

MOMMY BLOGGING: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE DISCOURSE OF
MOTHERHOOD THROUGH THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

by

CHRISTINA CIOCI YOTHER

(Under the Direction of Corey Johnson)

ABSTRACT

Women's leisure has typically been examined in terms of their family roles. An area of women's leisure that has often been overlooked in the research is the development of community and voice, specifically the opportunities for this within the blogosphere. The purpose of this study investigates how mommy bloggers build community and explore notions of motherhood through writing and voice. This was a basic qualitative study. Data collection involved examining the blog archives of four top mom bloggers on the 2010 Babble Top Mom list. Research questions centered on motivation for blogging, how blogging creates or facilitates community for mothers, how blogging provides a conduit for voice, and how blogging reinforces or recreates traditional notions of motherhood. Motivating factors included having an outlet for expressing parenting experiences, a sense of vindication to those experiences, and appreciation for the community that formed. Women reported that their blogs became a space where they felt a sense of ownership. Three conclusions emerged from this study. The first conclusion was that the purpose of blogging is fluid and changing as the women grow and develop their voices. The second conclusion was that blogging provides a space to challenge the

notions of motherhood through the embracing of authentic voice. The final conclusion was that community in this context is fostered from personal catharsis, ownership and voice, personal validation that builds relationships, and motivation that shapes the relationships formed.

INDEX WORDS: blogging, feminism, interpretivism, leisure, motherhood, narrative inquiry

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DEDICATION

To my Grandma Mimi (1932-2005):

Thank you for giving me Johnny Appleseed

and that first inkling of possibility.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My first blog post: Published November 8th, 2007



Figure 1

I have recently come to realize that the multitude of roles I fill everyday could quite possibly make me qualified for almost any job. Maybe that is what I already do...any and every job.

I am...
 Mother
 Wife
 Daughter
 Writer
 Chef
 Housekeeper/Maid
 Multi-tasker
 Nurse
 Teacher
 Tutor
 Plumber
 Electrician
 Beautician
 Chauffeur
 Volunteer
 Landscaper
 Laundry-genius
 Vet
 Locator of everything my family lost
 Decorator

*Mrs. Fix-it
Painter
Disciplinarian
Planner/Scheduler
Social Coordinator
Cheerleader - my family's biggest fan!
Individual - believe it or not, there is still a 'Me' somewhere in there!*

It's not always easy and my roles are ever-changing. But this is a life I chose...eyes open and my head on straight! It can be overwhelming, crazy, and sometimes just awful. I wouldn't, however, trade my life for anyone else's.

It's almost surreal when I think back on how this whole thing started. In many ways it seems like I've been doing this all my life – writing in one form or another. But it wasn't until I began blogging that I realized that there was a whole group of people – not just women – that exist in a space claimed for its honesty, its voice, and its connectivity. When I was just weeks away from delivering my third child I felt rather alone. I had a husband who traveled quite a bit and two younger children who couldn't quite interact on the level I needed. Late one evening as my husband left for yet another business trip and I tucked in the children and locked up the house, I started a blog. At the time I wasn't sure why I did it, but I felt like I needed somewhere to vent, explode, and say all those things that I didn't feel were okay to say out loud as a stay-at-home mother. I needed some sort of outlet for the massive amount of chaos that I couldn't seem to control. Blogging was convenient. It was accessible and could be done without taking away from my daily responsibilities involving my children. It gave me the opportunity to say what I needed to say, feel like I had purged my frustrations, and begin again with a new attitude. And, I honestly never imagined that behind the screen of that old laptop a community was waiting to listen. I began commenting on other's blogs and joining a few networks designed for blogging women and the sense of community was almost instant. I craved

what these other bloggers were giving me: a safe environment to share even my most unflattering moments as a woman and a parent. They felt completely safe and, in many ways, made me feel like I was home. This also contributed to the identity I constructed for myself through this leisure activity. Being a mommy blogger became part of *who I am*, not just *what I do*.

For several years blogging has been a form of journaling that appeals to many living in the technology era. It allows the blogger the opportunity to write about any number of topics through an online medium designed to promote interaction across a broad audience (Gunter, 2009). While the first blogs began in the 1990's, the numbers have risen to an estimated 60 million blogs across the Internet (Sifry, 2006) with women and mothers consuming a large part of that. Women, specifically mothers, began using blogging in a variety of ways. Women began to stake out their territory and secure their place in the blogosphere by writing about their children and their families (DesRochers, 2009) and have certainly carved a niche for themselves among the numbers. It is estimated that 23 million to 26 million mom bloggers are sharing their stories across the Internet (Bailey, 2009). What began as a way of sharing the numerous, and sometimes humorous, aspects of motherhood and raising children has become a sensation that lures countless readers to specific sites everyday. There they read about the adventures and misadventures of parenthood, comment and share their own stories, and form bonds that transform into trusting communities where authentic voice is celebrated.

Authenticity is a daily practice. Choosing authenticity means: cultivating the courage to be emotionally honest, to set boundaries, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable; exercising compassion that comes from knowing that we are all made

of strength and struggle and connected to each other through a loving and resilient human spirit; nurturing the connection and sense of belonging that can only happen when we let go of what we are supposed to be and embrace who we are.

Authenticity demands wholehearted loving and loving – even when it’s hard, even when we’re wrestling with the shame and fear of not being good enough, and especially when the joy is so intense that we’re afraid to let ourselves feel it.

Mindfully practicing authenticity during our most soul-searching struggles is how we invite grace, joy, and gratitude in our lives. (Brown, 2009)

In my experience the communities being formed exist because they provide ‘space’ that is nurturing, encouraging, safe, and filled with support. In this study community is defined as the group of mommy bloggers that exist within the virtual space known as the blogosphere and possess common characteristics and beliefs about parenting, children, and the roles of women. They interact through blog posts and comments as well as social media venues such as Twitter, Facebook, and online forums though the blog posts serve as the focal point for building community. What makes these communities so amazing, though, is the fact that they are stretching beyond the reaches of the Internet; they are transforming from virtual relationships to face-to-face friendships. Mommy bloggers are taking what began as a way of journaling their experiences and learning to celebrate the voice, relationships, and communities that emerge.

While some would argue that blogging can create an opportunity for mothers to disregard their children, I believe the blogosphere allowed mothers the opportunity to create tangible memories, including scrapbooks, photos, and stories of their lived experience and a place to question that which affects their motherhood experience on

both an individual level and within the socially constructed institution as a whole. What began simply as an online journal has become an influential part of mainstream media that fosters questions of intent, voice, and community.

Purpose of the Study and Guiding Research Questions

Guided by feminism and using an interpretive approach, I explored mommy bloggers and discourse of motherhood they build through the lived experience of blogging.

The guiding research questions were:

- Why do mothers blog?
- How does blogging create and/or facilitate community for mothers?
- How does participation in a leisure activity such as blogging provide a conduit for voice?
- How does blogging reinforce traditional notions or create new possibilities for motherhood?

Examined further within my Literature Review, I argue that blogging in general, and mommy blogging specifically, has been overlooked within the context of leisure studies and women's studies as an important activity and experience. The research undertaken up to this point lacks depth. It examines the activity itself within a definition of 'is this leisure?' Very little has been done to examine emergent blogging subcultures. Academic articles describe how blogging can enhance classroom learning (Young, Gyeong, & Lee, 2011; Coulter & Draper, 2006; Kukkonen, Kärkkäinen, Valtonen, & Keinonen, 2011; Flatley, 2005); however very few, if any, qualitative or quantitative research studies have been done within the context of blogging and leisure studies. Thus insight into the

phenomenon is limited. The field of leisure research is no stranger to research on the context of mothers and their connection to the leisure experience. Though research in the field of leisure and its connection and impact on mothers is rather extensive, minimal research exists within the context of blogging. This is surprising considering the number of women who engage in this leisure activity. My study addresses this gap not only with the first qualitative study, but also with one of the first ever narrative-based studies in this context. The literature and research already done addresses parts, segments, and methods but does not look at the topic inclusively at the bloggers. In this case I extend our understanding of blogging by discovering that blogging allows for a degree and type of expression unexamined before now. This study builds on that literature and begins to address a gap in academic research.

Subjectivity Statement

As I entered this inquiry it was imperative that I recognized my place within the research. My goals for this research were rather personal and based on my own experiences with blogging. As a blogger and stay-at-home mother (SAHM), I have had first-hand experience not only with the community of women sharing their lives, but also with the process of finding my own authentic voice.

The Mommies Downstairs (published 9/2/2009 on www.hooeycritic.com)

There are some women that long to stay home and dedicate their lives to their families. That may be their entire life's ambition.

And, some women do.

Some women stay home, tending to the needs of their families and feel completely satisfied with that endeavor.

My secret? I'm not. I never have been. It took me a long time to find the courage to

admit to myself that I'm not completely satisfied being a mother and even longer to realize that I have no reason to feel guilty about it.

Now, that doesn't mean that I do not enjoy staying home and caring for my family. It just means that I need something for myself. I have to have something for myself.

Maybe that's why I write.

Maybe that's why I can't seem to quit going back to school.

Maybe that's why I daydream. A lot.

It makes me wonder if other moms feel this way. What is it that they long for? What would satisfy them?

What is buried deep inside the mommies out there?

I believe my study was strengthened by my experiences because I've been in the throes of motherhood. In many ways I'm just a mom like the writers of the blogs I read. I am a part of the strong community formed by mommy bloggers and see exactly how powerful and capable these women are to survive even the most unexpected crisis. I exist within the safe haven of an audience and watch it grow into a community. I write to an audience of readers without fear of judgment and feel the overwhelming sense of security and community that develops. I have an identity, and online version of myself, and allow that to develop into a more authentic form of my voice.

But, I also think this created positionality in my research. Because I've been such a part of the blogging community I may have failed to look at certain aspects and ask the necessary questions. It was more difficult for me to take on the role of devil's advocate; I am rather partial to what blogging is capable of creating. I believe that putting myself into the role of researcher allowed me a better understanding of what is occurring through writing, but also the ability to show others the honor this phenomenon deserves. My

experiences with blogging have been only positive and beneficial to me as a writer and mother, but it is important to recognize that the experiences have possibly influenced my research. This acknowledgment of positionality, a careful research design, and appropriate sampling strategies worked to create a strong study that does not ignore the “who am I?”

COMMENTS *The Mommies Downstairs*

I miss walking into a room of strangers and having all eyes on me. Now they're on me because I have two beautiful little girls that glow. The eyes are from smiling elderly husbands and wives these days and not from handsome college 20 somethings. These men call me "ma'am" now. Wow - reality check. I know it sounds shallow, but it would be nice to be irresistible again - even if for a little while.

By **Anonymous** on **the mommies downstairs** on 9/3/09

I've been struggling with this for a while! Ever since I quit my job, actually. However, something has happened in the past few weeks and I finally feel like my heart is happy. I don't know if it's because I'm too busy with the two of them to even have a coherent thought, or if I've just finally figured out what I'm doing well enough to be satisfied. Being a SAHM is finally what I thought it'd be. But, I'm telling you...it's been an uphill battle for me to get to this place! I'm not sure why I've had a change of heart. I prayed long and hard for it, so maybe God finally said, "Ok, Alisha. Quit whining now." :) Who knows? Oh, and I'm TOTALLY with "Anonymous"! I miss being the cool, young, relatively hot teacher all the kids flocked to. Maybe that's one reason I'm more content at home... I'm no longer cool, young, or hot :)

By **Alisha B** on **the mommies downstairs** on 9/6/09

I've never seen that clip before! Thanks for sharing... haha... and phew... ;) I'm not alone, after all! In all seriousness, I love being a mommy more than anything but I am not cut out to be a stay at home mom. I can't handle it... I'm too high stress and I can't cook!

By **Loukia on the mommies downstairs** on 9/6/09

I am one of those moms who wanted to stay at home, but after the birth of my third child, I desperately needed an outlet. I am so thankful to my husband and you for encouraging me to write. I am a better mother for having done it.

By **Jennifer on the mommies downstairs** on 9/2/09

I want more! Lately i have really been thinking about a part time job. i am just not ready to put my little one in daycare. My hubby works a very sporadic schedule so i can't work when he is home.

By **WolfeFamily on the mommies downstairs** on 9/2/09

I wrote about something very similar. Feeling like, this isn't enough for me and doesn't truly make me happy. It is nice to know that you CAN say that out loud and the world won't come screeching to an end, even though I still feel guilty about it. That is why I started blogging too, a way to vent. I love your writing. Keep up the great work!

By **Sue on the mommies downstairs** on 9/2/09

I was just thinking about that very same clip earlier this week! I too was wondering if every mother was faced with a loss of identity after having kids. Staying home was never an option for me, I don't think I would even if it was.

By **Keelyn's Mom on the mommies downstairs** on 9/2/09

My interpretivist approach allowed me to recognize the position I take within the research and choose to attend to the issues and assumptions of my position. I needed to recognize that the knowledge and understanding I gained is situated among the relationships between people. As the researcher I needed to understand the central role I take within the interpretation of the data and that my role is active, not passive. I believe, though, that by embracing my role as researcher I not only established a better understanding of what is created through writing, but also the ability to connect with the authentic words of the writers themselves.

Not So Bad (published 11/29/11 on www.hooeycritic.com)

I've had this blog post buzzing in my head for a couple weeks now. It was one of those things that came to me after a deep discussion with my husband over my incessant state of overwhelmness. Is that even a word? Well, it is now.

Overwhelmness with school and writing my dissertation. Overwhelmness with the house. Overwhelmness with the kids' activity and schedules. It sometimes makes for a cranky mama. And by cranky I mean yelling at everyone, contemplating drinking, and writing to the government to encourage them to make Valium a required maternal supplement.

I had somewhat of a breakdown breakthrough a couple weeks ago when I finally admitted (out loud!) that I can't do it all. Do you know how much it freaked my shit out just to say it out loud?! To admit it to myself?! I can't be the perfect mother and wife. I can't keep a spotless house and still have time to analyze the thousand pages of data. I can't run myself ragged cooking and carpooling and dog training and running errands and still have time to breathe and exist in a somewhat lucid and functional state. I just

can't do it all.

And I thought to myself "Why the hell do I think that I should?!"

In that moment I realized I'm kind of a hypocrite. Congratulations, Neena, you pretty much suck.

I realized that I am spending thousands of hours and thousands of dollars to work on this PhD that is focused specifically on how mommy bloggers are creating a new dialogue of motherhood that is based on exposing everything we don't see in the magazines and within "The Jones'." It's about capturing the dialogue of their experiences of motherhood in all its raw, honest, less than perfect, authentic existence. It's about the underbelly - the real motherhood experience, not the "reality" we are presented within our culture.

Yet here I am not even living the life and the stories I study. Here I am trying so hard to be perfect at everything I do involving my role as a mother that I've been failing to admit (even to myself!) that perfection fucking sucks! It's not achievable. It doesn't make me happy. And, at the end of the day it doesn't make my kids love me any more or any less.

Hello, big giant light bulb. How many nights of overwhelming tears did it take get your lazy ass to come on?!

So in the midst of this breakdown breakthrough I made a decision. With the blessing of my husband I have hired a housekeeper.

Yes. I have hired someone to come in and clean my house every two weeks because I CAN'T DO IT ALL. She starts tomorrow and I couldn't be more thrilled. I couldn't be more excited to have at least this much off my shoulders for the time being.

And, I couldn't be more willing to yell to the world that not so perfect is really not so bad.

Screw you, Super Mom!

While it is easy to situate myself within the research and understand my positionality, it is important to present a thorough overview of the literature in order to locate the study within previous research. As stated earlier, there is minimal literature examining blogging as a phenomenon or as leisure activity. This gap within the literature, however, can begin to diminish by looking at the crossroads of feminism, leisure and motherhood, and media.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist Theory

The literature shows that leisure, motherhood, and feminism are integral parts of women's lives. It stands to reason that women experience some degree of self-discovery of voice that is related to how their lived experience is shared. It is also reasonable to understand that the leisure activities a woman chooses to engage in connect to the communities in which they are involved. The purpose of this study was to understand how mommy bloggers experience leisure and community development through the lived experience. The following questions guided this study: (1) Why do mothers blog?; (2) How does blogging create and/or facilitate community for mothers?; (3) How does participation in a leisure activity such as blogging provide a conduit for voice?; (4) How does blogging reinforce traditional notions or create new possibilities for motherhood? This literature review examines five major areas of literature relating to mommy blogging: (1) the role of feminism; (2) the connection between feminism and voice; (3) the connection between leisure and motherhood; (4) the role of media within feminism; and (5) the radical nature of the lived experience bloggers share.

Feminism is viewed as both a theory and a practice. It begins with a commitment to produce knowledge that makes a difference for women and works to challenge silences in research and politics in terms of women's experiences in a patriarchal society (Wearing, 1998). Feminism and feminist theory is best understood in historical waves.

While feminism is ultimately concerned with establishing and defending the rights of women and understanding why inequality between men and women exists, feminists do not always agree on how to combat this authority (Letherby, 2003). The first wave of Western feminism, often categorized as women's suffrage during the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, essentially focused on how women were 'different' from men and how circumstances such as class affected women and their experiences (Letherby, 2003, p. 49). The second wave of feminism employed the term 'difference' to bring to light inequalities women experience when compared to men. This wave, predominately occurring in the 1960's, was focused on women's liberation. The third wave of feminism began in the 1990's and concentrated on correcting the alleged failures of second wave feminism (Letherby, 2003). Contemporary feminist research and feminist theory stems from the culmination of each wave and the ever-changing lives of modern women. It concerns itself with the 'woman question' and is used as both a theory and a practice working to challenge the silences of mainstream research (Letherby, 2003).

Feminists have been stern critics of 'hygienic research'; the censoring out of the mess, confusion and complexity of doing research, so that the accounts bear little or no relation to the real events. But many of our accounts are full of silences too. These are not simply the outcome of personal choice, but of publishers' insistence that 'methodology' is boring and should be relegated to a short appendix. (Kelly, Burton, & Regan 1994, p. 46)

The Conservative Chick Attends a Women's Studies Class (Summer 2010)

What am I doing here?! I think I may have inadvertently signed up for the "completely wrong on so many levels" class! I just spent the last three hours feeling

unbelievably out of place. It's like I walked into the most liberal academic environment ever created with a big, fat sign that read, "Here comes the Conservative Oppressor!" where I proceeded to sit between an openly gay man and a lesbian man-hater.

"Hello, I'm a privileged White woman with strong conservative and moral beliefs. I'm also a stay-at-home mom that spends her days taking care of a husband and babies. Want to be friends?!"

I have never taken any sort of Women's Studies class before and I'm not what anyone would consider to be a feminist. I like my husband being the breadwinner. I believe a woman's place is home with the children. And, I don't really care if men make more money than women. I accept that men and women are different and I believe we rely on each other to be different and complementary as one of the foundations of human life. And I wonder if all of this effort for equality is doing irreparable damage to the family unit – something I am trying desperately to conserve.

But, now I find myself faced with the embodiment of everything I am not. The people in this class despise the word 'chicks' and think Obama is the answer to the world's problems. I have no problem calling someone a 'chick' and wouldn't vote for Obama if you paid me a million dollars. They shout for free reproductive healthcare for everyone that can't afford it. I say pay for it yourself. They talk of Palin being the devil. I find her charming and valuable. They speak of the need for change, the need for things to be equal, the need for everyone to have access. When asked how to accomplish all this they simply answer 'tax the rich.' I say that's an easy answer when it's not your money being taken. They seem angry all the time – so angry about everything. I say 'you wouldn't know what to do with yourselves if you weren't bitching about something?!'

They shout about stereotypes being so wrong. And, I see several of them just perpetuating the stereotypes they fight so hard to relinquish.

I don't anticipate this turning out well.

I wrote the preceding reflection during the first weeks of my first Women's Studies class. When I first began to puzzle feminism in an effort to understand my own subjectivity and positionality within it, I needed to write through my feelings. I needed to attempt to understand where my disillusionment with liberal feminism began and where I fall on the spectrum of feminist thought. I wanted to be able to examine the full scope of my experiences in order to engage in research with quality and recognition of my own experiences and influences.

I realize now that so much of what I felt when I wrote that reflection was based in my own confusion situated in a lack of a foundation with many issues related to social justice, women's studies, and politics. I based my feelings on longstanding stereotypes rather than on knowledge, understanding, and acceptance. Even now, to entertain such a question required me to face up to a reflection that is none too pretty. And, sharing such initial thoughts with professors who I admire is difficult. But, spending several semesters gaining exposure to a variety of feminist literature and viewpoints forced me to face up to my own insecurities, prejudices, and political beliefs. I suddenly questioned my actions, my life choices, and myself. There I stood, comfortable in my own shoes (or so I thought!) and wondered '*Is this who I am?*'

Facing the harsh reality of what I believed in relation to what I am continuously learning has made me come to understand and accept that, yes, I am a feminist.

Accepting this, though, made me realize that I need to find a way to blend feminism with many of my political, moral, and family values. I realize that accepting myself as a feminist means recognizing where the two parts of me meet. I consider that meeting to fall under the definition of a Conservative Feminist.

Conservative feminism first began to find its voice in a 1991 essay by Katherine Kersten entitled “What Do Women Want? A Conservative Feminist Manifesto” (Dillard, 2005). Acknowledging that a debt of gratitude is owed to “those who battled to open the voting booths, the universities, and the boardrooms to women,” Kersten focused her views on a belief that feminism is often “reduced to its essence” and fails to recognize a certain branch of women (Kersten, 1991 p. 4).

Often labeled as *enlightened conservatism*, or a conservative case against second wave feminism, conservative feminism believed that a feminist ideology with a leftist agenda is misrepresenting, ignoring, and manipulating the interests of many who fall under a conservative umbrella (Kersten, 1991). By doing so, feminism is failing to know and respect a certain group of women and, therefore, should not be claiming to truly represent all women. But, by accepting feminists who fall under a more conservative view, feminists would have the ability to represent the interests of even more women.

Kersten (1991) believed:

A conservative feminist is the architect of her own happiness. She finds happiness in striving to fulfill her responsibilities, to cultivate wisdom, to develop her talents, and to pursue excellence in all her endeavors. In everything she does, the conservative feminist’s watchword is ‘balance.’ In her private life, she strives to balance her obligations to others with her quest for personal fulfillment. In her

public life, she seeks to promote justice and equality, but also to safeguard individual freedoms. Her boldness in pursuit of reform is tempered by her respect for fundamental social values and institutions, which embody the collective wisdom of generations who sought the good life as fervently as she does (Kersten, 1991, p. 19).

When I read Kersten's words I realized that not only had I found my space within feminism, but that other women exist within it. What I had been searching for was a place where the efforts of women before me and current efforts of activism can be celebrated with joy and gratitude not with anger. I don't want to feel surrounded by rage or carry a perpetual chip on my shoulder because I am not a victim. I don't want to blame the system for my own shortcomings. I want to celebrate my family, my responsibilities – in whatever form they take – and recognize the unbelievable gift I have in choosing to stay home with my children. I want a space that acknowledges that ideal justice and ideal equality are not entirely possible because we humans are limited and flawed. Adversity is present because we are human, not because we are one gender or another. I want to feel that I am celebrated for my whole self, political views and all. And, finally, I want a space that aims “to help women judge *when* change – and *which* change is desirable” so that we can “avoid making matters worse, rather than better” (Dillard, 2005, p. 26). I am, after all, the architect of my own happiness. And, it is this foundational idea that I take to my research.

The literature examining feminism and motherhood is extensive, covering everything from motherhood and popular culture to activism to the mommy wars. A rich feminist tradition focused on motherhood brought such books as Adrienne Rich's *Of*

Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976) and Lauri Umansky's Motherhood Reconceived (1996) to the public eye. These texts brought to light the true experience of motherhood and pregnancy from historical, political, and religious perspectives with arguments that women should be defined not just by their child status, but also by the whole of their character (Kawash, 2011).

While the assumption is that that all motherhood, all mothering, all mothers are the same, mothers are embedded in different cultural and personal contexts which contradict sameness. The diversities of the contexts of mothering – for example the financial position of the mother; the number of children she has; her health; her education; her support or lack of it; the health of her children; her race; her class; whether she has a partner, what her partner may be like – all influence mothering as do the personalities of the mothers and of different children. (Porter, 2010, p. 10)

Despite decades of feminist attention to the gender gap in parenting, the responsibility of caring and raising children generally falls on mothers. The logistical work of raising children, including routines, guidance, development, and time, is extremely labor intensive for contemporary mothers (Arendell, 1997). “Mothering is symbolically laden, representing what is often characterized as the ultimate relational devotion, affection, and importance” with the dominant motherhood ideology in the United States being that of intensive mothering (Arendell, 1997, p. 2; Hays, 1996). This ideology centers on a good mother being self-sacrificing and entirely child centered with her time, energy, and emotions (Bassin et al., 1994). According to Chodorow and Contrato (1982) and Reese (1996) the traditional model of motherhood dates back to an

industrialist economy when paid labor separated from the home and works to reinforce a division of labor that is blatantly gender-biased. Lorber (1995) argued that motherhood and womanhood tend to be treated as one and the same identity. “Nurture is linked to femininity which, in turn, is tied to biological capacities to reproduce. Although gender is being contested and challenged and the related practices and arrangements of mothering transformed, mothering ideology endures” (Arendell, 1997, p. 3).

