most often mirror the rhetoric of the bloggers or that they use deferential rhetoric. Such patterns suggest that readers expect the writers to value complimentary and congratulatory rhetoric. In the negotiation of disagreements, readers often use rhetorical strategies used in agreeable discourse, such as the personal anecdote, to temper the differences. Other agreeable rhetoric consistently emerges in the comments: readers willingly offer advice when it is solicited, laugh and contribute to the writers’ jokes, reassure the writers when they confess a worry or transgression, and provide general affirmation of the writers. And when readers leverage their differences of opinion with the writers, it is done so with respect, kindness, and in some cases personal anecdotes and humor which have the effect of de-emphasizing (or diminishing the importance of) their differences.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I’ll discuss the extent to which the content of the entries and the responses of readers contribute to a larger revision of motherhood.

Additionally, the final chapter will consider whether, and if so how, the readers and bloggers of this study constitute a community.

Chapter 6

Are Mom Bloggers Radically Revising Motherhood?

According to Kenneth Burke, rhetoric has the potential to be a site of social change (Branaman 444-445). It is in the negotiation of identity (or consubstantiality), where social interaction occurs through language, that such change can emerge. Amy Koerber characterizes the negotiation of identity as rhetorical agency: the power that people have to make choices about self-presentation. Rhetorical agency, however, depends on a complex interaction between the individual's ability to make rhetorical choices, the conventional narratives and the expectations of that individual, and the availability of discursive alternatives that individuals can leverage or construct.

In this concluding chapter, I examine the notable patterns that emerge from my analysis of the rhetoric of the blog entries and comments to determine whether these writers and their commenters are indeed leveraging discursive alternatives and constructing a radical narrative of motherhood. As is shown in Chapters Four and Five of this dissertation, mom blogs do allow mothers to assert a kind of control over representations of their own experiences of mothering. The bloggers are able to share stories of their singular mothering experiences, and commenters are able to chime in, affirming the blogger's experience and often sharing their own similar stories. The public nature of these stories means that, in the cases of these writers studied, mothers **are** broadcasting unconventional non-ideal representations of motherhood. A reader of Lisa Belkin's *Motherlode: Adventures in Parenting*, a blog on *The New York Times* site, comments that "Losing control over your life is the secret sauce of becoming a mother.

Blogging is one way that women compensate for this loss of control: you pick the anecdotes, the photos, you control the narrative” (CT). As I’ve shown in Chapter One, in the literature review of scholarship on motherhood, scholars agree that “real” mothers and actual mothering experiences are generally obscured by the images and expectations of conventional or ideal motherhood. Additionally, scholarship on blogging has argued that the use of the public personal narrative allows an individual to be the architect of her own identity and to validate that identity by sharing it with others (Cf. Herring; Miller and Shepard). By virtue of these blogs’ public-personal nature, these writers are taking control of the representations of their own experiences. That is, by creating their own images of mothering, these writers illustrate ways that they are not, in many cases, adhering to conventional expectations. In their representations of mothering, two rhetorical devices emerge most frequently: confession and humor.

Confession

The bloggers in this dissertation use confession to construct narratives of their mothering experiences instead of showing anger at or launching outright protest against a system that imposes unattainable ideals. This act of confession signifies admission of incompetence, responsibility for inappropriate behavior, and sometimes guilt or shame.

The three bloggers rely on confession of incompetent and indolent mothering in the titles of their blogs: *Mom-101*: I don’t know what I’m doing, either (admission of inexperience); *sweatpantsmom*: it only looks like I’m wearing my pajamas (admission of apathy); *IzzyMom*: where every night is amateur night! (admission of novice status). In

addition, the entries of these blogs often frame their actions and choices as guilt-driven or guilt-producing.³²

The act of confession also implies that these writers expect their actions to elicit judgment. Also, these writers' use of confession suggests that they recognize (or accept) their experiences as 'wrong.' In other words, had these writers considered their stories of motherhood to be suitable narratives of mothering, they would not have couched their blog entries in self-deprecation and humility. Their use of confession as a rhetorical strategy subjects these mothers to their readers' judgments, indicating their acknowledgment that the actions to which they confess are offenses against the dominant expectations or stereotypes. So, their use of confession as a rhetorical strategy may be ultimately interpreted as a preservation of the "ideal" motherhood: they characterize their mothering practices as faulty and inadequate, which implies that they have internalized these ideals.