Some believe the mothering ideology continues to endure because of its link to the ideology of family and marriage as well as images in movies, television, and popular culture (Cheal, 1991). Mothers become critically important in maintaining family life, which leads to their identities and their leisure being consumed by their roles. According to Arendell (1997) the good mother is White, heterosexual, married, monogamous, and native born. She tends to be economically dependent on an income-earning husband and often does not have a job. These practices and the ideology it supports constitute a hegemonic motherhood where different ways of viewing motherhood are dismissed or critiqued in favor of more traditional gender inequalities.

Hegemonic motherhood is a patriarchal construction: it ties women’s identities to their roles as child raisers and nurturers of others more generally. Motherhood, no matter how closely conducted in accord with the ideological dictates, does not elevate its performers to the social and economic status experienced by men collectively. Rather, hegemonic motherhood remains subordinated to and under the force of hegemonic masculinity.” (Arendell, 1997, p. 4).

If contemporary feminists argue for both “social and cultural changes that support mothering as an empowering rather than oppressive experience,” it can begin with the inclusion of the mothering voice, (D’Arcy, Turner, Crockett, & Gridley, 2012, p. 31).

Feminism and Voice

Voice is central to feminism and feminist theory. It is pivotal in research concerned with narratives, perspectives, and subjectivities of women (Krumer-Nevo, 2009). One of the aims of voice in feminist research is to treat the voices of participants as knowledge stemmed from their lived experiences, troubles, and triumphs (Krumer-Nevo, 2009). “This is a multilayered process of balancing and rebalancing ‘private’ words saturated with anecdotes of everyday lives, relationships, emotions, and subjectivities, with ‘public’ generalized words connoting structures, institutions, and policies,” (Krumer-Nevo, 2009, p. 291). According to Cairns (2009), the concept of voice has historically been associated with liberation narratives responsible for ‘giving voice’ to marginalized populations in an attempt to shift the power structure to those with less authority.

Within second-wave feminist politics, voice became symbolic of women’s self-definition, and was embraced as a practice of ‘speaking back’ to disembodied, masculine forms of knowledge by emphasizing the local and embodied ways of knowing that emerge from women’s own lived experiences. (Cairns, 2009, p. 324)

In that respect, discussions of voice must tend to the historical context of the subject because that context brings with it a vast array of experiences that influence and

create the voice of the individual. The goal, then, is to capture what is ‘real’ and authentic as well as how the ‘real’ is socially constructed (Cairns, 2009).

The counter argument to what Cairns (2009) presented on ‘giving voice’ lies in the fact that we, as researchers, do not give voice to anyone. Rather, we provide an avenue or outlet for an otherwise silenced, but existing, voice to be heard. According to Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997), voice is a metaphor that applies not only to point of view, but also a woman’s experiences and development and is inextricably connected to a sense of voice, mind, and self.

It has become the unifying theme that links the chapters in our stories of women’s ways of knowing and of the long journey they must make if they are to put the knower back into the known and claim the power of their own minds and voices (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997, p. 19)

Gilligan (1983) defined the central concept of voice as “something like what people mean when they speak of the core of the self. Voice is natural and also cultural... voice is a powerful psychological instrument and channel, connecting inner and outer worlds... voice is a new key for understanding the psychological, social, and cultural order” (p. xvi). Conducting research with a feminist lens requires me as the researcher to acknowledge my epistemological and ideological stance. I need to be aware of my own knowledge and the ideas and beliefs that build that knowledge. I also need to be reflexive, acknowledge my motives and concerns, and use my research as “a strategic tool for activism and intervening in public and private inequality” (Villaverde, 2005, p. 107).

Gilligan, Spencer, Weinburg, and Burch (2003) introduced a method of analysis that focused on a voice-centered guide to qualitative research. This method of analysis, while not strictly based in feminist theory, is (as feminist researchers are) concerned with “the ways in which a person’s voice can be overridden by the researcher and their [feminist researchers, cultural psychologists, and psychological anthropologists] cautions about voicing over the truth of another” (p. 158). Gilligan (1983) originally developed this method through her research on moral development and identity. The approach is framed using the questions: *Who is speaking, to whom, telling what stories, about what relationship, and what are the larger societal and cultural frameworks?* Also important, the researcher explicitly portrays his/her own voice in the process. This method, sometimes known in conjunction with *experience feminism*, would “require active engagement of the researcher throughout the analysis,” and allow the researcher to keep the voice of the storytellers intact while constructing their narratives (Gilligan, 1983, p. 169).

There is, however, a struggle between feminist inclusions of voice within feminist theory. As stated earlier, feminism has often been criticized for only including the plight of the white, middle-class, and heterosexual woman. By excluding the voice of ‘The Other Women’ feminists have missed an opportunity to become united in dialogue. It is through that dialogue that feminist theory and feminist social action have the opportunity to better-overcome gender inequalities (Yeste, Ferrada, & Rulz, 2011). But, when that union is reached, the possibilities to extract a true, authentic voice becomes priceless.

According to Marks (1984), experience has become the sole guarantee of authenticity in writing and speech. “If a woman, whether in a consciousness raising

group or in an academic feminist setting begins to speak and states ‘In my experience,’ there is respectful silence and unanimous belief in her words,” (Marks, 1984, p. 101).

This idea of experience is at the center of a discourse that both believes in truth and limits its origins to autobiographical confessions. It rests on the assumption that when we leave behind the texts and documents of high male culture, we find pure experience in diaries, oral histories, letters, something infinitely more precious than avowedly literary texts, something that is the exact equivalence of presence, authenticity, and reality. (Marks, 1984, p. 101)

Marks (1984) believed that what has traditionally been dubbed human experience is, in reality, male experience and the transmission of those experiences is generally done by men. But, if women are given the opportunity to write and talk about their own experiences then have the ability to change the voice and the cultural representation that the media portrays.

In the context of mommy blogging, voice has the ability to be authentically based in the experiences of the writers. Mommy bloggers have a human experience that they are sharing in a context that is attempting to escape the male influence. Men are not relaying the experiences; women are sharing their experience in a manner that feels safe and situated within a supportive community. This means that while there will be obvious cultural influence of the male gender that feeds into the experience, it is not inherently gender biased. No one knows the experience of motherhood better than mothers. By sharing their words, their experiences, and their stories, their voice has the ability to be heard in an authentic form.. One of the core issues in feminist theory is the struggle between recognizing that oppressive environments have historically limited the

opportunities for women, minorities, and marginal groups and the need to identify the sources of individual resistance in those contexts (Ruiz, 2009). Personal agency is often considered a source of feminist resistance (Ruiz, 2009). Personal agency refers to “a subjective awareness that one is initiating, executing, and controlling one's own volitional actions in the world,” (Jeannerod, 2003, p. 1). This begs the question, though, are mothers oppressed?

Leisure and Motherhood

I Can't Do It All (published 4/26/2011 on www.hoeycritic.com)

I don't think I can do this. I try, but I'm just not sure anymore. I put on this façade that I have it all together, but the truth of the matter is I'm one step away from falling off the edge. I lie in bed at night watching the minutes tick by.

12:23...12.24...12:25. The ceiling fan spins overhead rotating at the same speed as my mind that I can't seem to turn off.

I think about the line of antibiotics in the fridge for strep throat or bronchitis or pink eye. Or whose snack day is this week and who needs ice cream money. I remember I needed to get the dog's stitches removed a week ago and that puppy class got moved to a different time. I think about finding the time to sign up for swimming lessons or schedule ballet camp or attend karate graduation. I think about who's uniform needs to be cleaned and how to properly sew on patches – who has early release from school and who's on which county's school calendar – who has a conference and who has a dental appointment. I think about adenoids being removed, tongues being clipped, newly discovered gluten intolerance that will dramatically change the way I must cook and pack lunches and prepare snacks. I think about forgetting to stop and buy that can of

crushed tomatoes and how I must produce dinner one key ingredient short. I think about coordinating play dates and babysitting, final's week, and teacher appreciation luncheons. I shout things like:

'Who peed on the floor?'

'Just buckle yourself in the car already!'

'Your daddy will have to fix it when he gets home.'

'No, I don't know if God's last name is Christ!'

I think about stats finals and found poetry and data analysis. I wonder if my husband thinks we have enough sex or if he still finds me attractive or if I should just buy the stupid lingerie. I count grams of sugar, rolls of toilet paper, money for field trips, minutes until bedtime. I wonder if I give enough hugs, say 'I Love you' enough, or if I coddle when life calls for toughness. I wonder if I should have told the truth about what happened to the goldfish or if I should visit my mother more or if I sent a birthday card to my niece. I think about the ring in the toilet, the colored bubble stain on the wall, the strange smell in the dishwasher. I think about editing papers for friends, writing letters of recommendation, answering distressed calls over spring break, the guilt of missing a preschool concert for a last Qual class. I think about the cucumber seedling left in the car, the school zinnia project that the cats knocked over, if I locked the front door.

The minutes continue ticking..I wonder if I'm good enough at any of this. I wonder about the girl I was before all this. Am I still her? Is she me? Will either of us ever be good enough to do it all? The ceiling fan keeps spinning. The thoughts, my mind keeps spinning. 12:26...12:27...The rest of the house sleeps as I contemplate the balance of their worlds on my shoulders.

With routines, schedules, and daily activities filling more hours than there are in a day, how is it possible for mothers to find a balance between parental duties and leisure, or time to themselves free from their responsibilities in the home? Many mothers would question if a balance is even possible. Motherhood in the 21st century is a strange mix of parenting, management, organization, and crowd control. While raising healthy, happy children is still an outcome strived for, motherhood has become a balancing act of what is required and what is expected. Lives filled with play dates, volunteering, household duties, extracurricular activities, the maintenance of careers, and school projects limits the amount of time any parent, especially mothers as the dominate caregivers, can devote to themselves or their leisure. The outcome is a busy life filled with stress, chaos, overscheduled children, a complete lack of attention to self, and an indication of the power structure held within domestic discourse. There is a stereotype that exists that centers on mothers taking a secondary role to that of their children. In many ways they are no longer seen as anything more than their role and experiences as mothers. Mothers put their focus and commitment into raising their children in this modern attempt at being Super Moms that they are allowing themselves to fall by the wayside and their own needs, non-parental identity, and leisure to become less than secondary.

Historically motherhood has been associated with characteristics of women (Hoare, 1967). While some researchers have limited motherhood to someone who does the relational and logistical work of raising children (Medina & Magnuson, 2009), others see it as a socially constructed “set of activities and relationships involved in nurturing and caring for people,” (2009). The social construction of motherhood has been studied in the past with numerous researchers agreeing that motherhood and identity, both separate and

together, are influenced by the norms, expectations, and experiences we have within the context of our social existence (Hays, 1996). The idea of motherhood being socially constructed allows the focus of the role to be centered on women while portraying it as a notion of femininity and a reinforcement of a woman's gender identity (Hays, 2009). But, while the definition of motherhood is fairly clear, modern standards and expectations for motherhood seem to be growing and changing.

The social roles and of modern mothers are expanding, the tasks required to balance this role are increasing as are expectations, and the struggle to maintain time for oneself is slipping away (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Mothers are continuously striving to meet these new social roles, including trying to “nurture, schedule, taxi, and feed their families,” all while maintaining a sense of self (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Mothers are spending their days working toward becoming whatever it is they perceive they should be due to observations that a Super Mom existence is the social norm. That existence maintains a mother as a balanced, secure, organized, patient, helpful, willing, and able woman compete with great hair, perfectly ironed outfits, well-behaved children, a great marriage, and a pristinely balanced life. Medina & Magnuson (2009) believed that the self-sacrificing nature of mothers enables them to take on the role of an agent, serving the needs of those around them before their own, and thus reinforcing an image of an *ultimate mother* – being everything to everyone. The Super Mom expectation is, therefore, reinforced.

This attempt to balance external perceptions and internal struggles deserves further examination. Why are mothers falling victim to an image set forth by media, society, expectations, and those that lack their lived experience with motherhood? Why

does the attempt at this unattainable image leave depression, anxiety, relationship problems, stress, increased guilt, and a sense of deviance if mothers choose an avenue different from the social norm (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). A mother's time is no longer her own and the result is a band of women that have neglected themselves, their leisure, and frequently their the identity (Wearing, 1998). Mothers also allow their own personal needs to fall by the wayside while trying to be the perfect parent. Everything from personal interests, downtime, and once loved leisure activities are dismissed in favor of carpool, extracurricular activities, homemade cookies, and volunteering for the PTO fundraiser. The irony of this is that they are working so hard to avoid any sense of neglect with their children, but are perfectly willing to neglect themselves. Their preferences for alone time, relaxation, leisure, and recreation are secondary to the desire to help their children with their needs, thus creating a constraint and further reinforcing that internal power struggle (Owens, 2008).

Leisure constraints have been studied in a variety of settings and contexts (Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006; Samdahl & Jekubovich, 1997). The consensus seems to be that leisure constraints hinder peoples' ability to participate in leisure activities or to achieve a desired level of satisfaction from that participation (Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006).

Shaw (1994) noted that women are particularly susceptible to leisure constraints. This susceptibility often results from "traditional gender stereotypes, such as the types of activities stereotypically seen as feminine and the pressure for bodily attractiveness" (Shaw, 1994, p. 9). The pressures can result in women feeling constrained to partake in certain leisure activities such as those that society deems appropriate for women or that

would improve their physical appearance. In these cases, women still participated in leisure activities. Societal pressures, however, resulted in constraints by restricting some women from choosing leisure activities for enjoyment or other benefits. (Liechty, Freeman, & Zabrieskie, 2006, p. 313)

Lack of time for leisure has been well documented as a major constraint and point of contingency for mothers (Currie, 2004). Working mothers, in particular, have expressed major concern over the lack of leisure time available (Currie, 2004). Smith (1995) and McMurry (1999) argued that mothers are often left with little time to attend to their own needs and have limited opportunities for self-improvement. This lack of time for leisure has been documented as being detrimental to women's mental and physical health (Currie, 2004). This begs the question, though, how can mothers begin to reconcile the damage caused by neglecting their own needs and leisure for so long? Is this neglect, and ultimately the power struggle just a leftover effect of the pristine media image of the 1950's housewife creating an endless supply of perfect casseroles? Or, have the modern conveniences that were intended to give the gift of time merely just supplying more demands to an already overbooked parenting schedule? And what of the joy and fulfillment of motherhood? Do those moments counter the effects of the lack of leisure time? It is possible, though, that by working to create a personal space specifically for the leisure of the mother herself, women can begin to reconcile the damage caused by such neglect.

A mother's leisure space can take many forms, including mental space, time space, or activity space (Currie, 2004). It can include daydreaming while working on household chores, resting in a comfortable chair, or participating in favored activities

such as walking, social time with friends, or taking an exercise class. The benefits that come from a mother being able to create a space for leisure include everything from a feeling of enjoyment to decreased stress to even a much-needed distraction from the pressures of trying to be *Super Moms*. Mothers have the potential to gain perceived improvement in body image as well and a correction of perceived body flaws (Currie, 2004). Brehm and Ianotta (1998) found that participating in an exercise class and escaping the pressures of motherhood for even a short period of time allowed women to improve their confidence and self-esteem by reshaping their bodies in what they considered to be a ‘beauty treatment.’ The flip side of this, though, is that mothers may engage in the dark side of leisure, such as the use and abuse of drugs, to provide moments of escape and leisure in a world where it otherwise might not be achievable.

Taking time-out for leisure allows mothers to value themselves and challenge the restrictions of personal freedom. It provides an opportunity for mothers to resist the normalizing control of stereotyped motherhood discourse. The prospect of women engaging in leisure purely for pleasure is antithetical to societal expectations that we should put others’ needs before our own. A woman’s sense of self-care through leisure or of her own self-worth has often been eroded. (Currie, 2004, p. 238)

By learning to recapture the time and mental acceptance necessary to participate in leisure, mothers have the opportunity to recreate the labels ‘mother,’ ‘wife,’ and even ‘caretaker’ in a solid attempt to vocalize the validity of leisure and the necessity of it within their lives. Wearing (1998), one of the prominent feminist leisure researchers, focused her work on how leisure may increase women’s independence in lives

constrained by patriarchal structures, including one study showing how the leisure experience can affect identity and enable resistance (Wearing, 1990). She pulled from Foucault's work on discourse, power, subjectivity, and resistance to conclude that "for some women resistance to the domination inherent in traditional passive, submissive feminine stereotypes is possible" through leisure (Wearing, 1998, p. 53). With this foundation, women can take control of submissive judgments of those around them, improve their emotional health, rediscover themselves as individuals not defined by labels, and create opportunities for genuine, honest discourse (Currie, 2004).

Power, according to Foucault, forms knowledge and produces discourse.

Resistance can involve uprising of knowledge previously discredited. The establishment of leisure as a valid concept for women, and the popular rising of the notion of leisure as an outlet for mothers to deservedly experience and feel the freedom associated with leisure, are examples of subjugated judgments that have the potential to form alternative and legitimate discourses for women," (Currie, 2004, p. 238).

By acknowledging their need for leisure and working to eliminate the constraints placed on them either by themselves or by society, women are quickly discovering exactly how to embrace leisure and all its subsequent benefits.

The key to mothers' success in leisure is a sense of empowerment (Parry, 2005). Mothers want the sense of worth that leisure activities bring and the separation of that worth from their role in raising children (Parry, 2005). They want to choose their leisure activities with intentionality. Green (1998) noted that the importance of women's leisure experiences "should not be underestimated, especially in terms of their potential for

resistance and renewal for women enmeshed in patriarchal cultures that continue to define them primarily as (heterosexual) wives and mothers" (p. 172). Feminist researchers have encouraged a view that emphasizes women as individuals within a family rather than "components of or anchors to the social structure of family" (Bialeschki, 1994, p. 58). Currie (2004) noted that by attempting to change the dominant discourse on motherhood, women have the chance to transform the discourse and embrace their right to "time and space for their own enjoyment and development" (p. 226). This resistance would enable women to challenge aspects of their subordination and the ideology of motherhood that normally has them caring for everyone but themselves, and, in turn, re-negotiate their place in leisure, (Currie, 2004).

Motherhood and Media

While mommy bloggers may be the first to take their parenting experiences to wider borders by publishing on the Internet, they certainly are not the first women to share the humor and chaos of parenting. Erma Bombeck began writing about her experiences with parenting in the 1960's. While she began publishing her stories as a newspaper column, her books including *The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank* and *Motherhood: The Second Oldest Profession* became wildly popular for their use of humor, often self-deprecating, wit, and wisdom about motherhood. Bombeck gained considerable respect and affection for her stories thanks to her incredible narrative voice and her ability to capture the "absurdity of suburban life" (Foster, 2012, p. 27).

A few weeks later [after hearing a lecture by Betty Friedan in 1964], I walked into a suburban weekly newspaper and asked for a job as housewife-columnist who "reveled in a comic world of children's pranks, eccentric washing machines, and

parents' night at the PTA." Later, when my husband came home, I said, "Guess what? I got a part-time job today." "Doing what?" he asked. "I'm going to write funny things that happen to our family." "You can't be serious," he said. "You're going to expose our personal lives to the public, exploit our children, and hold up our intimate moments together for the world to see?" "I get three bucks a column," I said. He smiled. "Why didn't you say so?" (Bombeck, 1994, p. 103).

While Erma Bombeck may have been one of the most prolific and well known writers to begin looking at motherhood and suburban life with a sense of humor, she was not the last. She paved the way for future women to do the same. In the 1980's and 1990's female comedians began tackling many of the same subjects as Bombeck. Roseanne Barr and Brett Butler both transformed their comedy routines into popular television shows that showed a much less perfect side of parenting than viewers were used to seeing in such shows as *Father Knows Best*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Leave It To Beaver* (Foster, 2012).

Many feminist scholars said women have historically been depicted as sex object or devoted homemaker "within the bounds of womanhood – piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" and tend to represent an almost mythical idea of family (Kim, 2008). This image of women as submissive beauties and homemakers worked to reinforce a hegemonic belief that men retain power over women. Hall (1982) defined hegemony as a situation in which a certain social group can exert total authority over other subordinate groups to the point where the power of the dominant group feels natural and justifiable. But, Bombeck and other female comedians gave light to a different side

of domesticity and, in their own way, worked to begin changing that submissive image with a humorous voice.

One of the key concepts of feminist media studies, and feminism as a whole, is the idea of the gaze. Tied closely to the concept of gaze is the place of cultural studies within feminism. According to Van Zoonen (1994) culture and representation have always been a significant battleground for contemporary feminism. Feminists are constantly struggling for a proper representation of women within the confines of feminism, culture, and media (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 5). Also known as spectatorship, Van Zoonen (1994) defined the patriarchal gaze as “the display of woman as a spectacle to be looked at, subjected to the gaze of the (male) audience” (p. 87). The use of women’s bodies as objects of desire and decoration stretches through pornography, advertisements, television shows, fashion photography, and movies (Van Zoonen, 1994). The media often uses the female body and the intended gaze as a means of selling products or advertising services and argues that it is the fate of the female to be looked at, to be the object of the gaze. While many feminist theorists (Anderson, 1993; Hennessy, 1993; Steeves, 1987) try to understand the devaluation of women in society, the media is often responsible for the continued belief that women function as a part of that intended male gaze.

It is argued that women’s position as oppressed in patriarchal capitalism has been reproduced and maintained by the aide of ideological practice via media. And studies of media representation have been conducted to discover how gender portrayals in media texts function to impose the dominant ideology (Grossberg & Treichler, 1987, p. 273).

This image of women as submissive beauties and homemakers has worked to reinforce a hegemonic belief that men retain power over women. Hall (2008) defined hegemony as a situation in which a certain social group can exert total authority over other subordinate groups to the point where the power of the dominant group feels natural and justifiable. Many scholars, though, have asserted that there are two separate realms of media discourse (Kim, 2008). In the first realm, known as the ‘natural hegemonic realm,’ social constructions are presented as the natural reality that is unchallenged and taken for granted by the media. The second realm, known as the ‘contested realm,’ is where social groups struggle with meaning and the complex nature of the dominant ideology (Kim, 2008). It is in this second realm that feminist scholars and feminist media scholars begin to construct their own foundation and theoretical assumptions.

Feminist scholars have also worked to change the hegemonic ideology of representation of women within the media. By creating a discourse about the images of women in the media, feminists have begun to raise awareness about the detrimental effects such images have for women (Van Zoonen, 1994). Their sense of well-being and beliefs of what is truly feminine have been challenged through cultural messages and images of beauty and weight. “The cultural industry’s prescriptions for women to be beautiful and slender – a pleasure to look at – has produced a generation of American girls and women who suffer from eating disorders like bulimia and anorexia nervosa” (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 87). Inundated with cultural messages of beauty, femininity, and appearance, Van Zoonen (1994) believed that gender is quite possibly the crucial component to the study of culture and women are struggling with their identity within the culture.

In the past women have based their identity, their expectations as mothers and wives, and their expectations of beauty on what a magazine or television show tells them is beautiful and correct. The clothes, the shoes, the correct weight, the right hair, the appropriate way to raise a family – are being presented in record numbers to women as the ‘right’ way to exist within as a member of their gender. But, by raising awareness to the negative effects these images are having on women, feminist scholars and writers like Erma Bombeck have worked to undo some of the damage under the guise of resistance. bell hooks (1990) believed that “the engagement with culture enables feminists to do intellectual work that connects with habits of being, forms of artistic expression, and aesthetics that inform the daily life of writers and scholars as well as mass populations.” (p. 31).

A Radical Act?

In the past critics mommy bloggers have faced criticism for what they do. In 2005 David Hochman wrote a piece for the New York Times called “Mommy and Me,” where he profiled numerous big names in the blogosphere. Within his article he portrayed mommy bloggers as ‘navel gazers’ who are really nothing more than narcissistic women. He troubled many readers by stating:

Today’s parents – older, more established and socialized to voicing their emotion – may be uniquely equipped to document their children’s lives, but what they seem most likely to complain and marvel about is their own. The baby blog in many cases is an online shrine to parental self-absorption.” (Friedman & Calixte 2009)

Hochman went on to discuss how mothers were spending too much time on their hobby and, in turn, fostering a “child-hurting culture of motherhood,” (Hochman 2005).

Mommy bloggers were quick to respond to his criticism. In particular, one mother, Melissa Summers, noted,

In the end what this article shows me, once again, is that we can't win no matter what we do. If we aren't worried about our kids, we're neglectful. If we think (and write) about the things our kids do we're called hand wringing obsessives. Hooray New York Times for capturing the essence of mothering! (Suburban Bliss, “A near miss.” January 30, 2005)

But, the most memorable outcry to criticism came during Blogher 2005, the first ever conference dedicated to blogging women. While the harsh criticism from the media was certainly not appreciated, it was the lack of respect from others in the blogosphere that created the most vocal outcry from mommy bloggers (Friedman & Calixte 2009). Other women in the blogosphere attacked mommy bloggers for their focus on children and domestic concerns, thus marginalizing them within a specific stereotype. One participant at the conference made the following claim: “If you women stopped blogging about yourselves you could change the world,” (Friedman & Calixte 2009).

Faced with harsh criticism from the media regarding mommy bloggers' focus on children and domestic concerns, Alice Bradley, a well-known, respected, and long-time mommy blogger, made a statement against the claims that blogging reinforces a marginalized population within a specific stereotype: “Mommy blogging is a radical act!” Alice's words from the 2005 Blogher Conference immediately became an activist mantra of sorts against the media's portrayal of motherhood. There was a sense of acceptance

among mothers as they shared the narratives of their experiences. They wanted their medium to show the real side of motherhood in all its messiness, tears, and actions laced with guilt. This was their way of escaping the stereotype of motherhood in the most raw and emotional way possible.

At the time Bradley's statement was like a battle cry, prompting mothers and mommy bloggers across the blogosphere to get all teary-eyed, come together, and raise their fists in "virtual solidarity." They were experiencing a different perspective through the blog world that mainstream media and critic were not accustomed to hearing. The audience they encountered online accepted them for who they were, faults and all. It was real mothers sharing real stories. It was a moment when mothers were working to bring a sense of unity, equality, and a voice to those that live outside of a media constructed stereotype.

We readers and authors of parenting blogs are looking for is a representation of the authentic experience that we're not getting elsewhere. We sure as hell aren't getting it from the parenting magazines. If you want to find out how to make nutritious muffins that look like kitty cats, you can read those. But a parenting magazine will never help you feel less alone, less stupid, less ridiculous. This is the service I think parenting blogs provide - we share our lopsided, slightly hysterical, often exaggerated but more or less authentic experiences. If one blogger writes about, say, her bad behavior at the doctor's office, then maybe at some point, some freaked-out new mother is going to read that and feel a little better-less stupid, less ridiculous-about her own breakdown at the pediatrician's. (Friedman & Calixte 2009).

Though fraught with tensions and conflict regarding powerful issues, the relationship between feminism and media is one that must be looked at in terms of resistance, oppression, and activism with an understanding that fault cannot be pointed only at the media. While I chose to engage in feminist research, it is my responsibility as a feminist and a blogger to bring awareness and voice to a small, often misrepresented community of women. It is time for mommy bloggers to have their moment of representation in academic scholarship.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Introduction

The connection between leisure, feminism, and motherhood is well documented. The emotional benefits for mothers engaging in leisure include increases in self esteem, connection to their roles outside of motherhood, decreased stress, and a sense of empowerment (Currie, 2004). What is unclear, however, is how mothers who participate in blogging as a leisure activity contribute to the discourse of motherhood and through the lived experience. The purpose of this research project was to understand how the lived experience of blogging contributes to development of voice and community for mothers. This chapter includes an overview of interpretivism and narrative inquiry, the design of the study, sample selection, methods of data collection, and data analysis techniques. In addition, the issue of creative analytic practice is discussed.

Interpretivism

With its foundation based in understanding over truth, interpretivism is proving a useful approach to studying numerous areas of social science, including leisure. While contemporary leisure studies researchers are embracing interpretive methodology, specifically narrative inquiry, to develop a better understanding of leisure, other researchers are using it as a means to understand the context of online worlds, including blogging and online gaming. Choosing an interpretivists approach and narrative analysis as a methodology was highly central to the fate of my own research on mommy bloggers,

specifically in the areas of data collection, analysis, limitations, representation, and questions of quality. Furthermore, my choice in using Interpretivism and narrative analysis as my research foundation begged to examine the potential methodological nuances that might exist between studying the “real” world versus an on-line one.

Interpretivism was born out of a need to escape the excess of scientific approaches to social science (Willis, 2007). While most research in the early 1900’s was still based on a Positivist approach that focused on absolute truth, external reality, and the development of theory, interpretivists wanted to escape the boundaries of the scientific method and develop understanding in context (Willis, 2007). Rooted in the thinking of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Husserl, interpretivism, at its core, centers on the idea that the nature of reality is socially constructed and that meaning making happens not only in context, but also within the social process of a group (Willis, 2007; Prasad, 2005). Central to the interpretivist paradigm is the idea that the reality we know is socially constructed and that human interpretation is the starting point for increasing knowledge about the social world (Prasad, 2005). “Humans in groups, and using the tools and traditions of the group (including language), construct meaning and thus are able to share their understanding with other members of the group,” (Willis, 2007, p. 97). Social construction dictates that research is best understood by the members of the group being studied (Angen, 2000).

The purpose of interpretivist research is not to find universal truths, but to understand and reflect upon the socially constructed reality of a specific group. The context in which this understanding stems is inherently important to the belief structure of Interpretivism (Willis, 2007). Understanding the context in which data is gathered is

necessary to understanding the ultimate reality of that group. “The question of interpreting data in context highlights the concern Interpretivists have about the *situatedness* of knowledge. Thus, the goal of interpretive research is an understanding of a particular situation or context much more than the discovery of universal laws or rules,” (Willis, 2007, p. 99).

Smith (1984) suggested that it is time for researchers to forego the traditionalist ideas of objectivity, truth, and external reality and appreciate that research is moving beyond method. “It is this inherent capacity for meaningful social construction that Interpretivists term as being subjective since it departs from the idea of a fixed external reality” (Prasad, 2005, p. 14). By moving beyond the scientific method side of research and accepting something other than an external reality, researchers will begin to see the knowledge available both to them and the groups they study.

While interpretivism can serve as a theoretical foundation for a variety of social sciences, it is exceptionally beneficial to the study of leisure. According to Russell (2005) leisure not only helps to shape who we are as human beings, but it is also a key component to understanding the human experience and living life on our own terms.

To have leisure is one of the earliest dreams of human beings – to be free to pursue what we want, to spend our time meaningfully in pleasurable ways, to live in a state of grace. Since leisure is a complex concept that has different meanings depending on the people, place, and time, defining it requires journeys to different people, places, and times...leisure is so basic to being human. (Russell, 2005, p. 4)

Interpretivism, itself, is meant to capture the human experiences in the context of social situations. If the people, places, and times of leisure shape the meaning that it

holds, interpretivism would be sensitive to this and allow for those meanings and understandings to become central. Countless leisure activities take place within a social context and, in turn, people create their own realities surrounding those contexts. Interpretivism allows the researcher to honor those contexts and the understanding that comes through the participation and experiences of those engaged. By combining this approach with the study of leisure, researchers have the ability to recognize the meanings people construct through their participation in social and cultural life. Even more so, as the leisure experience differs for each individual, Interpretivism allows for the possibility of all those individually constructed realities to shape our knowledge and understanding of the social context in which they exist.

Objectivity is not the basis of Interpretivism; it is not concerned with being completely unbiased and disregarding the subjects' previous experiences. Instead, interpretivism embraces subjectivity and tends to reflect the perspectives through which people view reality. By ignoring concrete facts and truths, interpretivism has the ability to include the emotions, experiences, and histories of people. Because so much of our personal leisure experiences are based within the context of our social status, upbringing, and lived experiences, it is only natural to want those factors acknowledged within the boundaries of any research. Interpretivism allows for this acknowledgement.

Just a Mom (published 8/12/10 on www.hooeycritic.com)

It's not often that I feel really out of place. Most of the time I can find a niche just about anywhere or learn to fit with my surroundings. I tend to be able to make conversation fairly easily and I'm not really intimidated by trying something new. In a group of bloggers I feel at home. I feel like I've found my people - those that just 'get you' - no

judgment, no explanations.

What I adore the most about being back in school is that it feels like the right fit - similar to the way blogging does. I've talked before about the good friends I've made and the sense of community that has sprung from the most odd ensemble of people. We just clicked.

But things can just as easily un-click when you least expect it.

As much as I wish I felt like I fit this year I don't think I do. That world that I became so attached to has morphed into something with new people, new offices, and new opportunities - none of which I'm a part of. I'm not teaching a class or diving into a fancy, new assistantship. I'm not working with a team on a publishable paper or presenting at a conference.

I'm just a mom.

That somehow got accepted into a PhD program.

I'll never be in a situation where I can experience this the way they can. I'll never live close enough to enjoy a game of tennis on a whim or go out for drinks. I'll never be involved enough or close enough to participate in office banter and jokes. I'll never be a part of the same world they are.

I'm just a mom.

I've never understood why using the phrase 'just a _____' was so harsh until now. It's like being segregated from something by no fault of your own - just the circumstances of life. I sat in a room yesterday with people that I felt so incredibly close to just a few short months ago. But, in the moment, I realized that connection had passed. It was as if an entire dance was happening around me and I just couldn't quite find the rhythm.

Somehow I missed the boat.

Somehow being just a mom that happened to get accepted to a PhD program is not enough to break down the barriers that exist merely from having slightly different circumstances. Somehow I've ended up on the sidelines, without a niche, and farther from being a part of the department family than I ever thought possible.

Existing in two worlds is difficult, but I thought I'd done pretty well until now.

But, at the end of the day, I must realize that some things just don't fit. And, that's okay.

It has to be.

So instead I blog. I put it here because "here" is the one place that actually gets it - gets the 'just a mom' part of me and welcomes that stance with solidarity and understanding.

I say these things here because nowhere else can my voice be heard so clearly. And that makes the fact that my worlds don't collide a little less hurtful.

Choosing an interpretive approach for my research enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of mommy bloggers through the lens of their blogs and their stories. By using this approach with my research I was able to explore value systems, motivations, attitudes, and behaviors of those women that engage in blogging as their leisure activity. Interpretive research also allowed me to understand my own role within the study and engage in reflexive practices in the form of journaling throughout the research process. Blogging/Journaling, itself, is a reflexive practice – it would seem illogical to study the context without engaging in reflexive practices throughout the process. This allowed for a sense transparency within the process and the finished ‘product.’ I was able to be conscious of myself my relationship to my participants and myself as a unique individual

as well as describe and explain the experience of blogging from the perspective of those involved. While there is certainly value in numbers and quantitative research, I believe that this phenomenon is better understood from the standpoint of human experience. Through qualitative research I worked to interpret and better understand the multifaceted layers of mommy blogging and the implications of any previous qualitative data.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is one methodology available to researchers working within an Interpretivist framework. Narrative inquiry is defined as “using a number of connecting approaches to produce a contextualized and contiguous interpretation and storied account of the particular situation(s),” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 8). It is the way humans account for the actions, events, and situations around them that works to shape their everyday experiences. While it can be used with a variety of theoretical frameworks, narrative inquiry can fit within a multitude of epistemological and ontological stances and still allow participants to be to be involved or for the researcher to take a more inward focus (Butler-Kisber, 2010). While there is no perfect match for narrative inquiry, Butler-Kisber (2010) emphasized the need for researchers engaging in narrative analysis to be clear in their process in “transparent and reflexive ways,” (p. 9). By taking a clear and reflexive stance, researchers will be better enabled to meet their narrative inquiry goals.

If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people, if we wish for the union between poetics and science, or if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we should value the narrative.

(Richardson, 1995, p. 218-219)

Narrative inquiry has the ability to enable researchers to understand the human element in a subjective and contextual nature (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Chase (2005) suggested that there are five major approaches to narrative inquiry. Narrative psychologists examine how stories affect the lives of people. Narrative sociologists look at the content and process of storytelling and identity construction. Other sociologists use narrative inquiry to examine language and the construction of meaning. And, anthropologists use narrative inquiry to merge life history and ethnography, (Chase, 2005). No matter the approach that is taken to engage in narrative inquiry, its underlying purpose is help the researcher understand experience through collaboration, telling, and retelling of stories (Butler-Kisber, 2010). My research goals align with that of narrative sociologists.

I used narrative analysis as my research methodology. Narrative research has its root in interpretive social sciences and compliments my interpretive research design (Patton, 2002). This design allowed me to examine the personal writings of mommy bloggers and answer the foundational questions of Narratology: *What does this narrative or story reveal about the person and world from which it came? How can this narrative be interpreted so that it provides an understanding of and illuminates the life and culture that created it?* (Patton, 2002). With those foundational questions of narratology and my established research questions as my guides, I examined the specific content shared by bloggers within their posts and how that content not only lends itself to storytelling, but also how the stories form the foundation that enables the strong communities to form.

Research Site

For the sake of my research, the online or virtual world is defined as an area free from the bounds of geography that enables participants to engage with others by way of access to technology, the Internet and high-speed, real time interaction. This can include social media, online gaming, blogging, chat rooms, and community forums. The research site is essentially non-material because it consists of a virtual space known as the blogosphere, a collective community of blog. I examined three years worth of archived blog posts published on the participants' personal blogs. My narrative research did not require me to be 'on site' for any length of time because the blogs were essentially accessible infinitely, but I spent approximately six months engaging with participants' blogs. Because I have been a part of the blogging community for over three years I did not anticipate having any issues with access to the site. I believe my constant presence and interaction within the blogosphere worked to my advantage when it came to gaining both participants and blog posts.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

I used a combination of purposeful sampling and criterion sampling within my study. Purposeful sampling enabled me to examine a variety of blog posts in order to capture and describe the central themes across a heterogeneous sample while still maintaining commonality across core experiences (Patton, 2002). My goal was to capture the blogging experience across a variety of situations and employ as much diversity as possible across the sample in term of race, marital status, geographic location, career choices, and family size. While it is difficult to achieve such a diverse sample with only four participants, I was intentional in choosing the bloggers with the

most variety. Criterion sampling enabled me to set predetermined criteria that participants must meet in order to be included within the study. Because of the vast number of mommy bloggers writing on the Internet, zeroing in on 3-5 specific participants and a minimum of three years worth of posts ensured quality within my data. I want participants who have continuing involvement in the blogosphere, so I set three years as the minimum number of years they must have been ‘actively’ blogging. And, in an effort to remove those participants who might fit the criteria but not be ‘active’ bloggers, I set a secondary goal of having them be among the “top” bloggers in their community. This status as a “top” blogger is determined by the 2010 Babble.com “Top Mom Blogs” list, a list detailing the top 50 mom blogs determined by reader nominations and votes. The women included on the list are considered top bloggers because their stories convey honesty and openness that readers feel is accessible and relatable to their own experiences with motherhood.

I immediately ruled out certain bloggers because they did not meet the criteria I originally set. Before contacting potential participants I familiarized myself with their blogs and read through at least a year of their archives to see if they would fit with my intention of gaining as diverse a sample as possible including women from different geographical locations, women of varying ages and marital status with children in all stages of development, and women with different ethnic backgrounds. I intentionally chose bloggers that not only met the criteria, but also those that blogged regularly about motherhood beyond just relaying what activities or crafts they do with their children. I chose women with blogs I considered to be emotionally heavy, exploring how they felt about motherhood. I used email and social media, including Facebook and Twitter, to

contact the bloggers regarding participation in the study once I determined the participants that best fit the criteria. Each potential participant was sent an email asking if they were interested in participating (See Appendix A). While I contacted upwards of ten bloggers, only four agreed to participate in the study. As each participant responded by email I provided them with additional details of the study and a consent form outlining exactly what was required to participate (See Appendix B).

Data Collection

I began collecting blog posts once participants consented to being part of the study. I originally planned to use a minimum of five years worth of blog posts, but struggled to find participants who had been blogging for that long and were willing to participate. I chose to amend the IRB for the study and focus on a minimum of three years worth of blog posts instead. This turned out to be a non-issue since I still had over 1200 narratives in which to focus the analysis. Since I spent an extensive amount of time familiarizing myself with each participant's blog before initial contact, I was able to collect her posts in a matter of weeks. With each participant I started reading the blogs in reverse chronological order with the most recent posts appearing first since this is how blogs appear online. As I read through the posts I copied and pasted them into a word document labeled for each participant.

In addition to reading the blogs I followed up with semi-structured interviews with each participant by email for clarification and member checking (See Appendix C). Because of the vast locations of each of the bloggers email was the most convenient way to follow up with them. In those interviews I explored the themes identified in my analysis, more deeply questioned their motivation for blogging, and questioned their

feelings and beliefs about the mommy blogger community. The following questions helped structure the interviews:

- Tell me a time when you had a meaningful experience in the blogosphere or relied on the blogosphere for support.
- Tell me about a time when you experienced backlash from writing in the blogosphere.
- What is it you're trying to accomplish with your blog? What is your purpose? Who is your audience?
- What does blogging bring to you personally?
- What have your experiences in the blogosphere taught you about motherhood?

I chose to follow up my analysis with semi-structured interviews as a means of establishing trustworthiness and regular contact with my participants. I provided them with a copy of the findings, asked for as much feedback as they were willing to give regarding the interpretation, and offered them the opportunity to discuss what the findings revealed. Not only was this a means of self-reflection, but it was also a means of recognizing errors within the interpretation and allowing participants the opportunity to “member check” my findings. The questions that structured the interviews were established to take my findings further with first hand responses and direct connections to the research questions.

Data Analysis

Blogs are established, maintained, and shared with words. The words become the stories, the stories build the connections, and the connections mold into virtual communities. For this study I engaged in narrative analysis of approximately 1200 past

blog posts participants generated over the course of three years. Each post was read thoroughly a minimum of five additional times beyond the initial familiarization to determine their correlation to the research questions established for this study:

- Why do mothers blog?
- How does blogging create and/or facilitate community or personal validation for mommy bloggers?
- How does participation in a leisure activity such as blogging provide a conduit for voice?
- How does blogging reinforce traditional notions or create new possibilities for motherhood?

Once the posts were collected I planned to focus on thematic analysis using the foundation and five perspectives of Women's Ways of Knowing, a feminist theory from which women "view reality and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge, and authority" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997, p. 3). But, as I began working through the data I realized that what I was trying to accomplish and the research questions I was trying to answer didn't fit well with this feminist theory. At this point I chose to push forward with a general thematic analysis and let the data guide me where it wanted to go in order to allow for the story itself to remain intact and grounded "in the study of the particular" (Riessman, 2008, p. 11). Because participants not only created the blog posts being analyzed, but were also engaged in the overall study, there existed the possibility for them to experience a sense of empowerment, one of the keys to the success of leisure for mothers (Currie, 2004).

As with much qualitative research, analysis began as I immersed myself in the collecting and reading of the participants' blog posts. Each blog post was read several times in an attempt to isolate themes and categories relating my research questions. I used an open coding system to identify major themes in each specific blog post. As I was working through the blog posts, though, I realized I needed to find a better system to handle the 1200 pages of data. I decided to use HyperResearch, a software analysis program that allows the researcher to code, retrieve, analyze data, and build theories. Once I began using the system I was able to highlight important words and phrases in the respondent's own words and compare subsequent blog posts to see if the same or similar terms occurred, as well as looking for new terms. For example, 'mother to mother' was the code I established to reference not only the dialogue exchanged online, but also the camaraderie they felt as the women shared their struggles as mothers. This term appeared nearly a dozen times within the first participant's data set and raised my awareness to it across other participants' posts.

After assigning initial code, I grouped the codes into categories that emerged as I worked through the data including self, background information, blogging and community, beauty and domestic duties. These categories were the basis for the memos and reports I created to focus and organize the emerging themes (See Charmaz, 2006). While I had planned to create a chart with participants' names across the top and key themes listed down the side of the page each cell noting specific posts and lines where the theme occurs, I was able to accomplish this through the reports feature included in HyperResearch (See Appendix D). From there I was able to see which lines, posts, and categories were representative of my research questions.

This approach allowed me to stay connected to the coding of data throughout the analysis process and keep the authentic nature of the stories themselves while remaining connected to the voices of the bloggers. This is also where I chose to examine the comments readers' left on participants' published blog posts. I used them to follow-up with the identified themes and assist in constructing blog posts within Chapter 4. However, while the comments did inform my own analytic thinking, they were not my primary source of data.

Creative Analytic Practice

Creative Analytic Practice is defined as “a process that involves expressing what one has learned in research through evocative and creative writing techniques including artists and literary genres such as poems, plays, performance pieces, autobiography, visual techniques, and other types of conversational, multivocal, and critical representations” (Parry & Johnson, 2007, p. 120). I believe presenting my research, data, and findings as a form of creative analytic practice is an excellent way to incorporate the context of my research in imaginative and creative representations. Parry and Johnson (2007) emphasized the importance of Creative Analytic Practice (CAP) as a means to capture the “complexity of lived leisure experience,” (p. 119). CAP is linked to traditional social science methods and the crisis of representation among traditional research. By incorporating CAP, researchers have the ability to recognize themselves within the research and the writing, reach new relationships with participants, address hidden agendas, and represent research in a more accessible manner (Parry & Johnson, 2007).

Our creative leisure is a means by which we release our personal thoughts, feelings, and needs of our existence. Leisure alone and creativity alone do not implicate this powerful nature. Thus, a greater understanding of how persons actualize creativity is required, (Hegarty, 2009, p. 13.)

By embracing the creative aspect of blogging as leisure and incorporating CAP into the representation of the research, I believe I demonstrated how the practice and results of qualitative inquiry are linked and provide reciprocity with the bloggers themselves.

It was important that I considered Richardson's (1997, 2000) criteria for judging CAP during both the process of creating and evaluating my research. These criteria are discussed further in Chapter 5. My research contributes to a deeper understanding of blogging subcultures by allowing my text to be constructed in the same context in which they represent their social world. The aesthetic aspect of CAP came in the form of the blog's visual ensemble, complete with text, photos, headers, and numerous other aspects that are typically found as part of a blog layout. I must also be clear on not only how the text was created, but also how my role as the research fits in. I took accountability for the representation and address any bias or ethical issues that may be present. While the impact of a text is the fourth criteria for judging CAP (Parry & Johnson, 2007), I cannot yet assess how the text will affect the reader on an emotional or physical level. I can only do my part to insist that it raised new questions and inspired new creative practices for me as a researcher. Finally, I needed to be sure that my research was an expression of the reality of the bloggers. By using blog posts as data and representing the finding of that data as another example of the context in which they were written, I will be adding credibility to their "lived experience," (Parry & Johnson, 2007).

A CAP project like this allows the reader access to the bloggers who participated in my research similar to the way blog readers interact with blog posts. I believe this provided an authentic approach to the data as well as something accessible to the mommy bloggers themselves and I believe this was a genuine way to give back to the community that has given me so much.

Assessing Data Quality

How can I assure that the data I collect is accurate, trustworthy, and credible? There are several things I did as a researcher to ensure that my data was of the utmost quality. In order to address and establish credibility within my study I used prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, and member checks. According to Lincoln and Guba (1986) prolonged engagement required me to have lengthy and intensive contact with those who I studied (p. 77). By keeping constant contact and engagement through social media with those that I studied I was better equipped to identify misrepresentations and those themes or ideas that stood out. I also used peer debriefing as part of my data quality. This allowed me to expose my data and research to professionals within the field throughout the research process (See Lincoln & Guba 1986, p. 77). I regularly met with a writing group full of peers to assist in this process. This not only provided feedback, but also allowed me to see gaps and defend my research choices. As discussed previously, I also used member checks by way of follow up interviews and sharing a completed findings chapter to establish credibility within my findings. Member checks allowed me to present my information to respondents for testing of accuracy and reconstruction of information.

In order to establish transferability within my study I used thick descriptive data of the experiences and community construction provided by the blog posts. The thick descriptive data allowed for “narrative developed about the content so that judgments about the degree of fit or similarity may be made by others who may wish to apply all or part of the findings elsewhere,” (Lincoln and Guba, p. 77). The more descriptive data of the blogging experience and its relation to voice and community that I provided the more likely my study and findings can be repeated, or transferred, to another setting. By doing my part to ensure credibility, accuracy, and trustworthiness within my study I was less likely to remove the authenticity and shared experience of the bloggers.

I believe that authenticity and trust are what creates value among bloggers and their communities. Leisure embraces this created space and celebrates the engagement, connection, and empowerment it provides to those involved. Interpretivism opens the possibility to explore the context of these leisure spaces and reflect upon the reality of the blogging communities they’ve created to reach a better understanding of their appeal, their function, and their unification. A study situated within the crossroads of leisure, motherhood, and blogging will create a new depth of knowledge and understanding not only for leisure scholars, but also for the mommy bloggers busy clicking away at their computers as they work to tell another story to their virtual sisters.

This chapter detailed the overall design of my study. The study, based in interpretivism and narrative inquiry, used previously published blog posts of women voted “Top Mom Bloggers” to examine how mothers who participate in blogging as a leisure activity contribute to the discourse of motherhood. The design of the study,

sample selection and participants, data collection, and data analysis were each discussed in detail.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

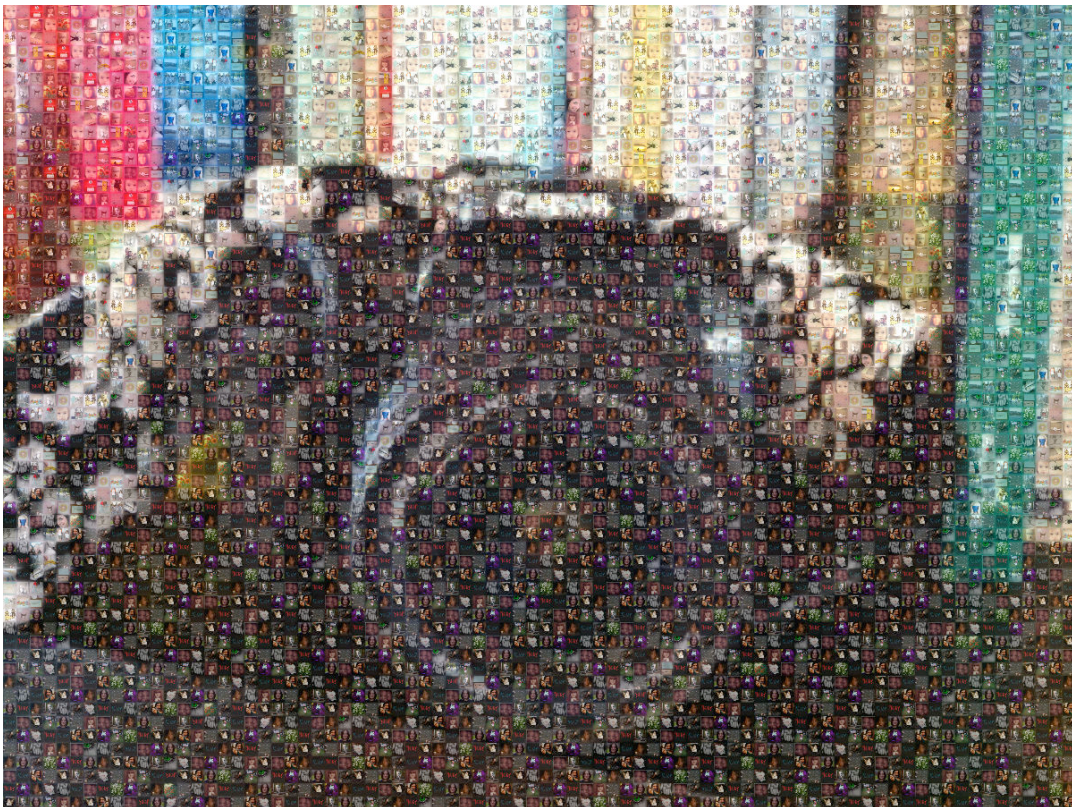


Figure 2
Introduction

"Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world," (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990).