The bloggers' use of confession to frame their stories about mothering may be an effect of those very unattainable ideals. In the introduction to *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods and Methodologies*, Eileen Schell describes a discussion that emerges across texts between Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Barbara Biesecker about women's writerly subjectivities. While Campbell champions women's production of text "on their own terms" (Schell 12), Biesecker argues that any terms under which women write are, in some way, defined with regard to patriarchal terms (Schell 13). In the case of this dissertation, those terms comprise ideal, conventional motherhood. Biesecker

³² For instance, Dean's post titled "It's a Bird, It's a Plane... It's Blundermom!" writes that "even though" she's not responsible for the mistakes she's made as a parent, "[she's] still *guilty*." Takeda-Morrison admits guilt in her post titled "Next Up: Stealing from Homeless People" by describing her "latest *shameful* parental transgression."

advocates for a Derridian approach to studying women's writing, where the question becomes "what play of forces made it possible for a particular speaking subject to emerge?" (Biesecker qtd. in Schell 13). In other words, Campbell's approach to studying women's writing potentially ignores the hegemony that necessarily shapes their subjectivities. Biesecker argues that such hegemony, or "play of forces," shapes *whatever* terms women might consider their own. Following Biesecker's lead, then, I would argue that one of the strongest forces that shape these mothers' writings about mothering experiences might be the hegemony of conventional motherhood itself. Their use of confession and their return to topics that emphasize their failures might be interpreted as effects of the ways that conventional narratives of motherhood inform their writing. They use confession to structure their personal mothering experiences, which might indicate that they *feel* guilt, or that they might imagine their use of confession will encourage readers to be more accepting—more forgiving—of their transgressions.

Humor

A similar claim can be levied concerning these writers' use of humor: rhetorically, humor produces distance and can be interpreted as a "safe" way to broach potentially controversial subjects. In the majority of these writers' entries, they have included some figuration that is meant to create levity. Most often, the writers combine hyperbole and exaggerated metaphors with what appear to be honest accounts of their actual experiences. The effect of such combination is that readers can choose how seriously they take the writer. While the joking tone of these blogs certainly invites readers to "laugh along" with the writer about her travails, the use of humor might also be

a way for both the writer and the reader to disengage with the reality of the hardships that mothering entails. Humor—especially exaggeration—also allows the writers to embellish their experiences in order to capitalize on the effect of comedy. Therefore, it is difficult in some cases to determine how honest or true the events and details of the writers' entries might be. The use of humor as a rhetorical strategy can create a kind of performative layer that allows both writer and reader the comfort of distance from the specific topic or concern of the entry. The rhetorical use of either confession or humor (or both) is easily present in nearly all the entries examined for this dissertation.

Conversely, one might assume that these writers' use of humor could be interpreted as an overtly critical act. Indeed, women writers have used humor for centuries to ease their critique of culture and society. Audrey Bilger writes in *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen* that “comedy can serve as an excellent vehicle for making radical ideas palatable to an audience that might otherwise be offended by them” (9). Humor has the ability to mask, buffer, or distance an audience from the realities of a joke's content, which allows the joke to be told when the more “serious” discussion would be unwelcome or unpopular.

Yet the argument has been made that women's humor is more than simply an easing or softening of their social critique—indeed, scholars have argued that such humor can have substantial purposes and effects.

For instance, Charles Case and Cameron Lippard argue in “Humorous Assaults on Patriarchal Ideology” that humor in general (not just women's humor) plays a significant role as symbolic communication; humor allows people to “affirm, reinforce, and...challenge concepts and beliefs in society” (242). In addition, humor can

demonstrate acceptance; specifically, listeners or audiences can easily express acceptance through simple affirmation³³ (242)—as I have shown happens in the comments of the writers’ blogs examined here. That affirmation, according to Case and Lippard, can open the doors to “a new definition of a construct” (242). Placed in the context of Case and Lippard’s claims, the commenters’ affirmations of the bloggers studied in this dissertation might illustrate the beginning of a paradigm shift. The affirmations from commenters can be interpreted as acceptance of these bloggers’ humorous pictures of imperfect motherhood. Indeed, since many of the commenters’ affirmations appear in the form of their own brief, public, narrations of similar experiences, it is safe to assume that readers accept both the imperfections and the public presentation of those imperfections.