When thinking about all the different ways to represent the data from this study, I realized the data itself brought me to an impasse. There were two choices, two roads to travel with this data. What I imagined to be so easy to pull together turned out to be a

decision stemming from something much deeper within myself as a researcher and as a writer. It was grounded less in what I *should* do and more about what I *could* do.

The first road, a more traditional journey, had me representing the data in a strict, formula-based--*this is the question/here is the answer/here is the evidence*-- way. Safe. Doable. Practical. The research question could be presented, answered with what emerged in the data, and numerous quotes and pieces of data could be used to support my claims. This would certainly fulfill any necessary requirements established for original research. It would likely be defensible in my final defense, wouldn't require too much boundary pushing on my part, and would allow me to graduate on the schedule I established for myself long, long ago.

Tempting this road is. The logical, structured, left-brained side of me wanted to move down this path, hauling my sack of strategies, orders, and patterns safely on my back. I wanted the reassurance this road brought with it: deadlines met, questions answered, and findings presented in a nice, neat traditional package wrapped up in a perfectly formed bow. Yes. This might be the way to go.

In the back of my mind, though, I heard the breath of a small voice – not necessarily straining to be heard, but more anxious to be acknowledged. It was there, leaning slightly to the right, encouraging me with the promise of emotion, imagination, and risk too impetuous to be contained in a back-loaded sack, but appreciated within the flowing words, stories, and photos I'd just spent so much time immersed in. It asked quietly “what if you *could* do something else?” It spoke just once – without fanfare, but instead with the openness of possibility.

At that point I did what many struggling doctoral students might do. I took a long hard look at what I was trying to accomplish with my research, vented about the unfairness of the universe, tried to convince myself it wouldn't matter what road I chose, verbally attacked myself for being too inside my own head, and decided if I'm only doing this once than I might as well see what was possible. I looked back at that first road, glanced again at the second road, and knew that I needed to drive my data where it wanted to go.

See, this isn't just my journey. This isn't just one mommy blogger thinking it would be super cool to understand other mommy bloggers. This is Christina/Hooey Critic an entrusted researcher/mommy blogger charged with the task of carrying the stories of my participants in and through, sharing their voices, and giving others insight and access to an experience usually understood only by those who engage/experience in it. It's about looking **along** motherhood and blogging not just **at** motherhood and blogging, (Lewis, C.S., 1970). The participants and I take this journey together. I'm just lucky to be part of their overall patchwork. And, it was this idea of "looking along" their patchwork of blogging that led to the creation of the photo mosaic that opened this chapter.

As indicated in previous chapters interpretivism is focused on capturing experience in context. It is within that context that meaning making happens. As a researcher I cannot ignore the context of what I am studying and the lens in which I am choosing to examine it. I felt that the picture mosaic was just one way to illustrate exactly how I fit into the context of my research. The whole picture is just as important as the pieces that create it.

The background picture of the camera is representative of the view and lens in which used examine the data. My view or lens takes snippets, excerpts, and moments of the data to form what becomes the bigger and more complete (though never finished) picture. Each photo used to create the picture was purposefully taken from the blog posts themselves as a tribute to the other medium, photography, that my mommy bloggers use to enhance the writing and stories they share on their blogs. The books in the background, though random titles, show how the participants stories not only stand alone, but also become part of a larger genre of narratives meant to help us understand their lived experience within context. They stand alone yet still contribute to a dialogue of the motherhood experience that will someday be looked back on as a window into what social media did for the voice of 21st century mothers.

Moving Through Analysis

Working through the data was a challenge. It forced me to remove my blogger lens and replace it with a researcher lens. This was difficult because I've read blogs for years as an absorber of the stories, an empathetic reader. But, looking at the data as a researcher required a more critical approach to honor the phenomenon. This chapter will focus on the findings revealed through the phenomenon. The findings were organized based on an overarching theme of virtual evolution generated through my journey with the data. I noticed that as I immersed myself within the data that each blogger was living within her own metamorphic journey – evolving, adapting, and changing based on her individual needs, her voice, and her developing community. This process includes logging on, the dialing handshake, and finally the connection. This virtual evolution is

synchronistic in the sense that each phase works both separately and simultaneously in a movement that escapes the boundaries of real time.

Consistent with CAP (Parry & Johnson, 2006) data is provided in multiple forms including excerpts, found poetry, and blog posts. These data representations are situated on discovering how the blogging community works for mothers, why mothers choose to blog, how blogging is a conduit for voice, and how blogging influences or recreates notions of motherhood.

The Bloggers¹

Mir

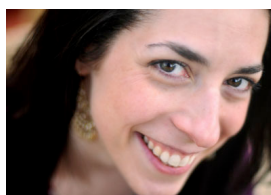


Figure 3

Mir, a Jewish blogger from small-town Georgia is the writer of the text heavy blog *Would Coulda Shoulda*. She began blogging in 2004 while dealing with divorce, unemployment, and single parenthood. Her writing is strong, her tone is smart, and her clarity is impressive as she writes her way through her experiences from parenting to a hysterectomy all while “laughing at myself as much as possible, trying to make sure that I end up with only the right regrets.” While she chose to make her participation in this study public, her personal details (names, locations, etc.) remain anonymous on her blog. She has two children she calls “Monkey” and “Chickadee.” Monkey is 12 years old and his journey with Asperger’s is explored heavily through Mir’s stories. Chickadee is

¹¹ Figures 3-6 show the photos participants use to identify themselves within their blogs

almost 14 and regularly tests her mother's patience and knowledge as she navigates her teens with an undiagnosed skin condition. In 2007 Mir remarried a man she calls "Otto" and began chronicling the experience of a blended family. Her husband is now featured heavily on her blog as she recounts their journey that actually began in college. In the past Mir has worked as a nanny, technical writer, mortgage broker, software engineer, and within the marketing field. Now she works as a full-time freelance writer and occasionally lectures at a local university.

Sarah



Figure 4

Sarah is the married mom of boy/girl twins, Claudia and Ian, who has been writing the confessional blog "Sarah and the Goon Squad" since 2005 when her children were born. She has lived in the Washington DC metro area for almost 7 years but grew up in Florida by way of Ohio.

She considers her blog to be her home on the Internet, but she currently writes for a number of parenting, women's, and music websites. Readers will often find her engaged in panels and numerous public speaking events where she shares her wisdom of the everyday life of raising a family with words and photography. Sarah loves "football, beer, Top Chef, music, food, fantasy sports, singing, live sporting events and when people pay me money to write things on the Internet."

Jenna



Figure 5

“Jenna” has chosen to have her identity kept confidential for this study. She currently writes a blog that has gained attention not for its exploration of sensitive topics, but for her likable approach to everyday topics. She began blogging in 2006 “as a way for me to deal with the monotony of days on end spent in my house in the middle of nowhere while my baby napped.” Much of ‘Jenna’s’ blog chronicles her constant moving and relocation thanks in part to her husband’s job and how the constant relocation affects her parenting and her children. She earned a Master’s Degree in Speech-Language Pathology, but “currently works as a freelance writer in Knoxville, Tennessee with her two children, ages six and four.

Dottie



Figure 6

“Dottie” has accomplished something almost impossible in the blog world. She has managed to keep her full identity anonymous and confidential during her entire time

in the blogosphere. She chooses to remain confidential in this study and on her blog because so much of her subject matter deals with her role as a kindergarten teacher.

As a 50-something mother, “Dottie” has been blogging for just over three years and explores her struggles with divorce, working in the education system, and raising a son and two daughter, both of whom are in college. She lives in the Pacific Northwest, has an open love of cocktail hour, and never hesitates to share her stories with honesty and pure emotion.

Virtual Evolution – Logging On

Something prompted each of them to open their laptops, to watch the screen light up, the icons load, and the connection to the Internet solidify. Something provoked each of them to open a browser, direct themselves to a blogging platform, and follow the prompt “create a blog.” Something drove each of them to choose a title, an avatar for online identity, and a design for their space. Something motivated each of them to fill that first blank post with the words and ideas swimming within them. Something pulled at each of them as they hovered over a button marked “publish” and logged on as individuals sharing the lived experience of motherhood with the world.

The question of “why” is the foundation of my research. Before understanding issues surrounding community, voice, and traditional notions of motherhood, it is necessary to understand why mothers blog. Why they are spending their time blogging feeds into the communities they create, the voice they choose to share, and the dialogue of motherhood they are embracing through their experiences. In all honesty I thought this would be an easy question to answer because each participant said on multiple occasions why she blogs.

Jenna stated that blogging gave her a sense of vindication during her early days of motherhood.

I keep telling myself that I started blogging and keep blogging because of this community. I keep telling myself that I blog because I enjoy it. It's fun, right? When I first discovered blogs, I found so many like-minded women, struggling through the early days of motherhood, who didn't sugar coat infancy and playdates and being a stay-at-home mom. Blogs made me feel vindicated.

Writing gave me something to do in those days when Carson was just a baby and I was so lonely, so bored, so discontent. It gave me something to occupy my mind, something to think about beyond my never ending laundry pile, what I could cook for dinner in five minutes or less, or how I was going to make it into the post office carrying a package and a carseat. In the early days, my blog was the sole place that was mine, and mine alone. Carson didn't poop on it, Tate didn't leave his dirty socks lying on it, I didn't resent it like I did most everything else in my life at the time.

Dottie began blogging as a means of moving her old journal writing into the world of new technology.

I started this blog to just put to "paper" the thoughts that used to swirl through my head on a daily basis. It replaced the old worn-out journals that now sit in my attic in an old cardboard box. Throughout this blogging process, I have always been honest and have laid in front of you the contents of my life, and my heart. I have tried to maintain my integrity and authenticity throughout this past year and a

half. I blog when I have something to say which, fortunately, seems to be almost every day.

Mir began blogging to have an outlet to share her parenting frustrations raising a child with Asperger's.

Sometimes one of my kids is rotten and I come here and write about it and say, "Good lord, MY KID IS ROTTEN," and I trust that 99.9% of you understand that while I am human and frustrated.

Sarah began blogging as a chance to realize her dream of becoming a writer.

On June 1st, 2005 I started a little website called Sarah and the Goon Squad. My first post is loaded with bad grammar. It sounds like every bad blog you have ever read and assures you that it will probably be my first and last post. It wasn't.

Almost 1800 posts later (and that is just on this site, since then I have written for at least 20 other websites) I am still here. Life takes you in crazy directions.

Impulsively signing up for that blogspot blog changed my life. I have become a writer. Who knew?

Even though each blogger was open about why they blog throughout their posts, it wasn't until I applied more analytic scrutiny that I realized the question was much more complex than I thought. Each of these women chose to "log on" and start blogging for very different reasons. Maybe it was the need to put thoughts to "paper." Maybe it was to claim a space all their own. Maybe it was to have the opportunity to become a writer. Maybe it was to be able to express the frustrations of motherhood. But, their "why" for blogging in the beginning is often very different than their "why" for blogging now.

It is impossible to ignore that their reasons for engaging with the numerous aspects of blogging change as they invested and explore further the world and possibilities of social media. They may have started blogging for certain reasons, but those reasons are multiple and fluid. They are changing, developing, and emerging into something more, something different, and something else. Blogging provided these bloggers opportunities to experience new things. Sarah was given the opportunity to experience a different side of music, taste exquisite food, travel, and enjoy new writing opportunities.

I have gone places I never would have been, I have met amazing people and been given really cool opportunities. I have been in the photo pit at a rock festival, I attended a WNBA draft, I met John and Roger Taylor, I ate at The French Laundry, I have spoken on panels all over the country, I cooked with some underprivileged little kids and a Top Chef, I drove across the United States, I edited posts that were written by Ronnie Lott and I got to go to The Winter Classic. I have made a lot of very talented friends

Jenna not only found a hobby, but also built a business. Despite an overwhelming urge to quit blogging because of time commitments, she continued because of the community. She embraced the community, discovered a bit of who she is, and created real friendships that led to great vacations and experiences on social outings. Jenna wrote,

Bloggng isn't a useless waste of time, whether it's my hobby or my business. These friends I've made on the Internet are real. I'm a talented writer and storyteller. I'm a photographer and I'm pretty, damn good. I belong. I am enough.

Even though I've long been disillusioned with blogging, I spent a great deal of money to go to Chicago this summer for BlogHer. Without blogging, would I get a weekend away from the kids, spending time with friends?

While Dottie began blogging as a means of putting thoughts to paper, she continues to blog and has had the opportunity to speak publically to other bloggers about writing as a craft. She has also been forced to learn boundaries that help to make her a better writer. She wrote,

The amazing Stacey from ***** called me and asked if I would be interested in participating on a panel for a session on creative writing. Would I? WOULD I????????? I felt like the girl who got asked to the prom by the best looking guy in town. "Cept she's a girl. I am devoted to the craft of writing, and am pinching myself each and every day that this audience is kind, grateful, patient, supportive and ha a GREAT sense of humor. (And a great sense of honor, of which I am also grateful.) I value my job, so I had to pay the piper. I did so with a smile and a renewed determination that this would only improve my work, and my writing. Frankly, I am sure it did. I was also encouraged to use this to mend some rifts with my principal that had been neglected. I can honestly say that fixing that particular issue has been a good, good thing. I know from experience, that things that go out on the internet are there forever. In fact, I've tested that theory MORE THAN ONCE, and yep; it's true. That means that sometimes you get to re-live your mistakes over and over and over again. What fun.

Mir has also learned about boundaries and friendship through continued blogging. She has been forced to discover what is actually her story to share and accept the emotions that spring up when sharing her story online.

The post I wrote for BlogHer yesterday about writing unsavory things about your children was a hard one for me. The subject of my post has, in my mind, crossed the line. Hell, she can't even SEE the line anymore. It seems pretty black and white, to me. But I write about my kids. Many writers I admire write about their kids. I think it can be done respectfully, and I cringe when I hear the baby-with-the-bathwater arguments for parents to never say a single word that's less than glowing about their offspring. It's dangerous territory, but I refuse to believe a few people making poor choices should mean that everyone else has to just shut up. So this has been on my mind. And I've been taking stock of what I say and what I don't. I don't think I always get it right (though I hope I do most of the time, of course), but it's part of what I deal with when it comes to sharing, here. If you think I've written less, here, this past month, it's because I have. It's because we're struggling with some things and while it was easy enough for me to decide "this is not my story to tell right now," it was harder to remove all of that from my brain and find something else that felt worth discussing, instead.

One aspect is fairly certain, though. Their reasons for "logging on," starting to blog and continuing to blog are as varied as their blogs, their narratives, and their voices themselves. Because of this variety it seems inaccurate to lump them all under the category of "mommy blogger." There is so much more to each of them. They are mothers and they are bloggers, but within the space they claim with their words and

stories they are vulnerable, celebratory, emotional, and authentic. They are in this for so much more than just a space for stories.

Virtual Evolution - The Dialing Handshake

“Whenever I feel like I’m suffering from writer’s block, I sit down at my computer and just start writing. I write whatever is on my mind. Occasionally I can mold a post from the words, sometimes there’s nothing to salvage, but at least I was writing. The cure for writer’s block, for me, is NOT not writing.” - Jenna

After these mommy bloggers have logged on and created a blog, there comes a point in blogging where they must turn their attention to the writing. They must write and put their stories out there. This is the point where it becomes about the words. The words must be shared before any connection with the blogosphere can be established. The “dialing handshake” forces the blogger to examine and establish what the protocol for any conversation is going to be through their own personal speed and authorization of sharing their discourse of motherhood. It becomes about the emotions, the experiences driving the words. Metaphorically speaking they are extending their hands filled with all the emotions of their stories of motherhood and waiting for reciprocation from other women and mothers experiencing similar emotions.

I believe that poetry has an evocative ability to bring about understanding for both the writer and the audience. It felt natural for me to turn to poetry as a means of representing some of the data because I believe it possesses the power to help me to work through what I did not necessarily understand at first from the perspective of a researcher. As a blogger and a mother, I had the insider status and it was difficult to unlearn what I already knew so intimately. Therefore, I used the poetic moment as an opportunity to

rediscover the wonder of what I experience everyday and actively engage with what these four bloggers are facing within their roles of motherhood.

Found poetry is a form of poetic inquiry that uses words, phrases, or lines extracted from the data to create a narrative piece conveying the emotions and experiences of participants. This type of inquiry gained credibility within qualitative research as a result of researchers, particularly feminists, struggling to bring together issues of ethics and voice within their work (Butler-Kisber, 2010). In an effort to overcome this issue feminists turned to experimental writing “to retain the voices of their participants, and to communicate more evocatively and accessibly,” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 83). Previous researchers (Richardson, 1992; Richardson, 2002; Sullivan, 2004) have used poetic inquiry as a means of remaining reflective and reflexive within their research and as a means of honoring the words, speech style, and accessibility of participants and their experiences while limiting the voice of the researchers as usually found in traditional representations.

Lincoln (1995) articulated what had been part of the feminist research agenda for some time. She defined this ‘new paradigm’ as one that embraced the need for ethical and deep relationships between researchers and participants, one that committed to research activity that would engender change and make participant lives better, and that would be oriented in social justice and equity for all (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 97).

I began crafting the poem that follows by pulling lines from my data report that focused not only on what these women do each day, but how they feel about what they do. The words were placed in no particular order and I intentionally abandon the rules of

punctuation, lines, or spacing as a means of showing how frazzled and multi-tasked these mothers find themselves throughout the day. Through numerous drafts that played with different forms, orders, and spacing I managed to remain in a state of consistent reflexivity, working to create a piece that reflected the essence of what each mother was attempting to convey through her words. As a result of engaging with the data so thoroughly and with the utmost respect for their lived experience, I managed to create an internal structure within the poem that attempts to duplicate the disoriented, chaotic, and sometimes-unrealistic expectations these women place on themselves in their efforts to balance their traditional roles of motherhood with the reality of lived experience.

Each ‘stanza’ centers on experiences and emotions my participants deemed important to share within the safe space of their blogs. While I could break down each stanza and summarize what these women are trying to convey about their notions of motherhood, I believe this is counterproductive. “To summarize a poem in order to present the result would destroy the result because the poem itself is the result. The poem is the thing,” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 13). I invite you to engage with this poem, the collective voices it brings together, and discover a different way of knowing the notions and possibilities of mothers. Each one of us, as researchers, human beings, bloggers, or parents has the ability to communicate in some way. Each one of us has stories to share that others can learn from. It is my hope that the following piece of found poetry enables you to make immediate connections to the lived experience of the four participants. Although the poem stands alone here in terms of representation, we will revisit some interpretation of its meaning in subsequent chapters.

“Excuse the play dough”

It's not you, it's me.
 Please forgive me,
 I've been busy being a Mother.
 I'm so paranoid about doing it wrong.
 I can't be cranky forever...
 Oh yes I CAN!
 I am busy.
 I'm not sure I have it in me:
 The incomplete hours, the panic.

Sometimes I feel like an imposter.
 I take my kids to scouts,
 I weed my garden,
 I drive my minivan around my manicured neighborhood,
 I honest to God wave to my neighbors,
 I really do have two kids,
 I really am a mommy blogger.

My house is a wreck.
 17 loads of laundry,
 Ballet recital last night,
 6 articles due by the end of the day.
 I get distracted by the dishwasher or screaming children.
 I forgot to buy the hula-hoop,
 Finish report cards,
 Plan the menu, order food for graduation.
 What if the kids are sick for their birthday party?

Weed wack and mow anything that even remotely looks like a weed in the
 gardens I NEEDED to maintain my SANITY.
 Scream at the unsuspecting teens.
 Take 5 or 6 Aleve and get to work.
 Pack her lunches 5 days a week.
 Rearrange my schedule to take her to the orthodontist,
 The dermatologist.

I go to the grocery store at least five times a week.
 I don't make my bed. Ever.
 I hate housekeeping.
 I've stopped going barefoot in my kitchen.
 Too many crumbs.
 I **should** sweep and mop everyday.
 I can't find the broom.

But I like to think of my house as clean enough.

A grocery list was made.
 The mortgage was paid.
 I promised myself I'd keep up with the laundry,
 Reply to emails promptly and edit pictures.
 Oops. I remembered that I signed up to volunteer – sometime,
 I get to be the kool-aid wench.
 I had visions of homemade goodies,
 We had takeout for dinner.
 CRAP!

I am standing in the shower and I yell “Damnit!”

My feet hurt and I'm hoarse from screaming.

I'm cold, barefoot, and braless.

When I look back I don't want to remember the frustrations,

This is just how this particular journey goes

Some people have bad days.

Look, my kid isn't perfect,

Neither am I.

I've tried to live my life all willy-nilly,

I can't.

There'd be much fretting and gnashing of teeth

Over my inability to live up to my own expectations.

I have not yet figured out a way to be in two places at once.

How can I possibly teach them what they need to know?

Watch out for strangers!

But some strangers are nice.

Don't let anyone touch you in your private areas.

Except sometimes it's okay like when mommy and daddy are giving you a bath.

I don't want to wear pantyhose,

I don't even usually wear shoes.

I generally dress like a hobo,

Wear my hair in a ponytail,

And eat from 10am to 5pm then again at dinner.

Shut up, like you change clothes everyday.

Oh, you do?

My thighs are fat again,

My stomach is a landscape of rolling hills

And my arms look like big, meaty burritos

I wasn't sure if I need to by large or XL underpants.
 I look in the mirror and feel disgusted,
 Overwhelmed, tired, and hopeless.

“Stay behind me!” I said/chirped/yelled/blurted out/spoke through clenched
 teeth...about eleventy billion times.
 I'm not really one of the popular moms
 Seriously, me and the kids are together ad nauseum.

Do you think this is what I like to do?
 I get to do whatever I want?
 Then why am I folding someone else's underwear?!
 You know the 5-year-old boy wasn't the one cleaning up
 the stray poo.

I'm a much better parent when the kids aren't fighting.
 I'm a much better parent when my children aren't whining.
 I have 42,354 photos to edit,
 You know, to remind me of how happy and great my life is.

I'm not really sure I want to work at a traditional job.
 What if I make the wrong decision?
 I know that I want to do more.
 I want to be the type of parent who is patient and usually smiling.
 Then I made the mistake of going upstairs to the kids' bathroom.

I woke up pissed off
 Married love is not like this.
 There was a time when I resented his trips, leaving me all ALONE with two small
 babies!
 I had very little time to explain how the morning should play out – what to fix for lunch
 and what containers to pack them in
 and where the lunchbox could be found.

I rattled off what time to wake him up,
 what he should wear,
 and how much milk to pour in his cup.
 Do not let him drink RED raspberry tea in his room
 where he MIGHT spill the WHOLE MUG on his off-white carpet.
 You know that the macaroni and cheese most certainly cannot touch the
 strawberries OR ELSE.
 Those four slices of bread pissed me RIGHT off.
 The blue spatula is still covered in egg.
 Next time I remind you to go to the bank,
 don't call me a nag and just DO IT.

I, being an asshole AND a very weary mother of two small children, don't have a lot of patience for his whining and his needs.

Don't hurt anyone today.

Wait? Is that an "im hurt" cry?

In the two seconds it takes to reach him you've already catalogued everything awful that may have happened.

There is orange-spotted underwear and a modern-art appearance in the dryer,

Ew. Barf in my car.

Swine Flu

I'm kind of family-ed out,

My mother-in-law is coming to visit this week.

It seems like a good time to pretend we normally keep the house clean.

There's something sticky on the back corner of that one shelf in the fridge,

I'm afraid to investigate.

I'm tired and I'm getting a cold and my desk is a mess,

I'm sure this is all just control-freak me feeling out-of-balance.

I make the children swear that they won't play in the mud,
won't even look at the mud.

Somehow they're completely painted in brown
in the two second that I look away.

I completely lose my shit.

I wonder if this is the outburst that will
leave prints on my pristine children.

I collapsed in an exhausted heap.

The surge of guilt overpowered my common sense,

Here, have some tequila.

I'm just glad it's edible.

I'm constantly at odds with myself,

Trying to walk the delicate line

and find the balance of being supportive,

being the best mom to my kids.

I am TRYING, really.

I will work on managing my time better.

I will work find my work/life balance,

And everything is going to be okay.

So this is being a "modern woman,"

I'm practically Miss Merry Sunshine.

Can't be everywhere,

Can't do everything

Want to do everything.
 Feel like I should do everything.

But there is so much more to me than that.
 These are the prints, the dancing fingerprints that I want to leave,
 Always changing, always striving

My life.
 It's charmed.
 It's good. I say to myself, over and over...
 I'm profoundly grateful for all of it.

This life, my life,
 Over and over again...

Virtual Evolution – The Connection

Five years later, my life has been so enriched and changed by the millions of words I have written. I also wouldn't have believed that I'd make true connections and grow friendships with those women I so admired when I first discovered them living in my computer. Many of my best friends are the women that I first met online in 2005. These are the women with whom I exchange text messages and Christmas cards and whom I long to see each year at various blogging conferences. - Jenna

While many mommy bloggers willingly share their love and appreciation for the community of people they found through blogging, it doesn't begin with a ready-made community. The community that becomes part of the blogging experience for mommy bloggers is the result of a process that takes time, nurturing, connection, and self-discovery. While the community grows with the blogger, it can only develop through a process beginning with the self, claiming ownership of voice, accepting the validation, and finally ending up with the community that is ever so important. It may begin with the self, but results in a very unselfish community. This 4-step process was constructed

from the data and is grounded in examination of blog posts focusing on the role of community and blogging for each woman.

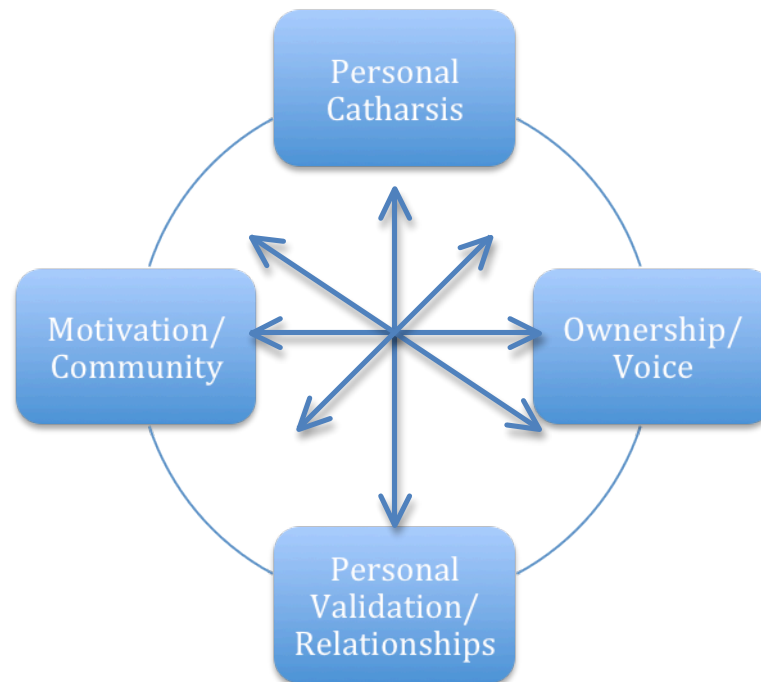


Figure 7

To demonstrate how this process works in the simplest terms, I constructed four fictional blog posts using excerpts from blog posts written by the four participants. Like the found poem presented previously, the words and phrases are assembled from excerpts from the raw data and were intentionally pulled to illustrate the process of community building that continuously occurred for all four participants. The posts use the voices and words of each participant equally and should be read as polyvocal, or multi-voice, accounts. Unlike univocal texts, the use of multiple voices as a narrative mode within a text encourages diverse readings rather than one preferred reading, (Chandler, 2004). This enables the reader to have an enhanced experience of the accounts concerning each area. Each post is then followed with comments from participants' blogs to show how those interactions begin to form the relationships that build the supportive community.

Step One: Catharsis

The first step to creating and facilitating community begins with the self. This point in the process is extremely self-centered to the blogger. They are choosing what to share, how to share it, how to convey what they are experiencing, and the best way to turn those experiences into a flowing narrative. The blog becomes the space for catharsis, a way to purge the experiences of parenting and the emotions of being a woman and mother.

Through words these women expose the underbelly, the struggles, and the positive or negative emotions of their mothering experiences.



Catharsis

When I started blogging I had no goal and no audience. I really only wanted the outlet. My blog is about emotional venting. I needed to be heard instead of convincing myself that I didn't really do anything worthwhile. The Internet saved me from myself, the lonely and isolated self that I'd become after a traumatic move twelve hours away from friends and family, followed three months later by the birth of my first child - stuck at home, new to motherhood, a prisoner to naptime and routine...

I love blogging for the catharsis.

I wanted to tell my stories, too. I longed to feel a connection with others as I sat at home for days on end. But mostly? I just wanted to be heard, I wanted to feel like what I had to say was important, even if it was just about my experiences as a mother. Thanks to a free blogger account, a whim, and a prayer, I began the blog. In real life I spend most of the day trying not to curse like a sailor in front of the children or the other moms at preschool. Fear of being too open and honest, super self-consciousness due to overexposure – in any given week I'll suffer from one or all of these things. I don't share every detail of my life, but I also don't only write smoochy, feel good posts. I also include my mistakes and heartache. In terms of writing, I've come to the realization that my writing isn't, in fact, brilliant. I don't completely suck, no, but there are millions (LITERALLY) of other women bloggers who smoke me in the writing department. I mean, I'm supposedly a *GASP*mommyblogger. I've always blogged about my kids. (Most of the time) I love talking about them with all of you and hearing your experiences. But if I don't talk about my kids, then what the hell do I talk about?!

I tend to bare myself here, without question, and feel that if I am not myself then there really is no point to this. I try to be true to who I am, and try never to blog at the expense of someone else. I've tried to not offend anyone, or injure anyone - it's just not my nature. However, I DO tend to rant and rave about my family. I hope you all know that I love them more than life itself, and would lay down my life for each and every one of them. (Well, perhaps not the dogs. Perhaps.)
Maybe the insecurity never goes away.

Posted by [Neena](#)

Labels: [catharsis](#), [community building](#)

7 comments:



birchsprite Mar 29, 2012 12:47 PM

Sending strong positive thoughts across the big water to help with the big feelings!

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



Jamie Mar 29, 2012 12:47 PM

Just when one challenge passes, another presents itself. Ugh. Hugs and little action thoughts for today!

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



momspeak Mar 29, 2012 12:48 PM

It's so enlightening for me to learn that so many people "think" of things in the same way/order I do. My mom was wrong, I'm not all that unique after all. (I'm good w/that BTW.) I often say, "My logical side knows that if A happens, then B will happen. My emotional side hasn't gotten there yet." I know HOW I should approach things, but my heart just isn't there yet. I suppose my heart may never get there, I just need to let my brain take charge in those cases.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



brainlessmom Mar 29, 2012 12:48 PM

Thanks for being you. I'm glad you hit publish yesterday. Even though I had a day of turmoil it helped me to figure out a few things and for that I'm grateful.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



marem Mar 29, 2012 12:49 PM

Yesterday your post was so personal that I felt every word. I commented on your post and left it as I usually do. Your reply made me know I wasn't alone in this. Thank you. It made my day about as good as your fruit bouquet. Although I am a bit jealous you got to eat yours happiness. :-)

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



erma Mar 29, 2012 12:49 PM

While you're forgiving yourself for the fact that you can't be All Things to All People (including to Yourself), can you forgive me, too? WHY is this such a womanly trait we all seem to share, why do we continuously feel like we're not "enough"? We rock the house, sister, just the way we are. Never forget it. (and remind me, too!)

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



tina Mar 29, 2012 12:49 PM

Wow what an awesome post! Thank you so much for writing this. I am new to the whole blogging world (about a year) and at times it is frustrating and overwhelming. You put everything in perspective for me. Blogging is an outlet for me and I really enjoy it, even though at times it can feel like too much. So thank you for such a wonderful, honest post

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In this post I show the recurring themes that all revolve around some sort of emotional turmoil. I wanted to show the life transition from woman to mother can be the driver behind looking for some sort of emotional purging. I exemplified this with excerpts that show constant release, sharing, and searching imagery. There is an “overfilled” sort of feeling to the words. This post illustrates missing key components to emotional fulfillment. The driver for me to construct this post and put things out there in the public virtual world is simply to show the need to express something that, for whatever reason, cannot be expressed in another venue.

As Sarah stated, “Maybe the insecurity never goes away. Hopefully it just gets easier. I feel bad for my kids because they still have to get through the worst of it, and they don’t even know it is coming.”

This is not to suggest that the tone of this post remains positive the whole way through the blog. I show deep undercurrents of concern, fear, self-censorship, and isolation. All of these things, as stated in the post, drive both content choices and the emotional baggage introduced simply by sharing publically. Contextually there seems to be a nod to the realization of the fact that the platform of choice to express these potentially deep personal posts is public in nature. This fact or admission drives to the heart of the concept of “open kimono” or revealing what it hidden. Clearly this post does not suggest full and unadulterated access, but I illustrate how certain emotions or beliefs may be kept hidden at this point in the process. There is obviously a process of selection that is undertaken in order to determine what parts any blogger shares with the world at large. In turn, this becomes emotional flashing rather than emotional nudity.

There is also a good deal of treatment to the concepts of family, joy, and support. I show that there is a deep recognition of the connection to family and is drawing, ever so indirectly, a correlation between these constructs in a blogger's life and the words on the screen. Again, this is another deep dive into the "why do this" pool of possibilities. I show the reasons for blogging vary from concern for, pride about, and need to be a better participant in the existing social, physical space, and social matrices. Sarah stated,

Anytime I go to a blogging conference I tell people that I am exactly what you would think by reading my blog but I say a lot more bad words in real life. This is true. In real life I spend most of the day trying not to curse like a sailor in front of the children or the other moms at preschool, but on my blog I usually have some time to edit myself and think of a more polite way of saying something. I just get nervous using too many profanities in print. What if my kindergarten teacher reads me? I don't want her to be too shocked.

The comments attached to the post highlight the fact that there are a wide variety of readers that both identify with the content and themes. I show how readers support bloggers for expressing such thoughts in the first place. The comments, the time taken to respond to the post becomes the seeds of the growing community. Universally, I illustrate that the commenters want to identify and internalize something from the words and feel compelled to express camaraderie and support for the endeavor of sharing.

Step Two: Ownership and Voice

The second step to facilitating community through blogging comes through a sense of ownership of the words and the discovery of personal voice. Moving through this phase of the process involves not only a willingness to share, but also the ability to be

blunt, honest, and authentic within what they consider to be a virtual safe space. The bloggers need to feel ownership of the medium, the blog, and with that ownership comes a freedom to behave more true to self. That freedom within the medium becomes the conduit for their voice. They are able to share the emotions and experiences that claw at their insides that would not otherwise be shared. They are opening the kimono in a manner that is completely within their control. While this may not always be received in a positively and may solicit negative comments, it is within the treads of responses that readers almost instantly step up in support.



Owning the Voice

There's one house in my neighborhood that has no window coverings, allowing us, when the light is just right, to peer into their home. This openness irritated me to the point of mania, obsessing every time I passed the house about the why. Why didn't they cover their windows? Why do they allow us to look inside? Why doesn't this bother them?

And then I realized that I live in a blog, and even though I have window coverings, they are sheer and at times wide open showing me walking around naked or unkempt. Why do I do this? Why do I want people looking inside? Why doesn't this bother me?

I keep telling myself that I started blogging and keep blogging because of this community. I keep telling myself that I blog because I enjoy it. It's fun, right? When I first discovered blogs, I found so many like-minded women, struggling through the early days of motherhood, who didn't sugar coat infancy and playdates and being a stay-at-home mom. Blogs made me feel vindicated.

Writing gave me something to do in those days when James was just a baby and I was so lonely, so bored, so discontent. It gave me something to occupy my mind, something to think about beyond my never ending laundry pile, what I could cook for dinner in five minutes or less, or how I was going to make it into the post office carrying a package and a carseat. In the early days, my blog was the sole place that was mine, and mine alone. Carson didn't poop on it, Tate didn't leave his dirty socks lying on it, I didn't resent it like I did most everything else in my life at the time. Emotional Me is a hot mess of angst and I consider it Logical Me's job to keep Emotional Me in a half-nelson as much as possible.

The good news is that I know this about myself. The bad news is that Emotional Me is a slippery bastard. I realize that my style of writing isn't everybody's cup of tea. My writing isn't eloquent prose, expertly crafted with \$20 words and perfect grammar. I think that my strength is my ability to craft a story in such a way that others can relate. It's taken YEARS for me to recognize this strength and for me to OWN this strength. Each one of us has a writing strength. Find it! Not to be cliché, but find your voice and hone it. Your writing may not be for everyone, but don't try to write in a way that isn't truly you.

I think every blogger/writer initially struggles to find their voice. I know that for me, I initially wanted to be very open, too open, writing about things overly personal. My windows had no coverings, and the light was always right for your peering eyes to see everything. Provocative, I remember trying to live up to that word, but all provocative turned out to for me was using the word f*ck a little too often. Now the pendulum has swung almost all the way to the other side, I've covered my windows with sheers and try to write watered down stories without curse words and about subjects that couldn't possibly offend anyone. Now that I have found my middle ground voice, I don't really like the way it sounds.

What I really want to do is throw my hands up in the air and say, "Dammit! This blog may not be ME as much as it once was, but it is still MY blog. I can do whatever I want!" After more than two years of blogging, I think I'm finally in a place where I'm no longer really trying to grow my blog and gain readership, though if it happens, great! I do want to keep my readers, though, because I LIKE you. I really, really like you. It would be a shame to lose a bunch of readers because I decided to be ME.

It occurred to me this weekend that I have a complete double-standard about sharing stuff online. And not just for me—which would be fine, you know, setting standards for myself—but I find myself getting all Judy McJudgerson about other people, which is quite frankly both exhausting and probably just bad karma. And yes, I know that everyone has their own boundaries. Everyone has to decide what they can live with, and what makes them comfortable, and if it makes ME uncomfortable, I am free to look away, and blah blah blah BLAH let's sing Kumbaya! I get that. I do.

The post I wrote yesterday about writing unsavory things about your children was a hard one for me. The subject of my post has, in my mind, crossed the line. Hell, she can't even SEE the line anymore. It seems pretty black and white, to me.

But I write about my kids. Many writers I admire write about their kids. I think it can be done respectfully, and I cringe when I hear the baby-with-the-bathwater arguments for parents to never say a single word that's less than glowing about their offspring. It's dangerous territory, but I refuse to believe a few people making poor choices should mean that everyone else has to just shut up.

So this has been on my mind. And I've been taking stock of what I say and what I don't. I don't think I always get it right (though I hope I do most of the time, of course), but it's part of what I deal with when it comes to sharing, here.

Posted by Dr. Mommy Blogger

Labels: [blogging](#), [voice](#)

4 comments:



Lindsay Mar 29, 2012 01:40 PM

Well, dont you feel that its your own fault for blurring those lines yourself? You blurred your own lines.. facebook/twitter/blogs just made it easier for you to do so. But people were doing this long before the internet when they would hold whatever weekly get together/dinner with work and personal friends.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



Stimey Mar 29, 2012 01:41 PM

This is an amazing post and articulates so much of how I think a lot of people evolve in blogging. I identify with a lot of what you say here. Blogging is such a weird little organism with us sharing our personal feelings and needs and insecurities and laughs, yet we also brand ourselves and try to follow the rules, and do the "right" thing. I so get what you're saying. And for me, you will always be one of my favorites. And you will always be a big blogger to me. And if you ever close up shop here and head someplace else, I insist on an email to let me know where you are going because I'd miss you.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



MEP Mar 29, 2012 01:41 PM

I don't have any good or easy answers for you, but I do know I would sorely miss this blog if you packed it in. I think you're honest and funny, that you're a great photographer, and that you are easy to relate to. I really enjoy the glimpses into your world. I don't have a ton of blog angst, but I also don't have a ton of blog readers. Probably there's a connection there! I love how you're sharing this internal debate with all of us. Reading the comments on this post has been enlightening.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



Gentry Mar 29, 2012 01:41 PM

I am on the opposite side of the blog world (I am brand spanking new and still trying to decide what my blog will be) from you and this was fascinating to read. In fact, I love your blog because you are so open and honest. I started blogging just a few short months ago because I had 2 kids under the age of 2 driving me insane. From what I have found in life (mom's groups, organizations, etc) most people are comfortable being readers, listeners, etc. That isn't bad...but they just aren't comfortable being the loud mouth that says it all—particularly the controversial stuff. They are not comfortable having their windows open if you will. So while, I am personally starting to let mine open just a bit more on my blog (and terrified by what this will bring)...I think that is okay. I have figured out there is nothing wrong with being a lurker, reader, listener...but the world does need some big mouths like me too in order to make it go around. In my verbose cluttered style...I like that you are a fellow big mouth. You are also a fantastic mentor for those of us just starting up. Please keep blogging.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)

This post shows a continuous return to the recurring concept of self-censorship. I acknowledge the development that happens for bloggers. There is a change from “the me” of owning this blog to “the we” of interacting with an established community. It is important to illustrate that it has taken years for a blog to grow beyond a “me” space to a “we” space.

I show the continuous struggle with the boundaries of what to share versus what to omit. There are overt references to bloggers crossing some perceived line based on an individual's definition, but still claiming ownership of what is shared. What is too much for one blogger may not be enough for another. These ideas echo the earlier struggle with self-censorship: what topics, statements, and feelings are out of bounds.

I also illustrate a prevailing attitude to use humor to trivialize or minimize the emotional impact surrounding the topic of discussion. Using humor in this way seems to be an attempt at deflecting the importance of the subject is. The use of humor in this post

highlights the impact and importance of the blog and the community. When considering how important this group is, it is clear that there is a tremendous amount of growth from that first day in which the writing enters the blogosphere. ‘Jenna’ stated,

If you would have said to me in 2005 that I’d be regularly interacting with people online, via a message board or WORSE! A blog, I would have thought you were just trying to annoy me. All that I knew about blogs at the time was that it was a place where geeks wrote about geeky things. Most blog writers were middle-aged balding dudes living in their parent’s basements, wearing wife-beater tees. They stayed up all night chatting online about Dungeons and Dragons while eating Cheetos and drinking cheap beer. I’m still certain that type of blogger exists (ha! Kidding!)

The comments all reinforce the concept of community in support of owning the voice and words. I show a sense of mutual support on a continuous basis with words like ‘mentor,’ ‘leader,’ and ‘loudmouth’ all spring up to help identify some degree of Alpha in the community. I illustrate how a blogger then becomes the focal point of attention, lifted to a position of importance and a key part of a growing community. Good or bad, I show this blogger has become a construct, a figure, an example of taking ownership of her own voice and a leader of what others are supporting or emulating.

Step Three: Personal Validation

The third step in facilitating community within the blogosphere comes in the form of personal validation. By sharing their experiences through their blog stories, mommy bloggers discover others that often feel very similar. Their emotions, beliefs, skills, and ideas are seen as valid, worthy, accepted, and supported. This personal validation comes

mainly through comments readers leave on blogs, but also through the blogger's acknowledgement of the importance of these comments and the budding relationships and community they include.



Validation

Once upon a time I had friends from high school and friends from college. Then I had high school friends and college friends and work friends. Then I had high school friends, college friends, work friends, neighborhood friends, friends from the twins club and eventually blog friends.

You get the picture.

Sometimes we would have a birthday party and your work friends would meet your regular friends and maybe a mom or two that I knew from twins club. It was okay. A little weird, but pretty normal.

I then found a whole world of people interacting online, talking about motherhood and marriage, weight gain and women's friendships. The very first blogs I read were several of the now defunct Club Mom blogs. Those first blogs that I read were the ones that changed my outlook of blogging and quite literally changed the course of my life.

Enter blog friends. At one point in my life, my blog friends were pretty much contained on the internet. I would comment on their blogs, they would comment on my blog and occasionally there would be an e-mail exchange.

Then I moved. When I moved here I only knew a handful of people that lived in the Washington DC area, but I knew that some of my blog friends lived here. Suddenly, some of my blog friends were real life friends. When my son was diagnosed with Asperger's, officially (we had known for a while that something was going on, obviously), and I wrote about it, I was completely overwhelmed by the response I received from my readers. I knew they'd be supportive – I've been blessed with a really kind and empathetic reader base – but I was astonished at both how many people either had or knew kids on the spectrum and had very specific words of wisdom to share AND how many people rushed to tell me that he was the same great kid he'd always been and they were there for us. It was really incredible; it felt like sharing the news with a thousand doting aunts who had our backs.

I cannot even count the meaningful experiences or quantify the level of support I have received from the blogosphere, but I can say that when I had to go on antidepressants there was an outpouring of support that really made me feel loved. While I didn't feel like I could talk to my husband or mom about my inner sadness and turmoil, I did feel that I could reach out to my online friends.

I was struck by the number of battles that we are all fighting, and the number of fears we all share. I was reminded that we are all worried about balance, about failure, about the rainbows that always seem right around the corner.

There were many stories shared, and many ideas that were passed from one heart to another, and several continue to resonate.

I'm feeling very sentimental about blogging after all of your thoughtful and kind comments. I've discovered a group of people that I really identified with and now I can't imagine NOT interacting with people online. I depend on your support, perspective, and humor.

Posted by Dr. Mommy Blogger

Labels: [blogging](#), [community building](#), [validation](#)

6 comments:



Lara Mar 29, 2012 01:46 PM

This post epitomizes what I love about your writing. You verbalize, via written word, those unspoken thoughts that most people are afraid or ashamed to acknowledge. It makes me feel better as a Mom, so nice to know I'm not the only one ;)

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



S Mar 29, 2012 01:46 PM

I'm glad you hit publish yesterday – not only was it great content but the writing was amazing. I am constantly amazed at the wisdom you bring to parenting when I feel like I'm just bouncing off the walls, reacting, vs guiding my kids. And, one comment mouthed from a teacher at pick up "he had a rough day" makes me question my parenting all day long, so I can't even imagine how I'd feel getting the phone call you received. We all want so much for our kids and its so hard to see them struggle. On my way home this morning, a beautiful rainbow appeared – it totally lifted me out of my "different day same ol' sh*t" mood. Each day is a gift, I just need to look up to appreciate it. Thanks for helping me look up.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



Julie M. Mar 29, 2012 01:47 PM

I adore you online and off. So glad we found each other.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



Tito Mar 29, 2012 01:47 PM

Forever in my Favorites!!!You make my laugh out loud at my desk at work ALL the TIME!! I love your blog forever!!xoxox

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



flutter Mar 29, 2012 01:47 PM

I'm just so glad you're here.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



Jules Mar 29, 2012 01:47 PM

OMG. Can I copy-and-paste this right on my wall at home?I think this is the anthem of the 21st century American mom.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)

In this post I show that there are two distinct external events stimulating the importance of the development of the online community. I illustrate that there is something different about the group of friends that are found through a blog. These are readers that are more than just readers. They interact. They offer comfort, support, and advice. These readers are an active and important part of a support structure. Readers are friends, confidants, and in some cases completely anonymous. ‘Dottie’ stated,

So, I’ve tried very hard to keep this particular pain behind closed doors and out of this blog. But it hasn’t been easy. And frankly, Bitchy and I had a discussion about it not long ago. I shared with her that I was having a very, very difficult time writing. I’ve wanted to write about everything that is happening, but I just don’t know how. I’m not sure if I trust what might end up on the paper when I’m in a painful and angry state. I know from experience that things that go out on the internet are there forever. In fact, I’ve tested that theory MORE THAN ONCE, and yep: it’s true. That means that sometimes you get to re-live your mistakes over and over and over again. What fun. And so I tread lightly as I open up about this horrible rollercoaster...

Furthermore, I illustrate that it is through some event that the line begins to blur between blog friends and real world friends. I show that women who have only traded emails and blog comments become the center of friendly encounters. The support that explodes in a time of personal crisis goes even further to solidify the role that this blog community plays. I emphasize feelings of empowerment in revealing and discussing things on a blog rather than with a family, a husband, or friends. Mir stated,

Well, let's be clear: I have CONTACT with all sorts of people. Through the miracle of Facebook, sure, yes, I periodically do talk to a couple people who were in my kindergarten class. Two of my best friends from high school write on my wall occasionally, and I on theirs, but only recently got back in touch and I wouldn't call it a deep relationship. Facebook is kind of like a floating class reunion, and it's a lot of fun at first, walking down memory lane, but then it sort of fades into the background. Wow, your kids are really growing up. Congrats to your husband on the new job. Hey, I like your hair like that. Not exactly deep stuff.

The comments for this post tie positive feedback, supporting statements, and emotional bandages in a form of validation for the blogger. This validation brought by comments ranges from acceptance to understanding to a sense of nurturing. Not only does the blogger admit the role the readers play in her life, but the readers also acknowledge both their role and her role to them.

Step Four: Motivation

The final phase in the process of building community comes in the form on motivation – motivation to keep sharing, motivation to keep blogging, motivation to continue making

efforts to build relationships. The support, validation and understanding these women feel when they share their experiences continue to motivate them to embrace what they are feeling and expose those feeling across a medium that promotes interaction.

Motivation becomes a powerful tool even when the need to quit or stop writing nags at the blogger.