Similarly, Helga Kotoff argues that humor as a genre is more complex and powerful than it has historically been given credit for. In the past, Kotoff shows, humor and comedy had been situated as “low level ... intellectual activit[ies],” typically characterized by scholars as undisciplined or “dismissed as incarnations of chaos and disorder” (5). However, in the last century, scholars have recognized the ways that humor contributes to and acts as a litmus for “normality and normativity” (5). According to Kotoff, “[humor] creates new unusual perspectives...and thereby communicates sovereignty, creative power, and the freedom to intervene in the world” (5). Again, as Case and Lippard suggest, Kotoff might agree that humor has the potential to infuse the humorist with a kind of agency she can exert on the world around her, and the potential to change that world.

³³ The simple affirmation Case and Lippard cite is laughter. While the affirmations that appear in the blog comments in this dissertation are textual, I believe they are still often simple in that many comments consist of textual representations of laughter (for instance, “LOL!” and “HAHAHA!”)

Additionally, Sean Zwagerman, author of *Wit's End: Women's Humor as Rhetorical and Performative Strategy*, argues that women's humor is often characterized by parody and self-talk (Zwagerman 83). Such use of humor creates agency; for example, these writers' self-mockery repositions their seemingly failed mothering practices as worthy of harmless mirth rather than hostile criticism. In other words, by making themselves the "butt" of their own jokes, they appropriate the potential for others to criticize them. The self-deprecating nature of these bloggers' entries may be seen as evidence for Linda Naranjo-Huebl's argument in "From Peek-a-boo to Sarcasm: Women's Humor as a Means of Both Connection and Resistance." She posits that women's humor, and specifically the type that relies on self-deprecation, is an act of "claim[ing] knowledge of [one's] own vulnerability" which "by that knowledge gains mastery over [the vulnerability]." To make this argument, Naranjo-Huebl first characterizes conventional or men's humor as often derived from the limitations of others. That is, conventional humor is typically "rooted in a 'glorification' of the self" or works in service of the "preservation of the self" through feelings of superiority (Naranjo-Huebl). Such humor can be described as "making fun of others" or finding humor in others' misfortunes. Women's humor, however, can be characterized in contrast to men's or conventional humor particularly in the way it does not rely on the glorification of the self in comparison to others (it does not typically rely on others' misfortunes or shortcomings). Instead, Naranjo-Huebl argues, women's humor often relies on self-deprecation that is rooted in personal stories involving their friends and family. Therefore, women's humor not only reverses the direction of the jokes so that the

target becomes the humorist herself, but women's humor also draws on women's own experiences and those shared with people close to them.

The reason men's and women's humor differs, according to Naranjo-Huebl, is based on gendered communicative goals. She cites the work of Deborah Tannen, author of *You Just Don't Understand*, to posit that "men in general use language for positive self-presentation, that is, to establish and maintain status. Women, on the other hand, use language to connect, to establish and maintain relationship and intimacy" (Naranjo-Huebl). And while Tannen's scholarship has been characterized as problematic for its essentialism in application to all women (Cf. DelPrete; Rodino), her definition provides a useful distinction between the effects of self-deprecatory humor and humor targeted at others as used in the blogs studied. Self-deprecation can support relationship-building and intimacy because it reveals the writer's vulnerabilities; revealing vulnerability can lead to the establishment of trust. Likewise, personal narration can support relationships and intimacy in that the sharing of one's life suggests trust is granted to the audience. Naranjo-Huebl quotes Tannen, who contrasts women's humor with men's or conventional humor, to describe the utility in women's humor:

[Women's humor is] much more context-bound. It is more often created out of the ongoing talk to satisfy the needs of [a] particular group of women. Since the goal of interaction is intimacy, there is not the same need to compete for performance points ... [Women's] humor includes and supports group members by demonstrating what they have in common. (Tannen qtd. in Naranjo-Huebl)

Self-directed humor provides a vehicle for intimacy and for fostering group commonality. The analysis of these bloggers' entries and comments, in which the bloggers and readers rely heavily on self-deprecatory humor, indicates that the use of humor has promoted familiarity among the readers and the bloggers.

Naranjo-Huebl also argues that the self-deprecating humor can be interpreted as "assertive" and as extending to targets outside the self. For instance, Naranjo-Huebl describes an excerpt from Brett Butler's³⁴ comedy show. The example illustrates that while women make fun of their own bodies, the effect is that the joke provides a larger critique of cultural expectations concerning women's bodies:

Brett Butler comes down the stairs dressed for a night at the opera. Her best friend comments, "Why, Grace, I didn't know you had cleavage." Looking down she replies, "Well, I don't really. I'm wearing a 'Wonderbra'. This is really my fanny." Here the joke is directed at the "Wonderbra" and its incredible claim to make our bodies achieve the cultural standard of big breasts.

Naranjo-Huebl explains that this assertive humor, in which the target of the joke shifts from the self to a critique of culture, also serves as a kind of "nonalienating means of resistance."

Scholarship about and theories of humor suggest that, in some ways, the mom blogs of this study might be seen as subtly shifting what is acceptable for mothers to discuss publicly. For instance, they are broaching a subject that, in most public

³⁴ Brett Butler is a comedienne and actress who starred in a short-lived situation comedy titled *Grace Under Fire* which aired in the mid-1990s. The show featured the main character Grace (played by Butler) as a single mother struggling with raising her children and returning to the "dating scene" as a middle-aged woman.

circumstances, is a less-than-appropriate topic for discussion: the messiness of mothering. However, their humor might also “soften” their unsightly narratives, which makes their stories more publicly acceptable. In addition, the commenters’ responses, which overwhelmingly indicate support and affirmation of the bloggers, suggest that these “inappropriate” narratives of motherhood are acceptable. So, I can argue that among the bloggers and commenters in this study, a shift has occurred: bloggers present their imperfect parenting publicly, via humor, and readers do not react with disgust or harsh judgment. Instead, readers affirm these women’s mothering “mistakes.” Their use of self-deprecatory humor presents the writers (and commenters who follow suit) as vulnerable and trusting, which creates intimacy. However, in other ways, the scholarship of humor doesn’t match the findings of the analysis in this dissertation. For instance, while Naranjo-Huebl makes a convincing case that self-deprecatory humor has the potential to target cultural and social systems, I am unable to find evidence in these mom blogs entries for the kind of displacement she describes; in other words, while the writers studied in this dissertation use self-deprecatory humor, their brand of humor **does not** shift the target of the joke to so that it serves a larger cultural or social critique.

Therefore, these women’s use of confession and humor manages to keep them inside the ideology of conventional motherhood. While the content often attempts to address problems of ideal motherhood, the rhetoric of their entries ultimately reinforces the binding narratives of motherhood. Their performances of confession and humor become narrative conventions that make them complicit in the preservation of conventional motherhood. Of crucial importance to this conclusion, moreover, is that these writers seemingly attempt, through rhetorical agency, to resist or reject the

expectations placed upon them by conventional motherhood, they are unable to do so because such conventions are extraordinarily powerful.

Does a Meaningful Community Emerge?

Chapter Five has shown that readers' comments tend to serve the following purposes: to provide the blogger with comfort, support, approval or affirmation; to present similar experiences; and to commiserate or sympathize with the blogger. Readers' comments also engage with the bloggers' entries in more complex ways by extending their original discussions or by interrogating the bloggers' opinions and offering different perspectives; however, these kinds of comments are generally couched in the rhetoric of affirmation or diplomacy.

These comments reveal trust. They create unity or alliance with the blogger or demonstrate identification with the blogger. It is also clear, through the number of comments left by readers, that they are enthusiastic about interacting and communicating with the blogger and other readers. According to Mary Chayko, communities "offer members a sense of belonging, of not being alone, of being understood" (144). The kinds of comments that readers leave on these bloggers' entries indicate that the *purpose* of commenting in these discussions is precisely to create a sense of belonging for themselves, other readers, and the blogger by demonstrating that they understand—and to show the blogger (and any reader who shares such experiences) that she is not alone. In Chayko's sense of community, then, these blogs do inspire readers to participate with one another in community fashion. To call the group of writers and readers that "gather" around these texts *a community*—one single community—poses a kind of problem,

however. The three blogs of this study only represent a small portion of a larger network of readers and writers who read, write, comment on, and participate as bloggers. Many of the commenters who appear in this dissertation are bloggers in their own right, maintaining similarly styled blogs and engaging in conversations with their own readers. The three bloggers of this dissertation are also active commenters on countless other blogs. There is *community* emerging out of the many mom blogs, but it is not *a community*. Each individual blogger inhabits *her own specific community* made up of the readers who happen to comment on her blog and the other bloggers she happens to read. No one mom blogger's community is exactly the same as any other; however, in examining the three blogs of this dissertation, the claim can be made that there is an emergent discourse community that, in the case of these three blogs, stretches across multiple writers/readers.