Motivation

The thought crosses my mind nearly everyday that I should quit blogging, close up shop, copy my archives so that all this work is not totally gone. My memories are recorded on this blog after all. When I think of quitting, I get all panicky, though. "Who will I talk to?" "I know that as soon as I quit, I'll have something really poignant to say." "What will I do with my time?"

There is nothing simple about quitting. Blogging has become such a part of who I am. Most of my friends live in my laptop/iPhone. This hobby is the source of vacations and get togethers. Without blogging, would I get a weekend away from the kids, spending time with friends?

What I mean by community is this: The people who visit and comment, the meaningful interactions with other bloggers, and positive word-of-mouth about your blog. Building relationships in blogging is exactly like building relationships in real life. Be nice to others, return favors, and make others feel welcome. The goal should be to develop meaningful relationships with those to whom you relate.

To each of you reading, I cannot tell you just how much I appreciate your visits, comments, and emails. Before discovering this link to the outside world, I felt very isolated and one dimensional. You all have become my friends and support network. Even on days when I've decided that I QUIT! I'm not blogging EVER AGAIN!, somebody will leave me a comment or send me an email that makes me change my mind.

I am devoted to the craft of writing, and am pinching myself each and every day that this audience is kind, grateful, patient, supportive and has a GREAT sense of humor. (And a great sense of honor, of which I am also grateful.)

I am no longer shocked when I find myself engaged in an interesting and fascinating conversation with a stranger. The fact that we felt connected by our blogging experiences and similar blogging friends was not a shock, as I've learned that we are almost all connected in some interesting and magical way.

I don't have the words to tell you all how much it means to me when the Internet proves, once again, to be a place filled with kind and thoughtful and just plain NICE people. Yesterday I needed to let it all out, and I did. I've learned that your friends will wrap you in love and comfort. Reach out to them and they will lift you up.

Through it all I've been amazed at the support and love I have felt from so very many of you. By caring about my life, and what I write, you have given me a new lease on life. I have been provided with a missing piece of a puzzle I DIDN'T even know I was MISSING! I read each comment, respond and visit as often as I can, and feel very connected to all of you.

Thank you. Thank you for being there through kidney stones and the birth of my daughter, my good days, my really, really low days, and while I tour the United States.

And one other important reminder for all of us? When you are climbing that ladder; when you are making that journey; when you are achieving success don't forget to lift as you go. Yep. We must remember that true success is sweet only if you have your community to share it with; and the best way to have them with you, is to lift them up as well.

Lift as you go, people. Lift as you go. YOU are the wind beneath my wings. Let's hold hands and look out at the ocean while sitting in Adirondack chairs, mokay?

Posted by Dr. Mommy Blogger

Labels: [blogging](#), [community building](#), [motivation](#)

7 comments:



Catnip Mar 29, 2012 01:53 PM

Sheesh, can I just reprint this on my own blog? It's EXACTLY where I am too. My worlds are colliding and I don't quite quite what to do about it.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



Pam Mar 29, 2012 01:53 PM

My blogging anxiety tends to ebb and flow. I go through periods (right after BlogHer last year, for example) where I think, "Why don't I have more readers? Aren't I witty and a good writer? What's wrong with me? What's the point anyway?" Then, I have other phases (like now, thank goodness) when I think, "It's just for fun and my high school biology teacher and my sister college roommate read it . . . so that's cool." Thanks, as ever, for your honesty and your thoughtfulness

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



Jennifer Mar 29, 2012 01:54 PM

I think that blog conferences can definitely mess with your head! I always feel so overwhelmed after them, learning about all the things I SHOULD be doing, worrying about all the people I met and how I was going to add them to my already monstrous blog reads, hearing about everything I missed...Like you said, it ebbs and flows.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



Miller Mar 29, 2012 01:54 PM

thank you for lifting as you go as an example for us...smiles.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



Janie Mar 29, 2012 01:54 PM

you rock, girlie. you do.

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



singlemom Mar 29, 2012 01:55 PM

You are so right, but it does get hard sometimes to lift and stay positive. Without that kind of an attitude we don't stand a chance, do we? I happened on a blog The Meanest Mom and she listed all of you that were in Atlanta. I live nearby. Sounds like a great group of ladies that got together!

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)



helen13 Mar 29, 2012 01:55 PM

i just started blogging this year and its great to just be able to put your thoughts out there and rant if you need to. Happy new year! :)

[Reply](#) [Delete](#)

I created this post to highlight the peak of the blogging circle of community: motivation. By this point in the lifecycle I show that the blog has grown into a full and interconnected web of community in which there is a continual feedback loop. Bloggers and readers are passing good karma tokens around, lifting up the new writers, and continuing to develop deep connections with the readers. This is the first time that one of these blog posts acknowledges the ebb and flow of the willingness and nerve to write or share. This post shows that as the community develops the writers the bloggers have an obligation to continue adding to the community. I illustrate that there is an inherent responsibility of the bloggers to continue to provide this space for community, to continue to develop new content to keep the community moving forward, and continue to motivate one another. At this point it seems that the blogs are not about a personal issue or experience; rather it is about the group experience surrounding that personal issue or experience. 'Jenna' stated,

After more than two years of blogging I think I'm finally in a place where I'm no longer really trying to grow my blog and gain readership, though if it happens, great! I do want to keep my readers, though, because I LIKE you. I really, really

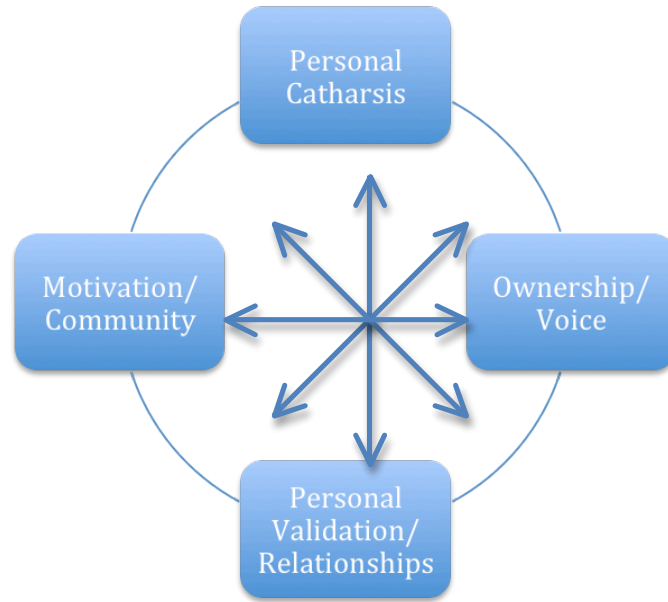
like you. I would be a shame to lose a bunch of readers because I decided to be ME. Can I give myself permission to expand the content that I present on THIS site? Is it even allowed?

‘Dottie’ stated “I’ve learned that your friends will wrap you in love and comfort. Reach out to them and they will life you up.”

The comments continue to show positive reinforcement that this evolution of the blog is in the right direction. The comments remain forceful in their support, comforting, addressing both the stated and unstated concerns of the author in the source post.

Throughout both the post and the comments I show constant images of friendship, hand holding, and community. One can almost see this group of people, these women and men, sitting around a table enjoying coffee and laughing. Laughing together.

The whole process of moving to develop community for these mommy bloggers is symbiotic in the sense that each step works in relation to the others. The steps are dependent upon one another and are constantly repeating – with each post, with each blog, with each, story. What I discovered, though, is that while each step is dependent upon the others, bloggers can exist in multiple steps at one time. The process is not linear. This is indicated through the circular motion of the diagram and the cross arrows within the center. As the process repeats the connection and community continues to grow and develop. Comments enable interactions between bloggers and readers that have the ability to escape real time but still work to create connections, understanding, and personal growth.



This chapter provided data in multiple forms including blog posts and found poetry. While it is set up to provide evidence to support the research questions, the data is presented with an overarching theme that includes Logging On, The Dialing Handshake, and The Connection. How community is established and maintained is also explored within the data and included polyvocal accounts and blog comments to support the process. Chapter 5 will explore the conclusions and implications of the findings.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate how mommy bloggers build community and explore notions of motherhood through writing and voice. Four research questions guided the study:

1. Why do mothers blog?
2. How does blogging create and/or facilitate community for mothers?
3. How does participation in a leisure activity such as blogging provide a conduit for voice?
4. How does blogging reinforce traditional notions or create new possibilities for motherhood?

Four women agreed to participate in this study. Participant selection was a combination of purposeful sampling and criterion sampling from the Babble 2010 Top Mom Blogger list. Blog posts were collected from each blogger's archives ranging from the start of the study and working back a minimum of three years. Follow up contact in the form of electronic interviews elicited additional information and clarification from each blogger. By conducting member checks through follow-up interviews and sharing the results I was able to garner informal feedback to ensure that the research was accurate and credible of the participants' experiences. Those participants that responded to the request for member checks indicated that the findings "look great" and were "fantastic, I

love it.”

Discussion

As an Interpretivist it seems counterproductive to draw conclusions about the research specifically because these conclusions and findings only exist within the context of these four participants in this particular study. The reality present to these bloggers is constructed through the meanings and understandings they gained through their social experience within the blogosphere and does not indicate generalizations that can be made to all mommy bloggers or mothers in general. And, as a mommy blogger myself, I cannot ignore my role within the research. In many ways I am as present in the research as the bloggers themselves.

Three general conclusions were drawn from the findings of this study. The first conclusion was that the motivation behind why mothers blog is fluid and constantly changing. The second conclusion was that blogging provides a space and a voice that works to reinforce and create new possibilities for motherhood. The third conclusion was that community is established through a sense of catharsis, ownership and voice, validation, and motivation. I set out with four questions in mind to guide my study. While I found answers to each of these questions within the context of my study, I must now ask “So what?” What do these three conclusions mean?

This question of why mothers blog needed to be broken down into two distinct parts: why these mothers began blogging and why they continue to blog. The two parts do not exist separately, but coexist and feed off one another over time. As a researcher I cannot ignore the fact that the reasons each of these mothers blog and participate in social media change over time. They begin blogging for one set of personal reasons, but

continue blogging for a very different set of reasons. And those reasons are not stagnant. They are fluid and adaptable based on their varying needs. The “why” changes, develops, and becomes flexible and pliable as their needs and goals change.

Jenna started blogging because she heard of the benefits of the community that exists for many bloggers. She discovered many women that were experiencing and struggling with the same aspects of motherhood that she herself was struggling with. There was a sense of vindication to her experiences and feelings as a mother of young children. As time moved on, though, Jenna discovered not only a hobby but also a business. She realized that the experience and the community that developed became such a part of who she is to the point that stepping away or quitting was not an option. It would mean the loss of relationships, business, and a community of support.

Dottie began blogging as a means of replacing the old paper journals she kept for years. It gave her a space to record and purge the thoughts about her children and her job as a teacher. It became her space to be authentic and honest. Her dedication and continuation with blogging brought her a new appreciation for writing as a craft and opportunities to speak and share that craft with other women. She learned of existing boundaries and how supportive and caring a community of women can be when sharing stories and mistakes online.

Mir began blogging as a means of finding validation for her emotions and feelings regarding raising a special needs child. Her blog started mainly as a love letter to her children, something they can read one day to better understand their mother as both a parent and a person. Her blog developed into a place for writing practice, emotional venting, and connecting with others. It gave her an extended family that repeatedly

celebrates the triumphs and disappointments of daily life. Blogging brought her a new career, social support, and medical support that she doubts would have been found any other way.

Sarah started blogging with no goals and no audience. It was merely her outlet, a place to express herself. But, she quickly realized that blogging brought her the opportunity to become a writer, travel, and experience the underside of the music industry. Through the support she received and the community she developed she continues to blog with the goal of creating a career with blogging and social media. It has become her catharsis, her support, and her future ambitions.

With the question divided into two parts, why these mothers began blogging and why they continue to blog, it is clear that these parts do not exist independently. They work as a cohesive unit that changes and develops over time. Blogging begins for one set of distinct reasons personal to each blogger, but continues for a very different set of reasons also distinct and personal to each blogger. And those distinct reasons are not stationary. They are moving and flexible based on the individual needs of the blogger. As stated earlier, the literature examining bloggers, specifically mommy bloggers, is almost nonexistent. Blogging has been examined in an educational context (Young, Gyeong, & Lee, 2011; Coulter & Draper, 2006; Kukkonen, Kärkkäinen, Valtonen, & Keinonen, 2011; Flatley, 2005), but this study gives sustenance to looking closer at what 3.9 million mothers are doing with their leisure time. A study on social networking and maternal well being (McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes, 2011) suggested most mommy bloggers began blogging as a means of keeping in touch with family and friends. My study, however, showed that the “why” for blogging is much more complex than simply keeping in touch

with family and friends. By participating in this form of leisure these mommy bloggers and redefining their own labels as “wife” and “mother” and learning to vocalize the necessity of this leisure within their lives. They are improving their emotional health, rediscovering themselves, and embracing opportunities to engage in genuine, honest discourse among women (Wearing, 1998; Currie, 2004).

What is certain, though, about why mothers blog is that their reasons for engaging in this form are movable, changing, and rarely steady. Their reasons for starting to blog and continuing to blog are as varied as their blogs, their narratives, and their voices themselves. Because of this variety it seems almost wrong to lump them all under the category of “mommy blogger.” There is so much more to each of them. They are mothers and they are bloggers, but within the space they claim with their words and stories they are vulnerable, celebratory, emotional, and authentic women. They are in this for so much more. And, it’s the combination of those varied aspects of blogging and continuing to blog that unify into the freckled mosaic that creates a larger picture of these four women and the many others that call themselves “mommy bloggers.” And that is what the literature has failed to recognize up to this point.

The piece of found poetry shared in Chapter 4 was not only a creative exploration of the traditional notions of motherhood through the experiences mothers face within the domestic aspects of their busy lives, but also a means of exercising creative analytic practice to escape a crisis of representation in lived experience research, (Parry & Johnson, 2000). Creative analytic practice brings with it questions of validity, reliability, and objectivity (Parry & Johnson, 2007). As a researcher I must recognize that a piece of found poetry used to capture the lived experience needs to be judged

differently than traditional research representations. Richardson (1997, 2000) developed several criteria for creating and evaluating creative analytic practice.

The first criterion focuses on whether the text gives a deeper understanding of social life. This is often achieved by honoring the context in which participants understand their experiences. While the blog posts themselves are essentially vignettes of the mommy bloggers' experiences, it is not uncommon for them to explore writing poetry within the pages of their blogs and enables me to honor their human perspective. The second criterion focuses on the aesthetic merit of the text. While these criteria tend to be subjective to the audience and the writer, I believe the poem captures the complexity of the experience of motherhood in an interesting and inviting manner. Plus, aesthetic merit encourages readers to form their own interpretations of the social world being shown through the poem and reinforces why I let the poem stand as is in chapter four.

The third criterion focuses on reflexivity and requires me to be clear on how the poem was created. This was stated in chapter four as I discussed numerous drafts, play with punctuation, and the use of polyvocal accounts to create the final piece of found poetry. The fourth criterion focuses on the impact of the texts. I cannot make the decision as to whether the poem meets this criterion because it is dependent on the audience, the questions it raises for them, and the poem's ability to motivate the audience to try new research approaches. The final criterion focuses on whether the text conveys a credible account of the lived experience. I believe the poem meets this criterion by incorporating the multiple voices of the participants and using excerpts from blog posts across a broad spectrum of years to show a credible account of both an individual and

communal experience of motherhood.

As stated earlier, it is counterproductive to summarize the poem and its multiple parts because it would destroy the result. But, what I can say is that by examining the polyvocal aspects of the poem, these four participants are reinforcing the traditional notion that the mother is the embodiment of the caretaker, (Hoare, 1967; Medina and Magnuson, 2009; Hays, 1996). They are responsible for roles traditionally given to the mother: cooking, cleaning, raising children, running the household, and handling the family schedule. This isn't new to the existing body of literature examining mothers. But, what is new is how the traditional notions of motherhood are at a crossroads with this new possibility for voice to mothers existing within the realm of blogging and the conversation it creates. Dutro (2011) suggested that "A reader's witnessing might involve empathetic emotional responses or expressions—verbal and non-verbal—that acknowledge the weight and importance of the stories told" (p. 197). While her research focused on writing wounded within classroom literacy, the sentiment can easily be applied to the context of mommy blogging. As these women share their struggles, or wounds, they are creating an opportunity for what she calls the "metaphor of testimony and witness," (Dutro, 2011, p. 197). In this context the act of witnessing depends on the act of being heard. By making the stories and words available in a forum designed for interaction, mommy bloggers are creating their own form of testimony and witness that is open to sharing struggles with parenting as shown within the found poetry piece. Caruth (1995) stated that "we can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may

lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound (p. 8).” And, this ties directly to the development of community centered on support, give, and take.

As stated earlier, the contemporary ideology of motherhood centers on mothers being selfless caregivers who focus their attention and time entirely on their children in what Arendell (1997) called a *good* mother. What this poem shows is that the participants in this study are reinforcing a traditional notion of motherhood in their care of the children. They handle carpool, schedules, activities, meals, household duties, and the responsibilities involved in raising the children. What is breaking this hegemonic discourse of motherhood, however, comes through the mothers authentically sharing their emotions. They are using their blogs as a space for a voice that wants to work against that hegemonic discourse by entertaining ideas that there are alternate and valid ways of raising children that do not require the mother to give up herself in the process. While they all may fit the mold of a traditional good mother their blogs show a contrary to that motherhood stereotype born from the industrial era.

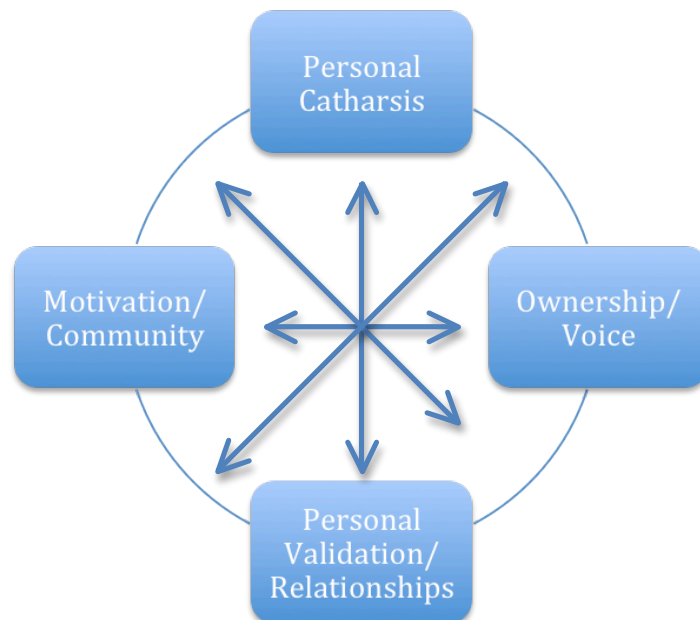
The understanding of self and voice that comes through writing allows mommy bloggers to escape isolation, remove filters or guards that might prevent them from sharing, engage in self reflection, and continue to write for personal well being. This experience of having a sense of self through blogging appears when bloggers choose not to distance their personal identity from the writing itself. Furthermore, when these women share their stories in an online forum, it allows them to escape the hegemonic discourse of motherhood that comes with their personal circumstances, reflect on themselves as women, parents, and wives, and maintain a personal identity within the

writing. Doing this in a media venue allows mommy bloggers to begin to bridge the gap between traditional notions of motherhood and those that embrace and inspire the voice of the mother in a healthy and purposeful manner.

Few would dare argue that parenting is a difficult task and there is little doubt that the context and practice of motherhood is changing. Motherhood, in particular, is being shoved into the spotlight and gaining critical examinations among scholars as resistance to constraints grows. It is, by far, a very different experience than other contexts examined by past research as the culture has evolved and changed. Women who have somehow adopted the notion that they must portray a *Super Mom* persona in order to be good mothers are stepping outside that label and declaring that those standards and expectations are ridiculous and unachievable. They are using their voices to break down the Supermom Phenomenon and take back some of who they were before they had children while learning to balance who they are as mothers. They are recognizing that their leisure is valid and important, but as the poem shows, is lost within the shuffle of the multiple aspects of running a family. But, by acknowledging through their own authentic voice that the struggle is continuing, there is potential to change and recognize the benefits leisure brings to mothers. The benefits have the potential to reach numerous aspects of family life and their openness can help redefine what constitutes a good mother in the eyes of society, media, and gender roles. By focusing on the roots of what drove them to blog in the first place, mommy bloggers hold onto the authenticity and the voice of their chosen medium. And, while the radical nature of what they do might be questioned, someday when writers record the historical events of 4th wave feminism, there is sure to be a small mention of mommy bloggers, their impact on modern

motherhood, and their influence in creating a space for resistance against outdated expectations.

As explained in Chapter 4 the four steps involved in creating the community bloggers are so much a part of and showed each step with a blog post and reader comments. These steps include personal catharsis, ownership/voice, personal validation used to build relationships, and motivation that develops community.



While the steps involved in building the blog community for mothers is new to the literature, what is interesting is exactly how this process works. The whole process is symbiotic in the sense that each step works in relation to the others. The steps are dependent upon one another and are constantly repeating – with each post, with each blog, with each, story. What I discovered, though, is that while each step is dependent upon the others, bloggers can exist in multiple steps at one time. The process is not linear. This is indicated through the circular motion of the diagram and the cross arrows within the center.

In the context of mommy blogging, voice has the ability to be authentically based in the genuine experiences of the writers. Mommy bloggers are having a human experience that they are sharing in a context that is set up to make them feel empowered and heard. These women are sharing their stories in a manner that feels safe and situated within a supportive community, a community centered on uplifting both women and mothers. This means that while there will be obvious cultural influence of the masculine gender that feed into the experience, it is not inherently gender biased. No one knows the experience of motherhood better than mothers. By sharing their words, their experiences, and their stories, their voice has the ability to be heard in an authentic forum.

As mentioned in Chapter 4 each of the bloggers use humor, often in a self-deprecating manner, to deal with the difficult topics discussed on their blogs. While they seem to attempt to deflect the importance of the subjects they explore, research has shown that humor within a leisure context can not only decrease stress and anxiety, but also remove social restraint by “expressing the inexpressible,” (Szabo, 2003, p. 152). Humor can be a communication facilitator, a means of breaking the ice, and a way to maintain relationships (Mcree, Leitner, & Leitner, 2004). Perhaps this is why the bloggers choose to relay their difficulties with a sense of humor and laughter. Perhaps they are using the blog not only as a leisure space, but also as an opportunity to decrease stress, find laughter, and reveal their “inexpressible” in the process. Other researchers, though, found that using humor in a leisure context, specifically when building friendships, similar to the way the bloggers build their friendships and relationships online, is a way for women to rework gender identities by resisting stereotyped gender roles (Green, 1998). The laughter and humor that exists within this context “can pinpoint

incongruities in the way ‘things are supposed to be and the way things are’; it can also be used to enforce the rules of the culturally dominant group, or to subvert them (Green, 1998, p.181). Maybe, without even realizing it, these bloggers are exposing incongruities within what is traditionally a male dominated society and exposing the way things really are with their words and narratives.

The blogging space is a safe haven for these women and, while it has been dismissed by the literature in the past, it is important to acknowledge both from a critical perspective and a feminist perspective that it is time to listen to and honor this phenomenon. The blogosphere has the ability to transcend the fast-paced society many mothers exist in and enable them to find a tribe of support and make connections with like-minded people, (Lopez, 2009). It limits traditional time and distance constraints present in a mother’s leisure and the anonymity that exists can enable bloggers to be more honest and present with their voices. The space can now be opened for future examination in multiple contexts and from multiple perspectives. Their voices and their stories show that these bloggers are reclaiming the power of their own minds and voices.

This understanding of self and voice that comes through writing allows mommy bloggers to escape isolation, remove filters or guards that might prevent them from sharing, engage in self reflection, and continue to write for personal well being. This experience of having a sense of self through blogging appears when bloggers choose not to distance their voice from the writing itself. Furthermore, when these women share their stories in an online forum, it allows them to escape the isolation that comes with their personal circumstances, reflect on themselves as women, parents, and wives, and a

voice within the writing. Doing this in a media venue situated on sharing allows mommy bloggers to begin to bridge the gap between being heard and feeling empowered.

Mommy bloggers engage with their audience in a written form that expresses the roles, expectations, experiences, and realities of modern women. This format allows mothers a space to create artifacts of their experiences as women on an individual level and as an institution of modern mothers. One of the core issues in feminist theory is the struggle between recognizing that oppressive environments have historically limited the opportunities for women, minorities, and marginal groups and the need to identify the sources of individual resistance in those contexts (Ruiz, 2009). Personal agency is often considered a source of feminist resistance (Ruiz, 2009). Personal agency refers to “a subjective awareness that one is initiating, executing, and controlling one's own volitional actions in the world,” (Jeannerod, 2003, p. 1). By sharing, interacting, and building relationship in this online medium of blogging, these mothers are claiming ownership of their situations and taking hold of the opportunities this outlet provides. It begins within themselves, but bridges to a community of support and voice for an online generation of mothers.

A recent study also showed how blogging and social networking impacts feelings of connection and social support for new mothers (McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes, 2011). This was one of the first studies to examine new mothers and the use of social networking and blogging and reinforces what I discovered as a means of escaping the isolation my participants experienced. The connections that these mothers created worked to enhance maternal well-being and diminished feelings of depressive symptoms (McDaniel, Coyne,

& Holmes, 2011). My findings enhance what this study found by including a sense of validation through sharing maternal feelings and experiences.