For instance, Miller and Shepard's definition of a discourse community, in which rhetorical expectations and conventions reflect a shared set of values, is fulfilled by both the genre of the bloggers' entries as well as the genre of comments on these entries. For instance, I can characterize particular rhetorical components of the mom blog entry that are shared across these three women's blogs. Specifically, the titles of the blog entries are often humorous and self-deprecating³⁵. Also, these mom blog entries share other rhetorical elements: they are most often first-person narratives of these women's personal experiences and opinions, and they are most often humble and self-mocking. Moreover,

³⁵ For instance, Takeda-Morrison's "Lying, Deceit, and Self-Absorption: Some Moms Can Do It All!"; Dean's "It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Blundermom!"; and Gumbinner's "Early Bird Special, Here I Come!"

readers' comments, as is shown in Chapter Five, have identifiable generic elements that reflect the performances and rhetoric of the blogger and of other readers.

Additionally, these bloggers and readers can be seen as part of a discourse community since readers reflect the values of the bloggers in their comments. That is, readers' comments generally match a blogger's rhetorical approach in a particular entry: confession is matched with confession; humor is matched with humor; a personal anecdote is matched with a similar personal anecdote. The mimetic nature of the readers' comments affirm the blogger (and other readers)—such affirmation illustrates acceptance and approval of the values (opinions, perspectives, experiences) that the blogger initially delivers. Based on the mimetic nature of the comments as well as the patterns in topic and rhetoric *across* these three mom blogs, I can conclude that the participants, both bloggers and readers, are members of a discourse community.

The kind of discourse in this community reflects the importance of *support*. The kinds of confessions and storytelling presented in the bloggers' entries and the kinds of responses that readers offer can be characterized as seeking support and providing support, respectively. The mom blogs studied in this dissertation—and the entries and the discussions in the comments—resemble the kinds of conversations that occur in support groups, where participants meet to share stories, concerns, and challenges related to a particular life issue, normally an illness or addiction, though support groups also exist for a host of other issues that people struggle with, such as phobias and grief. Generally speaking, organized support groups are comprised of people who meet periodically to share stories and to provide support for one another. Meetings often have rules of order that prevent interruption, official advice-giving, and judgment (Mahre). Additionally,

meetings are often governed by rules ensuring that members offer reassurance, information, and encouragement rather than incite conflict (Mahre). Ground rules are often set so that participants will feel safe (there is an expectation for privacy or confidentiality) and so they can develop trust for one another (Mahre). Support is built through sharing experiences, sharing strategies for coping, and sharing information. Additionally, support is built through simple commiseration.

As seen in the three mom blogs studied here, commenters' behavior (via their rhetorical strategies) uncannily conforms to the general ground rules set in support group settings: reassurances; advice given when it is requested; encouragement offered via similar stories, commiseration, and general affirmation. Though the discussions are public, these mom blogs are providing a kind of support-group community for other mothers. In this way, these communities are meaningful. Mothers can listen to others' stories and share their own in order to understand mothering (their own and others') from larger perspectives.

However, the question remains whether the support-style community that emerges on/out of these mom blogs is productive in a larger cultural sense—in the sense that the participants are revising or interrogating conventional expectations of motherhood. And it doesn't fit Zappen's characterization that the online rhetorical community is defined less by shared values and more by the opportunity for members "to engage each other and form limited or local communities of belief" (Zappen et al.). The rhetoric of the support group does not foster cultural critique or probing exploration; if anything, it resists thorough engagement and reflection. However, there are instances where commenters on these blogs question and disagree with one another and/or the blogger,

and such questions and disagreements are couched in a rhetoric of diplomacy and deference. The indication that these writers are forming “communities of belief” might be present in the respectful deference that they leverage during disagreements. That is, while there are disagreements present in the discussions that emerge out of the blog entries, the treatment of one another can be seen as one way in which the readers and writers acknowledge the belief that mothering is inherently singular and personal, and that differing practices and opinions can still be respected.