Results from the study revealed minimal negative aspects of their experiences with blogging. This overwhelming positive nature of the experience is possibly a result of the sample of bloggers themselves. Women were chosen for this study because they were voted on by readers as some of the top mommy bloggers on the Internet and have been blogging for a minimum of three years. While the participants in this study related rather positive experiences with the blogging community and personal insights from their participation in blogging, such positive experiences would not necessarily be shared by all mommy bloggers. Those for whom blogging was negative experiences have more than likely chosen to cease blogging online, and the exclusion of their stories is perhaps a limitation of the results presented here. While each participant did share an experience where they received negative backlash from writing in the blogosphere (shown in blog comments), each participant managed to receive additional support from their online community and turn the experience into a learning one. Previous literature (Rojek, Shaw, & Veal, 2006), has shown that the solidarity many people feel, including participants in this study, often happens through media, including television, radio, and Internet. Harris (2004) showed that mass communication is creating spaces for engagement and enabling participants to dismiss previous boundaries of age, gender, and physical distance and, in turn, create a positive leisure experience.

It is also important to note that findings did not show obvious attempts on the part of the mommy bloggers to challenge existing patriarchal structures. While motherhood is traditionally seen as the role of the woman, the women participating did not use their

blogs as a place to challenge their role within this structure. For them it wasn't about gender, it was about finding a space to give voice to their mothering experiences. And, while those experiences themselves might be seen as gendered and we might examine them in an academic setting from a gendered point of view, it was more about exercising their voice within the role they chose for themselves. The mommy bloggers saw their involvement in blogging as an aspect of their own separate personalities, not of their gender. They viewed their accomplishments through blogging and the opportunities it has presented in terms of what they had thought themselves capable of before, and not as a reflection of a deliberate attempt to challenge a patriarchal structure. By adopting the description of "mommy blogger" though, it implies a gendered nature to the experience and plays itself out within the stories and the space. According to Henderson & Shaw (2004) by focusing on the gendered nature of the leisure experience researchers have the ability to make the lives of women visible. Perhaps by identifying as "mommy bloggers" these women are bringing visibility to their lives and, in turn, doing their part to reduce gender inequalities.

What is so interesting about the fact that the women did not reference gender overtly is that they are still showing several of the key components of conservative feminism. As stated earlier, the foundation of conservative feminism is based in allowing the woman to decide when change and what change is desirable for them (Dillard, 2005). These women are working to fulfill their responsibilities to their children and home while trying to develop their writing talents, gain wisdom and insight into motherhood, and obtain a sense of personal fulfillment. Their blogs capture these experiences and reinforce that their priority is their families – the place where they feel confident in

creating the change they wish to see. The literature, though, does question the ability of these social media spaces to inspire change when they do tend to be limited to those who are more privileged and have access (Gregg, 2008). I cannot ignore the fact that, even though I worked to get a heterogeneous sampling of participants within the study, this is certainly a sample with more access to technology and social media than might be found in other areas of study including underprivileged mothers.

While none of my research questions focused specifically on motherhood and beauty, it is important to note that the findings revealed a connection to body image and beauty for each of the mommy bloggers. Throughout the blog narratives there were constant references to personal hygiene, weight gain/weight loss, fashion, and personal beauty. The undertone of these references focused on how each mother felt she was supposed to look and how much she was supposed to weigh according to what she believed to be society's expectations. This lack of confidence in personal beauty was apparent, if not magnified, in mothers possibly due to the post-baby body changes and an underlying idea of how one "should/supposed to" look as a mother. It is based in a perceived idea of beauty and perceived judgment by other mothers. Previous literature suggests that body image is of significant importance to mothers (Jordan, Capdevlia, & Johnson, 2005) and that body image can either improve or diminish post-baby (Tooks Crowell, 1995; Walker, 1998; Strang & Sullivan, 1985). Since previous literature showed both sides of the issue it is important to note that the focus on beauty for mothers within this study and in general is still a prevalent issue within the discourse of motherhood and deserves further study.

While the data did not directly discuss identity, it was clear from the blogs as a whole that each participant developed an online identity within the social context of blogging. While this identity may have centered on being honest and authentic to the stories they live, the social context of this identity cannot be ignored. Symbolic interactionism is a perspective that emphasizes the importance of meaning and interpretations within the context of human experience (Patton, 2002). It emphasizes the shared meanings people create through their daily interactions and how those meanings, in turn, become their reality. The major premises that are fundamental to symbolic interactionism include acting toward things based on the meanings they hold, that meaning arises from social interactions, and that those meanings are handled through an interpretive process (Patton, 2002). *Situated identity*, a term coined by C. Norman Alexander (Alexander & Lauderdale, 1977), was designed to explore the aspects of social structures that appear when discerning previous work on identity and roles.

Blogging is where there is the potential to merge situated identity, leisure, and community within a digital context. Future research focusing on the impact leisure participation has on a woman's development and sense of identity would continue to fill the gap within the literature. It is clear that identity development is central to the establishment and conceptualization of *self*. The self is crucial to understanding social structures, behavior, and the process of meaning making within those structures. Researchers have looked at the role of identity/self in the conceptualization of leisure for more than 30 years and almost unanimously agree that social structures cannot be fully understood without an understanding of situated identity. Specifically within the context the virtual world, identity requires more exploration within social communities. The

possibility of pushing those boundaries is visible within the context of mommy blogging and how it intersects with identity, community, and social structure. Future research can work to fill part of that gap and inspire others to recognize the potential of virtual scholarship. The remainder of this chapter will present the conclusions drawn from the four research questions, along with implications for practice and recommendations for further research.

Recommendations

At this point it is important to break down implications and recommendations into two categories: academic and non academic. The reason I do this is two fold. I do this mainly as a means of continuing to build trust with mommy bloggers. So little research exists at this point that I believe we need to build trust with mommy bloggers to continue future research. I want mommy bloggers to recognize that academic study of what they do is not done with the intention of exploiting, but with the intention of empowerment and understanding. By acknowledging this fact I hope to continue bridging any divide that may exist between being “new” to academic study and being skeptical. Second, I want to provide ideas and opportunities for this research to be used at a practical level that bloggers and others involved in social media can benefit from everyday. This will hopefully work to enhance the building of trust and minimize any potential marginalization that might exist between academic and non-academic worlds.

This study is theoretically significant because it begins to build a body of knowledge that is still in its infancy concerning mommy bloggers and how they build community as well as how blogging can become a conduit for voice by examining a previously untapped setting of blogging as leisure. It also offers increased understanding

of both motherhood and leisure within a new context. The study also adds to current information about feminism and empowerment in women as it expands on previously studied concepts such as mothers' motivation to participate in leisure activities, but concentrates specifically on blogging for the first time. This study offers practical significance as well, identifying for mothers ways in which they can develop voice and community in leisure contexts. It has the potential to illuminate a culture and communities that mothers may not even realize exists within their computers and expose them to a new leisure context that fit so well within our technology-heavy society.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how mommy bloggers build community and explore notions of motherhood through writing and voice in the specific leisure context of blogging. A qualitative research methodology was utilized to garner insights from blog narratives about their blogging experiences. Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are made for future research:

- Conduct a quantitative study using a survey to reach more participants beyond those considered top mom bloggers. Some women who were unwilling to allow access to their blog archives may choose to share their experiences through a survey instrument. Having a larger sample might reveal even more regarding blogging communities than those brought to light by the four women in this study.
- Include daddy bloggers in a qualitative study to find out if there are men who also value connectedness, voice, and community aspect of blogging. A study including men may help researchers discover why men participate in a leisure context so heavily dominated by women.
- Repeat the current study but with a more extensive sample of participants. While

this study had four of the top mom bloggers and the sample was as diverse as possible in terms of race, geography, number of children, and marital status, the study could easily be strengthened by examining more women considered top mom bloggers.

- Study women participants in varying blogging contexts. For example, study women that focus specifically on political blogging, food blogging, adoptive mothers, or those that self identify as feminist bloggers. It would be especially noteworthy to determine if women who participate in other blogging contexts experience the same community and conduit for voice as the mommy bloggers in this study.
- Conduct a mixed method study of the role of social activism within the blogging community. I observed numerous aspects of social activism during my time as a blogger both before and during this study. Those moments of activism include promoting and encouraging change regarding issues of breastfeeding, online piracy, boycotting businesses, marital equality, and women's health. A mixed method study would provide a solid foundation of numbers to determine what impact blogging activism is having as well as detailed insight into what those number of activist movements mean.

Implications For Practice

This research begins to bring voice to a process that has existed for several years and works to give experiential understanding of the very organic process of four women. It is of utmost importance to me to find ways to use this research to support current and future mommy bloggers. As simple as it may sound, the main way for me to do this is to

get the research out there – to find every opportunity to share what I now know about building community with as many women, bloggers and non-bloggers, as possible. This requires taking a more active role in social media and within the conference circuit, using the power of social media to draw women to a space where they can learn, understand, and begin to experience their own virtual communities.

The research needs to be shared and published in both academic and non-academic publications. There is opportunity to present the research and findings to numerous parenting magazines and online parenting websites so that it is easily accessible to a broader audience, specifically those women that are now relying on the Internet to teach them how to be mothers.

There is also the potential to bring access to a new community to existing and future mommy bloggers. While many online communities and magazines do exist as resources for mothers, most of these communities are so established that they may seem intimidating to those novices just beginning to explore what exists in the realm of parenting online. There are no websites available to new bloggers whose sole purpose is to help them navigate social media and learn to build community. I want to work with other bloggers to create a new safe space for those mothers just beginning to explore social media and blogging. This space would not only provide access to blogging tips and tricks, but also allow established bloggers to act as mentors to those just beginning. There would be opportunities for those new to blogging to connect with one another while establishing their voice and site. They would have the opportunity to read and discuss how others have navigated blogging and community in the past while supporting them with articles, research, and ideas to establishing their own community. It is my

hope that a site offering this form of mentoring to new bloggers would limit some of the “cliques” that do tend to exist within social media and provide a practical space to share the news and research at the forefront.

Bringing new research on mommy blogging to light also provides an excellent opportunity to connect female bloggers with advertisers in a manner that works to influence how women and mothers are being portrayed. The media is beginning to recognize mothers, specifically those that use their leisure time to blog, as a prime marketing target. Marketers are taking notice of the \$2 trillion females are spending on their families each year and doing their best to listen and react to what these women are saying (Ramirez, 2009). Specifically, companies and advertisers are targeting mom bloggers as the gatekeepers of the female niche. They can compete for the praise and space mom bloggers offer in order to reinforce to other consumers the variety of goods and services available to them. They can use mom bloggers as the vehicle for which to inform the world of consumers of their vast amount of choices they are able to make freely in terms of what products and services they purchase, (Parker, 2001). Mommy bloggers have the potential to become the ideal target of marketers because of their audience, influence, and virtual credit. And, they can use this virtual credit to share a new belief that women do not have to be perfect, but are perfectly content being good enough.

By engaging directly with the media and sharing stories that break free from the reinforced expectation of what the media has historically portrayed them as, bloggers can begin to put their own stamp in the crossing of feminist thought and culture and influence the media in a more positive light. Logically it makes sense that marketers would target

mom bloggers when trying to attract both the necessary and discretionary family spending. Mom bloggers are a ready-made focus group with a well-understood and defined audience. “The central concept is...arranging an economic meeting between the buyer and seller.” (Parker, 2001). By actively engaging the moms writing these blogs the marketing world is aggressively setting the aforementioned meeting. They are beginning to recognize the readers of these blogs as the buyers of the goods and services they have been tasked with selling. By honing the power and influence of mom bloggers to communicate between marketers and consumers they can potentially illustrate how much money and how many monetary opportunities exist from the extension of a new media leisure activity. What this ultimately illustrates is that advertisers want to cash in on the integrity and the community of the individual blogger. While the audience is appreciated, what they want is the credibility that these mom bloggers have gained through their leisure efforts.

Blogging can provide an outlet for many women to combat the expectations they feel in their roles as wives and mothers. They can use their stories and narratives to open a dialogue amongst one another and with the media about modern motherhood and the how the reality of ‘what is’ differs from the reality of ‘what is expected.’ Mommy bloggers can work as a unified community to break the silence of many mothers before them and acknowledge that who they are might be different from the images presented by the media, but that they are no less a class of women because of it.

Summary

Based on the blog posts and narratives of four mommy bloggers who were voted as top mom bloggers by Babble, three conclusions about blogging and motherhood,

community, and voice emerged. This study revealed first of all that a leisure context such as blogging provides a context to reinforce and challenge notions of motherhood. It can provide opportunities for women's empowerment and a conduit for voice within the mothering experience. Secondly, community in this context is fostered from personal catharsis, ownership and voice, personal validation that builds relationships, and motivation that shapes the community. Third, there is no definitive reasons mother spend their leisure time blogging. The motivation for engaging with blogging changes to the individual needs of the blogger. Implications for practice as well as women in general were discussed and recommendations were made for possible future studies.

For the past three years I have existed in two worlds. In this first world I am a stay at home mom and a blogger. I plan meals, carpool to preschool, pack lunches, help with homework, and watch karate lessons. I tell my stories of struggle and joy to an online audience as I march through the daily trenches of parenting. I open up to them in a way that feels honest, wholesome, and respectful of what I try to do everyday. Through opening my own kimono I have accepted that my virtual sisters in the blogosphere have come to my be own lifeline to women with the similar goals of raising happy, healthy children and not losing themselves in the process. I feel pain when they share their stories of heartache and express gratitude when they validate my less than stellar moments as a mother. I interact with them on Twitter, plan trips with them to meet up in NYC, and send as many virtual hugs as my fingers can type. I celebrate the pictures of birthdays, laugh at the misguided family road trip, and do my best to 'hold their hands' as they wait for the doctor to call. They do the same for me without hesitation or motive beyond wanting to be there for support and celebration. This world is crazy and frazzled

every moment of every day, but having that tie to others that are just as crazy and frazzled reinforces that, as I mother my children, I am not alone.

My second world is one that has thrown my first into chaos many times. In this second world I am a budding researcher, a girl that has struggled to adopt 'scholar' as a descriptive trait, a woman that has struggled to find a place in academics and feminism. In this world I am forced to adopt new lenses, ask difficult questions, and be critical of things that have always seemed so natural to my existence and my choices. It has, at times, been almost unbearable living in this world. It is here that I learn of my own ignorance, come face to face with my lack of understanding or knowledge, and begin to question things that I've always felt were better left alone. I came into this world with a tiny bit of curiosity and nothing more than a desire to understand more about the women that share their stories online. I've often lacked confidence in this world - always wondering if I'm smart enough or academic enough to come out of this as even a small semblance of myself.

I've always been fearful of allowing these two worlds to collide. I have worked to keep them separate by existing in my first world as just a mom and fighting the advantages of my second as someone with the stance that I'm just a curious person. I've been afraid to call myself a researcher for fear that it will somehow marginalize those around me that don't necessarily understand the academic world. I struggle to even refer to all the stories I've collected as data - afraid that lumping them into that category will somehow diminish their strength and value.

I was driving in the car the other day – 24 hours before drafting this chapter - when I suddenly asked myself why I'm so afraid to let these two worlds collide. Why

can't I be a mom, a blogger, and a researcher? Is it because I don't believe they can coexist? No, I don't think so. Is it because I don't see what I do as something valuable? Not really. I think it's more than that. I think I've been afraid to allow these two worlds to collide *not* for fear that what I do isn't valuable, but for fear that I won't follow through with my end of the bargain. I have a responsibility, no matter what my title, to embrace this opportunity and grab hold of the chance to show others that this is a phenomenon is worth honoring and worth listening to. It is my critical perspective, my overlap of worlds, that is opening up a space for these women - women like me - to speak and be heard. I owe it to these women to give their stories a chance to be heard in as many forums as possible. I owe it to other moms to bring to light a world that may very well save them from isolation. I owe it to myself to recognize exactly how powerful allowing these worlds to collide can be for current and future mommy bloggers. But, in order to do that I must step over the divide. I must embrace any and all titles and be willing to push further and deeper into this to see what lies on the other side. I must abandon the fear that I don't know much and grab hold of the fact that, quite frankly, I do. I know this better than anyone. I know how much voice and identity and community exist behind the screen and within the stories. By existing as a mother, a blogger, and a researcher I know all too well how a simple curiosity can transform into a phenomenon worth fighting for. This is just the first step...

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APPENDIX A

Initial Participant Contact

Hello, my name is Christina Yother and I am doing a dissertation research study under the direction of Dr. Corey Johnson, in the Department of Counseling and Human Development at the University of Georgia. This research study is about the lived experiences of mommy bloggers. Specifically, I am interested in exploring how mommy bloggers contribute to the contemporary discourse of motherhood. This study will use previously published blog posts from your personal blog. I believe the benefits of this study may result in a better understanding of the impact the blogging community is having for mothers.

If you are interested in participating in this study, you will be asked provide access to all your previously published blog posts and archives as well as participate in a follow-up questionnaire. Participation in the study is completely voluntary. There are no gifts or incentives

You will be provided an opportunity to read a Consent Form before you allow access to your blog archives, as well as suggest a pseudonym to be used as a replacement of your name. You will also be provided with a copy of the Consent Form. At any point during the study you may elect to stop participation, at which point any and all material collected will be destroyed.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please call me at 678-925-9501 or email me at cyother@uga.edu

If you have any questions or problems about your rights as a research participant, please call The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia at 706-542-3199.

Thank you for your willingness to participate!

Sincerely,

Christina C. Yother

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study titled “Mommy Blogging: A Narrative Inquiry into The Discourse of Motherhood Through the Lived Experience” conducted by Christina Yother from the Department of Counseling and Human Development at the University of Georgia (678-925-9501) under the direction of Dr. Johnson, Department of Counseling and Human Development, University of Georgia (706-542-4335). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at anytime without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The reason for this study is to explore mommy bloggers and the discourse they build about motherhood through the lived experience.

If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:

1. Provide full access to my personal blog archives OVER THE COURSE OF 1-6 MONTHS
2. Suggest a pseudonym to be used during analysis and write up of the findings
3. Participate in a short, follow-up questionnaire via email

No risks are expected and the benefits for me are that my ENGAGEMENT with blogging may help me understand and improve my lived experiences. I also hope to learn more about how individuals engage with the blogging community.

No individually-identifiable information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others without my written permission except if it is required by law. I will suggest a pseudonym which will be used to refer to my responses during the data formation and representation. Upon completion of the questionnaire, any direct identifier to me, the participant, will be broken and the use of a pseudonym will occur from that point forward. During the time of the study and beyond, any identifying information will be kept under lock and file for hard copies and/or through the use of password protected computer programs. Only the investigators will have access to the data files, which will not be publically disseminated. The data files will be destroyed 5 YEARS AFTER THE COMPLETION OF THE DATE OF THE STUDY.

The investigator will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project.

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

Name of Researcher:

Date

Christina Yother

Email: cyother@uga.edu

Name of Participant:

Date

Signature

Signature

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.
Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX C

Follow-Up Questionnaire

The questionnaire is intended follow-up on the findings upon completion of data analysis as well as provides an opportunity for member checks.

1. Tell me a time when you had a meaningful experience in the blogosphere or relied on the blogosphere for support.
2. Tell me about a time when you experienced backlash from writing in the blogosphere.
3. What does blogging bring to you personally?
4. What have your experiences in the blogosphere taught you about motherhood?
5. What is it you're trying to accomplish with your blog? What is your purpose? Who is your audience?

APPENDIX D

Blogging Data Report

Case	Code	Frequency	Type	Reference	Source
GoonBlog	blogging	10	TEXT	3373,4115	Good Squad .rtf

Source Material:

The kids didn't have school today because of all of the flooding. When my neighbor wanted to take my kids on a walk to McDonalds I nearly lost my mind. "IT ISN'T SAFE!" I yelled at everyone. Of course my neighbor didn't know that one of our local bloggers lost her son yesterday to the storm when he was swept away by the fast rising water in a creek. My kids didn't know it either, but I ended up telling them when I was trying to explain why I was the meanest mom in the neighborhood. I was trying to be positive as I was driving them to McDonalds in a fit of guilt for denying them everything and also ignoring them while finishing up a project for work this morning. I told them that I liked winter because there were no mosquitos to bite me.

GoonBlog	blogging	10	TEXT	20965,21990	Good Squad .rtf
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Source Material:

On June 1st, 2005 I started a little website called Sarah and the Goon Squad. My first post is loaded with bad grammar. It sounds like every bad blog you have ever read and assures you that it will probably be my first and last post.

It wasn't.

Almost 1800 posts later (and that is just on this site, since then I have written for at least 20 other websites) I am still here.

Life takes you in crazy directions. Impulsively signing up for that blogspot blog changed my life. I have gone places I never would have been, I have met amazing people and been given really cool opportunities. I have been in the photo pit at a rock festival, I attended a WNBA draft, I met John and Roger Taylor, I ate at The French Laundry, I have spoken on panels all over the country, I cooked with some underprivileged little kids and a Top Chef, I drove across the United States, I edited posts that were written by Ronnie Lott and I got to go to The Winter Classic. I have made a lot of very talented friends. I have become a writer. Who knew?

GoonBlog	blogging	10	TEXT	22140,22233	Good Squad .rtf
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Source Material:

Thanks for reading. I can't imagine that I would have kept this up if it weren't for you guys.

GoonBlog	blogging	10	TEXT	32088,33234	Good Squad .rtf
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Source Material:

It is like this blogging thing.

I acknowledge that this blog thing is winding down. I don't believe that "blogs are dead" or anything like that, but I'm not blind. Even when the traffic is there the comments aren't. I'm just as likely to be on Twitter or Facebook as I am to be reading a blog. I'm not as comfortable writing about my children as I used to be. They can read. It is becoming their story and not mine. Sometimes I go an entire week without writing anything here.

So what is next?

I don't know. A lot of my friends have written books. Do I want to do that? Maybe. A lot of my peers have

started PR companies, design firms or consulting businesses. Do I start another business? Maybe.
 I have a pretty good writing resume. Should I try to get a solid writing gig that actually pays?
 Do I try fiction?
 Yes, I am scared of snakes and writing fiction. Somehow the fiction reveals more about a person than the memoir ever could.
 I like change, but I'm not quite sure what comes next.
 It is these bridges.
 You wouldn't think that something that big could sneak up on you, but there it is.
 And we keep driving because we have no other choice.

GoonBlog blogging 10 TEXT 66269,66869 Good Squad .rtf
 Source Material:

I debated whether to write about the Babble list thing or not. I know it is controversial and I know a lot of people think that the list is flawed, but I am on a new mission to not bury my accomplishments. I was talking to my husband about my issues and he pointed out that maybe I was not taken seriously because I spent so much time trying to downplay my achievements. I thought I was being polite, I thought I was being humble. It turns out I was just convincing people that I didn't really do anything worthwhile, and that has really been working against me.
 Plus, it isn't very metal.
 But this is.

GoonBlog blogging 10 TEXT 74469,75017 Good Squad .rtf
 Source Material:

There are actually two kinds of BlogHer hangovers. The kind of hangover I wrote about two weeks ago and the kind where you run out of words. Usually when I come home from BlogHer I find that I have mysteriously run out of things to say. It is as if I have told most of you in person and I don't need to write any posts.
 This year I thought I avoided that.
 I came home from New York and I had plenty to write about.
 Then all of the sudden I didn't. I haven't written here in a week and my last post was three YouTube videos.
 I owe you more than that.

GoonBlog blogging 10 TEXT 101305,101777 Good Squad .rtf
 Source Material:

This week I've heard some of the most amazing writers I know worrying about how much they suck. These are men and women in their 30s and 40s who astound me on a regular basis. These are published authors and A-List Bloggers and people whose words have made me cry or howl with laughter.
 Maybe the insecurity never goes away. Hopefully it just gets easier. I feel bad for my kids because they still have to get through the worst of it, and they don't even know it is coming.

GoonBlog blogging 10 TEXT 147342,147799 Good Squad .rtf
 Source Material:

It is fun to go on road trips to blogging conventions. It is fun to be a grown up for a couple of days. I enjoy going for more than 24 hours without having anybody wipe their nose on my shirt and being able to go to the bathroom without having someone walk in who has an urgent need for a banana.
 But even at BlogHer, where I can talk about social media and blogging platforms and streaming video I never stop being a mommy.
 I wouldn't want it any other way.

GoonBlog blogging 10 TEXT 180424,181557 Good Squad .rtf
 Source Material:

Once upon a time I had friends from high school and friends from college.
 Then I had high school friends and college friends and work friends.
 Then I had high school friends, college friends, work friends, neighborhood friends, friends from the twins club and eventually blog friends.
 You get the picture.
 Sometimes we would have a birthday party and your work friends would meet your regular friends and maybe a mom or two that I knew from twins club. It was okay. A little weird, but pretty normal.
 Enter blog friends.
 At one point in my life, my blog friends were pretty much contained on the internet. I would comment on their blogs, they would comment on my blog and occasionally there would be an e-mail exchange.
 Then I moved.
 When I moved here I only knew a handful of people that lived in the Washington DC area, but I knew that some of my blog friends lived here. Suddenly, some of my blog friends were real life friends.
 It was sort of weird, but it still wasn't a huge deal. Most of my regular friends knew that I was a blogger and internet dork and they didn't make fun of me.
 Well, they only made fun of me a little bit.