This overwhelmingly diplomatic nature of the comments on these blogs is noteworthy within the larger context of blogging and internet comments. It is currently common for cultural critics to lament the lack of civility and the lack of thoughtful comments in online forums (Cf. Adams; Pérez-Peña; Rinaldi). According to these critics, bolstered by anonymity and bile, commenters often come off as thoughtlessly polemic and coarse (Adams). Popular news organizations such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have been forced to construct stringent commenting rules and institute comment moderation to reduce “flaming,” a rhetorical term that describes belligerent and often hate-filled diatribes meant to incite or offend (Pérez-Peña).

The mom bloggers and their readers examined in this study do indeed have the characteristics of a community. The lack of visible comment moderation³⁶ reveals that these bloggers respect their readers’ ability to maintain civility; and, as the analysis of the comments in Chapter Five shows, readers respect the bloggers’ unspoken expectations. The bloggers and many of their readers share both a clearly marked discourse and a specific life experience, and they exchange stories of those experiences, which are often

³⁶ None of these bloggers, during the time that was studied, had explicit commenting policies or automatic comment moderation.

quite personal. Such exchanges require an element of trust or feeling of safety against ridicule. However, the model of their community—that of a support group—is not one that would seem to bear the weight of attempts to make large cultural changes.

Are these Mom Blogs Radical?

As I show in Chapter Two, scholars and bloggers have made claims that mom blogs are “radical”—they have argued that mom blogs reveal authentic mothering experiences, which provides catharsis in a public way. Generally, a radical action or movement is meant to accomplish (or contribute to) fundamental change of a system. The Oxford English Dictionary defines radical as “relating to or affecting the fundamental nature of something; innovative or progressive” (Soanes and Angus). The second and third definitions in the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* characterizes radical as “2. thorough-going or extreme, esp as regards change from accepted or traditional forms... 3. Favoring drastic political, economic, or social reforms” (Flexner 1592). Can the term *radical*, therefore, responsibly or accurately describe what the mom blogs of this dissertation accomplish: the revelation of authentic or “real” mothering experiences? Can the communities that mom bloggers and their readers construct for themselves be characterized as *radical* because they present humorous narratives about their personal experiences that are different from those presented in baby books and on television? Do these mom blogs indeed call for or demonstrate extreme changes to the ideals of motherhood?

A *radical* movement to revise our cultural expectations of mothers might look more extreme: it might look like other blogs not examined in this dissertation, such as

Tedra Osell's *Bitch, PhD*³⁷ in which she (and other feminists) write about the intersections of womanhood, motherhood, feminism, politics, academia; often the writers would focus on controversy and disenfranchisement and advocate for activism, offering explicit protest of and anger at patriarchal expectations of women and mothers.

Comparatively speaking, the blogs examined in this dissertation are decidedly not radical. There are only a few examples from the entries in the analysis in which the bloggers directly address the problems that emerge from the unattainable expectations placed on mothers.

However, if I consider the scale of writers included in this dissertation—not only the three bloggers, but also the many readers who comment, I see a significant number of women eager to participate in a discussion about *how they can't fulfill the expectations of ideal motherhood*. The examples I provide here in the analysis are not the only writers and readers participating in such discussions; many of the commenters whom I present here as readers are also bloggers in their own right, posting regular entries and having conversations with their own readers in their comments. It's reasonable to assume that similar discussions—humorous presentations of mothering transgressions followed by supportive affirmation—are occurring on countless other mom blogs. The aggregation of these discussions suggests that ideal motherhood is not operative for a significant number of mothers.

However, there is no indication of overt rejection or resistance to conventional motherhood in the blogs I studied. There is never any direct address of the unattainability

³⁷ *Bitch PhD* can be found at <http://bitchphd.blogspot.com>. The blog is no longer active; in 2010 Osell and the other writers decided to quit blogging without specific explanation other than the blog had “withered on the vine.” Archives (as of this writing, October 2011) are still available.

of such expectations. So while the content of the entries and the interactions in the comments indicate the conditions exist for a community, and while there is engagement with the complexity of being a mother in America during the 21st Century, there is no indication that this particular set of writers and readers is working together toward or accomplishing an explicit revision of the role of motherhood.

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³⁸ As of this writing, the Modern Language Association, which governs the style and format for this dissertation, has not published guidelines concerning the citation of online comments. For the purposes of this research, I have approximated a format to properly represent authorship of the comments as well as to offer readers sufficient information to find the comments online. Commenters who have common names that appear to be the authors of multiple comments (such as "Christina") were verified to be the same commenter before I used the triple dash [---] to indicate such.

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