GoonBlog blogging 10 TEXT 188924,189774 Good Squad .rtf
 Source Material:

Anytime I go to a blogging conference I tell people that I am exactly what you would think by reading my blog but I say a lot more bad words in real life.*
 This is true. In real life I spend most of the day trying not to curse like a sailor in front of the children or the other moms at preschool, but on my blog I usually have some time to edit myself and think of a more polite way of saying something.
 It isn't that I have anything against bloggers that curse a lot. In fact, I am a huge fan of foul language. I am somewhat of a of a connoisseur of profanity. I just get nervous using too many obscenities in print. What if my kindergarten teacher reads me? I don't want her to be too shocked.
 So this is why I am so thrilled that the day The OrlandoSentinel.com linked to me** was the same day I dropped the f bomb not once, but twice in my post.

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 50845,51593 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
 Source Material:

Every time I attend a blog conference, I'm adamant about the fact that I'm not attending to learn anything new. "I'm just going to hang out with friends," I tell anyone who will listen, because this blogging thing I do is just a silly hobby, right? Truthfully, though, I always learn something or at least confirm the things that I already know, and not in a waste of time sort of way, but a positive, sigh of relief sort of way. Blissdom especially has a way of leaving me feeling uplifted, empowered, and worthy.
 Blogging isn't a useless waste of time, whether it's my hobby or my business.
 These friends I've made on the Internet are real.
 I'm a talented writer and storyteller.
 I'm a photographer and I'm pretty, damn good.
 I belong.
 I am enough.

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 127039,128129 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
 Source Material:

I've committed two of the worst sins that a mommy blogger could commit.
 Firstly, I failed at wishing those of you who are mothers a Happy Mother's Day yesterday. Please forgive me, I've been busy being a MOTHER, so certainly you understand. I want you to know that I know just how hard you work as a mom and just how little recognition that you get. I know all about the doctor's appointment that you remembered to make for your kiddo (an appointment you made while you stirred dinner on the stove, broke up a fight, and changed a load of laundry). I also know that you can find almost

any lost toy/love/umbrella/lunch box/shoe. I know that you remembered to pick up another gallon of milk and that you know that the macaroni and cheese most certainly cannot touch the strawberries OR ELSE. I know that you lose it sometimes and that sometimes you feel like you're overwhelmed.

I'm really just trying to say that I KNOW about all the things you do and I'm totally impressed with your awesomeness.

Sin, the second, is a crime so heinous, I pray the mommy blogging police don't come after me.

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 153487,155100 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

Here's the thing, I actually do know what I'm talking about when it comes to these blog tips. I know! I'm so conceited! (Actually, no I'm not.) It's just that having blogged for over THREE WHOLE YEARS practically makes me a shawl-wearing, bespectacled, rocking chair sitting wise blog-grandmother. There are definitely bloggers out there who've been at this whole online writing thing for far longer than me, but there are FAR MORE bloggers who haven't made it beyond the first year (or even just a few months.) I've considered quitting so many times for a good reasons and for immature, huffy, jealous reasons. The writing, the commenting, the social media interaction all take up a lot of time and it's easy to get overwhelmed, I've come *this close* to quitting because I felt overwhelmed and guilty when I couldn't keep up with it all. After three years, I do occasionally think that the most recent post I've written will probably be the last because there is no possible way to come up with another unique topic, yet somehow I always come up with something to say.

And then there's the whole jealousy issue. I know that I'm often jealous of others writing talents. There have been times that I've felt bitter about the same people getting invited to all the fun things or other's subscriber and comment numbers. I know there are a handful of people who claim to be immune to the jealousy, but I also know that I'm not the only one who has felt this way.

I have a super secret, super special way that I've been able to overcome all of this and still continue to blog. IT'S ALL ABOUT YOUR PERSPECTIVE.

The end.

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 156547,164852 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

2. You will be stricken with all sorts of writing ailments including (but not limited to) writer's block, fear of being too open and honest, super self-consciousness due to overexposure, and jealousy of other's superior writing talents

In any given week, I'll suffer from one or ALL of these things. EVERY BLOGGER feels this way at some point.

Whenever I feel like I'm suffering from writer's block, I sit down at my computer and just start writing. I write whatever is on my mind. Occasionally I can mold a post from the words, sometimes there's nothing to salvage, but at least I was writing. The cure for writer's block, for me, is NOT not writing. Another trick that I use is to look at photos I've recently taken and write a post based on one of the shots. There are also lots of sites that offer weekly memes or writing prompts that can help you get over the hump.

As your readership grows (and it WILL grow), your concerns about what and who you blog about will become a concern. The more people that read you, the more you may become self-conscious about what you should and shouldn't reveal. BUT WHAT ABOUT AUTHENTICITY!?! It seems to be a buzz word these days around blogging. My personal ever developing philosophy about this is that I never write something that would intentionally hurt another person. I don't share EVERY detail of my life, but I also don't only write smoochy, feel good posts. I also include my mistakes and heartaches.

While at Blissdom, I attended a writer's workshop led by Megan from Velveteen Mind, Arianne from To Think is to Create, Deb from Deb on the Rocks, and Amber from The Run A Muck. In the session, Megan mentioned that she was listening to the audiobook, Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within (Disclosure: Affiliate link). The point that Megan explained that most struck me was that if there's a writer whose work makes you crazy envious, instead of being jealous, begin to look at that writer as a teacher from whom you can learn. Another thing that this workshop spurred within me was that in order for me to be a better writer, I have to start thinking of myself as a REAL writer, not just some pretend wanna-be that has no talent.

I realize that my style of writing isn't everybody's cup of tea. My writing isn't eloquent prose, expertly crafted with \$20 words and perfect grammar. I think that my strength is my ability to craft a story in such a way that others can relate. It's taken YEARS for me to recognize this strength and for me to OWN this strength. Each one of us has a writing strength. Find it! Not to be cliché, but find your voice and hone it. Your writing may not be for everyone, but don't try to write in a way that isn't truly you.

3. We ALL get jealous of other bloggers.

I love this tweet from @MindiCherry (Moms Need to Know)

It seems like every week there's another top blogger list published, the same eleven bloggers have been invited on yet another fabulous trip, and you hear that another blogger has a book deal. Maybe you wrote your heart out on your latest post and only received a few comments, you lost 100 subscribers overnight, or you don't have as many followers as you'd like to have on Twitter. It is HARD not to let these things get you down. But hear this!

YOU CANNOT LET OTHER PEOPLE'S SUCCESS GET YOU DOWN!

DON'T LET YOUR STATS DEFINE YOU! (comment numbers, page views, @replies, subscriber numbers)

Sorry to shout like that, but I really need you to hear those things. In fact, I'm going to shout them again.

YOU CANNOT LET OTHER PEOPLE'S SUCCESS GET YOU DOWN!

Most of the bloggers that seem to have what you want, whether it's their comment numbers, perceived stats, or free trips didn't start blogging a week ago. They've been working hard for what they've received. They are engaging writers, great at building their community, excellent at networking and have developed relationships with the "right" people. Guess what? YOU can also do those things! It just takes time, patience, skill, and networking.

I was recently named as one of Babble's Top 50 Mommy Bloggers. To me it was a HUGE honor, I'd never been named to a list like this one before. But what does it really mean for me? I'm not thinner, my boobs aren't perkier, I'm not suddenly recognized in the grocery store by adoring fans, and I haven't been offered a job as an Editor for a major publishing company. I didn't even get a trophy! What I do get, is at least 100 more product review requests in my inbox per week now, not exactly something that makes me jump with joy.

DON'T LET YOUR STATS DEFINE YOU! (comment numbers, page views, @replies, subscriber numbers)

I've said before that the size of your blogging community is only as important as YOU make it. If you have 10 loyal readers, that is AWESOME! If you have 1,000 loyal readers, that's AWESOME, too...not awesome-er. The thing about stats is that there may never be a number that truly satisfies you. I'm not saying that you won't one day have 500 or 2000 or 10,000 subscribers (or whatever your goal may be), but I am saying that even when you get to that magical number, it won't feel as great as you thought it would. The quest for MORE, in terms of blogging, is insatiable.

Instead of focusing on THE NUMBER, focus on your community. Come to truly appreciate those who DO read your blog and interact with you on Twitter. Remember your original reasons for blogging and what makes blogging fun. I know that logging into StatCounter is NOT usually fun, but emailing back and forth with a reader can totally make your day.

Here's a post by Megan from Velveteen Mind that speaks to not allowing your stats to define you, go read it! I also suggest reading this post from PhD in Parenting that discusses reasons to check your stats, none of which say anything about your stats defining who YOU are.

4. Unless you are a robot, your feelings will probably get hurt at some point.

I am honored and humbled that so many of you comment and subscribe to my blog. Unfortunately since there are more than 25 of you, I'm just not able to read every one of your blogs. I used to have time for reciprocating every comment, I also used to have only one child who napped twice a day and gave me four whole hours of complete, unadulterated commenting time. These days, I'm lucky to get four hours A WEEK to devote to blogging. It gives me the nervous tummy to think that I may have hurt someone's feelings because they've been a loyal commenter and I've barely acknowledged their existence.

People seem to get hung up is on the perception that "popular" bloggers don't make any time for other, smaller bloggers, that they appear to only interact with the other elite. Perhaps this is true for some, not every blogger out there is interested in expanding their already ginormous community. I'm not immune to the feelings of rejection by other bloggers, but I've stopped interacting (and even reading) many of the people that I know have little to no interest in getting to know me. However, I suspect that most "popular"

bloggers are interested in interacting with their readers, but are limited by time.

My feelings have been hurt too many times to count since I started blogging. My most favorite blogger of all time (formerly) absolutely crushed me when, the day after I first began this Blog Tip Sharing series, she wrote about how ridiculous it was to tell other people how to blog and she just couldn't understand why anyone cared about making their blog better. I've had my feelings hurt over emails I've sent that have gone unanswered. It hurts my feelings when I've replied a ridiculous amount of times to someone on Twitter and they've NEVER responded. Sometimes when I see that someone isn't following me back on Twitter that I think should be following me, I'll do the quick unfollow-refollow because SURELY the fact that they aren't following me is a mistake!

Trolls can also show up uninvited to your blog and wreak havoc. I've had my fair share of trolls, they are particularly fond of my posts about Alabama. I could shoot off indignant replies or post their IP addresses on my blog, but I'm a firm believer that if you ignore them, you take away their fuel. There is only so much room in my brain, I simply do not have the space available to allow people full of negativity take up that space.

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 189265,190315 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

I'm feeling very sentimental about blogging after all of your thoughtful and kind comments yesterday. I started writing online back in 2006. That was the same year that I joined and started participating online for the first time via a message board. If you would have said to me in 2005, that I'd be regularly interacting with people online, via a message board or WORSE! a blog, I'd would have thought you were just trying to annoy me.

All that I knew about blogs at the time was that it was a place where geeks wrote about geeky things. Most blog writers were middle-aged balding dudes, living in their parent's basements, wearing wife-beater tees. They stayed up all night chatting online about Dungeons and Dragons while eating cheetos and drinking cheap beer.

I'm still certain that type of blogger exists(ha! kidding!), I found that my image of bloggers was way off. In fact, I've discovered a group of people that I really identified with and now I can't imagine NOT interacting with people online. I depend on your support, perspective, and humor.

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 190317,191275 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

So back to aught six, I met a local blogger through my message board . Through her blog, I then found a whole world of people interacting online, talking about motherhood and marriage, weight gain and women's friendships. The very first blogs I read were several of the now defunct Club Mom blogs. Those first blogs that I read were the ones that changed my outlook of blogging and quite literally changed the course of my life. Those blogs were, (since I can't link to their Club Mom blogs, I'll link to their personal blogs...)Motherhood Uncensored, All & Sundry, Cheeky Lotus, and So the Fish Said.

Today is Delurking Day, a day where you I encourage you to "delurk" or say "hi," especially if you don't normally comment. Yes, it's a blatant ploy to get comments. I'm okay with that. I know it's awkward to comment when you really have nothing to say, so I'm asking you to delurk (or just comment as you regularly do!) and tell me, who were your first blog reads?

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 220166,224630 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

Today's class is going to focus on building a community around your blog. What I mean by community is this: The people who visit and comment, the meaningful interactions with other bloggers, and positive word-of-mouth about your blog. Building a community around your blog is vital to attracting and maintaining readers. You want to create an atmosphere on your blog where people feel welcome and want to come back.

To build a community around YOUR blog, though, means regularly venturing out and participating in OTHER blog communities.

In the past year, I've neglected commenting on blogs and replying to comments left on this site. I KNOW that my lack of reciprocity and communication with others has negatively affected building this community. So, everything I'm recommending? I need to take these suggestions and actually start putting them to use again.

1. Comment on others' blogs

I think that this is THE NUMBER ONE THING you can do to attract and maintain readers to your site.

Commenting on other blogs is especially important when you're first starting out with your blog. In fact, behind well-written content, I think it's THE MOST IMPORTANT THING you can do to generate traffic. Find other blogs in your niche and let the comment love flow.

People LOVE receiving comments and your comment let's people know that you visited. Consider your comment your calling card. Not only does the blog author see your calling card, but so do other visitors to the site. If you've left a particularly witty or well-written comment, you're likely to get people's interest piqued enough to click through to your site. Beware of leaving very obviously "traffic-seeking" comments, like "Oh that was funny. Be sure to check out my blog at Practically Comment Spam!"

With that said, there does come a point when commenting and reciprocating comments can take over your life. Literally. There does have to be a balance between commenting, social media participation, and writing on your blog. In an upcoming post, we'll discuss time management.

2. Promote others' posts via StumbleUpon or Twitter

If you don't have time to leave a comment, but think that what you've read is worth sharing, then promoting a post via StumbleUpon or Twitter is almost as good as leaving a comment. Some people who really value their traffic numbers may even think it's better than your comment. The one downside to this, the person whose post you've promoted may not ever know that it was you who sent them an increase in traffic. However, I definitely believe in blogging karma, what you put into the community will be repaid in full, which leads to my next point...

3. Devote time to social media interaction. Be accessible to your readers!

Whether you spend time on Twitter or Facebook, Flickr, or a message board, choose a place you enjoy, make friends, and participate. It will pay off.

These are great places to interact with people in your blogging community. I know that there's many schools of thought on following/following back people on Twitter or friending people on Facebook and Flickr. My personal opinion is that if you're trying to seem accessible and truly participate in the community, you should follow (most) people back on Twitter and accept friend requests on Facebook/Flickr.

In regards to Twitter, with so many applications that allow you to set up lists so as to keep track of those you are closest to, then not following possibly relevant people back is kind of rude and can be interpreted as elitist. This means that you should follow back people in your blogging genre (mommy blogging, food blogging, craft blogging...). That doesn't mean that you have to follow every Tom, Dick, and Harry that claims to be a social media expert or random guys with no profiles set up. You can also always unfollow people that you realize you have nothing in common with.

4. Join weekly meme's/carnivals

(There is some debate as to what these weekly participation things are called...from here on out for ease of reading, we're going to call them carnivals, okay?)

There are so many different carnivals you can join to promote content on your site each week. Participation in these carnivals can be a great way to generate traffic, especially when you're first starting out. Being a regular contributor to a particular carnival is also a way to developing relationships with the other participants. If you do choose to participate, it is a good thing to also visit the other sites participating.

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 225339,228692 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

5. Reply to emails

If someone has emailed you, REPLY. I can't tell you how many times I've emailed another blogger only to get *crickets chirping* NO REPLY. This has also happened too many times to count, when someone has emailed me for advice or assistance, but never bothered to thank me for my reply. *shakes head in disgust* Listen people. It's rude not to reply to emails. If you don't have time, then reply back and say, "Hey, I'm so swamped right now, I'm sorry I can't reply right away, but when I get a chance, I will!"

(If you think I'm talking about you, well....) Speaking of replying...

6. Reply to comments left on your blog

Replying to comments lets your readers know that 1)you actually read your comments and 2) appreciate each comment left. Before learning about the greatest comment plugin ever that emails my reply to the commenter, I would just reply via email. Most of us don't have time and it also isn't necessary to respond to every single comment on your site. Some comments don't require replies, but those comments that ask a question or that just make your day, **SHOULD GET A REPLY.**

The ability to respond to comments is also a point of contention between different blogging platforms. In fact the whole replying to comments issue is one reason I switched from Blogger to WordPress. I think that Blogger's key flaw is that you don't have to include your email address when you comment. Tsk, tsk.

6. Show your readers you care about them by linking to them

The greatest way in the world of blogs to let someone know that you admire their work, besides commenting! and promoting their posts in social media forums, is to link to their site. If a post of someone's inspired you to write your own, **LINK TO THEM!**

7. Link to your own posts to help explain the backstory to new readers

Have you ever walked up to a group of people who are all laughing about some situation and people that you're clueless about? You stand there feeling awkward and left out... This happens on blogs all the time. I regularly read new-to-me blogs and don't understand what they're referring to, then in the comments section I realize I'm the only one who doesn't know the back story.

Remember that many people just randomly happen upon your blog and do not know your life story. If you want to make your new readers feel welcome and you're talking about something that has a backstory or could be clarified by something you've already posted about, then **LINK TO THOSE POSTS!** Don't let new readers feel like the new kid who doesn't get the joke.

So basically what I'm trying to say...Building relationships in blogging is exactly like building relationships in real life. Be nice to others, return favors, and make others feel welcome. The goal should be to develop meaningful relationships with those to whom you relate.

I also think it's important to mention that the size of your blogging community is only as important as YOU make it. If you have 10 loyal readers, that is **AWESOME!** If you have 1,000 loyal readers, that's **AWESOME**, too...not awesome-er. When a blogging community becomes very large, it's hard to maintain those readers through reciprocity in comments, replying to comments, or linking to new sites.

What do you think fosters a welcoming blog community? Who are the bloggers you feel like do a particularly good job building a community around their blog?

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 246357,247543 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

Let's just pretend for a moment that your name is Jennifer and that you had previously lighter hair ranging in shades from practically bleached blonde to deep chocolate. Imagine, for a moment, won't you?, that you were contemplating going lighter again, with lots of highlights. What would you be considering? A deep golden brownish-blond? Keeping the dark color previously held in such esteem? Returning to your blonde beginnings?

My hair is obviously in need of a trim, but I don't know what to do with it anymore. I'm so sick of the style I have now. It's at an in between length, I'd really like it to be longer, but waiting for it to grow is a killer. It's possible that my hair color just needs a refresher course in **HOTNESS 101** and I need a little trim and head massage to perk me up. It's also possible that I've completely lost it, especially since I'm going to participate in **NaBloPoMo**. (Which has nothing to do with hair directly, but both admissions hold sufficient evidence of my insanity.)

(I had to search my blog for "hair" to find all the places where I've talked about my hair. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! I need some new material. I talk about my hair waaaay too often.)

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 269530,278584 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

There's one house in my neighborhood that has no window coverings, allowing us, when the light is just right, to peer into their home. This openness irritated me to the point of mania, obsessing every time I passed the house about the why. Why didn't they cover their windows? Why do they allow us to look inside? Why doesn't this bother them?

And then I realized that I live in a blog, and even though I have window coverings, they are sheer and at times wide open showing me walking around naked or unkempt. Why do I do this? Why do I want people looking inside? Why doesn't this bother me?

There were two conversations on Twitter yesterday talking about feeling invisible and openly wondering if we packed up our blogs and disappeared tomorrow, would anyone notice? In a nutshell, the discussion revealed that a lot of us feel invisible and the majority of us feel dispensable. The answer to the age old question, When a blogger leaves in this vast and dense blogosphere forest, does anyone notice?, is no, not really. After a day or two, they're forgotten and the Internet collectively sighs in relief at having one less person to keep track of.

I've been at this gig for almost three years. Three years of pimping myself out, three years of jumping up in down in front of my wide open windows yelling, "look at me!!! Look at me!! OVER HERE! See me?? Please like me!!" And yet? And yet I still often feel invisible, I still feel like I'm not part of the in crowd. Three years of still not being recognized.

"Oh hello, Jennifer. Playgroups are no place for children, you say? Nice to meet you." says Big name blogger.

"Well actually we met last year at BlogHer, we talked for like, an hour. How do you NOT remember???" I seethe, silent in my head. But what I actually say is, "Nice to meet you, too."

(No, I'm not talking about one situation or person, I'm referring to probably 15+ different occurrences.) I am exhausted.

I keep telling myself that I started blogging and keep blogging because of this community. I keep telling myself that I blog because I enjoy it. It's fun, right? When I first discovered blogs, I found so many like-minded women, struggling through the early days of motherhood, who didn't sugar coat infancy and playdates and being a stay-at-home mom. Blogs made me feel vindicated.

Writing gave me something to do in those days when Carson was just a baby and I was so lonely, so bored, so discontent. It gave me something to occupy my mind, something to think about beyond my never ending laundry pile, what I could cook for dinner in five minutes or less, or how I was going to make it into the post office carrying a package and a carseat. In the early days, my blog was the sole place that was mine, and mine alone. Carson didn't poop on it, Tate didn't leave his dirty socks lying on it, I didn't resent it like I did most everything else in my life at the time.

Here's the kicker, though. I resent this blog now. More so, I resent that I don't write the way I wished that I could.

What was once this great way to connect with others, has become this never ending loop of barely keeping my head above the social media water line. I've literally lost sleep over the fact that I haven't ever visited some of the my most loyal commenters or that I didn't answer a question left in my comments section or that I have at all times at least two or three need-to-be-answered emails. My close friends' blogs, I hardly have time to read those and when I do, my comments often amount to "great post," which is apparently the "wrong" way to comment.

Blogging has also become more than simply writing. There's Twitter, that I do occasionally enjoy, but I feel so out of the loop since I can't spend hours interacting like it seems so many others do. I talk to people, they don't talk back. I talk to people and sometimes I don't have time to reply. Hello vicious cycle! I cannot keep up, I feel like I'm drowning in the wake of bloggers who must have 48 hours in their days to my mere 24.

Then there's the worry that I don't use Twitter "correctly," which really, is just plain STUPID. I'm so very tired of having to comment the "right" way, interact on Twitter the "right" way, always remembering to be "relevant," when all I really want to do is connect with others because I'm lonely and bored.

In terms of writing, I've come to the realization that my writing isn't, in fact, brilliant. I don't completely suck, no, but there are millions (LITERALLY) of other women bloggers who smoke me in the writing department. This makes me feel like a very small fish in a huge, swirling vortex to nowhere. I've all but stopped reading some of my favorite blogs because they are such amazing writers that it makes me feel even worse when I struggle to write something witty or passionate yet what comes out is basically the same shitty post over and over. I'VE STOPPED READING PEOPLE BECAUSE THEY'RE GOOD???? That is all kinds of messed up.

(I'm not saying this to get some of you to say that you think that I'm a talented writer, because REALLY.) You want some more brutal honesty? That little subscriber number over there in my sidebar? I have tried to take it down, but I can't. It is too closely connected to my fragile blogger ego. I look at that number and think that when someone new that's never been to my blog before sees that number, they'll read my less

than stellar writing and think, “but she has over 1,400 readers! She must be somebody.” The big bloggers may not recognize me, I may get very few @ replies on Twitter, I may sort of suck as a writer, but doggonit, I have subscribers!!

[Fraud, see also Imposter, see also playgroupsarenoplaceforchildren.com]

I think every blogger/writer initially struggles to find their voice. I know that for me, I initially wanted to be very open, too open, writing about things overly personal. My windows had no coverings, and the light was always right for your peering eyes to see everything. Provocative, I remember trying to live up to that word, but all provocative turned out to for me was using the word f*ck a little too often. Now the pendulum has swung almost all the way to the other side, I’ve covered my windows with sheers and try to write watered down stories without curse words and about subjects that couldn’t possibly offend anyone. Now that I have found my middle ground voice, I don’t really like the way it sounds.

The thought crosses my mind nearly everyday that I should quit blogging, close up shop, copy my archives so that all this work is not totally gone. My memories are recorded on this blog after all. When I think of quitting, I get all panicky, though. “Who will I talk to?” “I know that as soon as I quit, I’ll have something really poignant to say.” “What will I do with my time?”

There is nothing simple about quitting. Blogging has become such a part of who I am. Most of my friends live in my laptop/iPhone. This hobby is the source of vacations and get togethers. Even though I’ve long been disillusioned with blogging, I spent a great deal of money to go to Chicago this summer for BlogHer. Without blogging, would I get a weekend away from the kids, spending time with friends?

I’ve been contemplating starting a completely different blog, a fresh start. That, too, makes me feel panicky. Or maybe it makes me feel even wearier. I remember the hours I spent commenting on other’s blogs, signing up my blog all over the place to get my name out there and to think I would have to do that again? And I’d lose my precious 1,400+ subscribers! Saying that makes me stop in my tracks, WHAT THE HELL am I doing? Starting over would be without strings attached, without the stress of “properly” interacting in the community and, dare I say it..., maybe it would be more about the writing. (HA!)

There is also the whole debate in the mommy blogging community about sponsored trips, reviews, free what the hell ever and how it reflects on us as a community. All of it, ALL OF IT, makes me overwhelmingly tired. Why yes I do have opinions on the subject, but since I can’t articulate what they are I’ll just keep my mouth shut. I only mention it because this SITUATION is part of what’s bothering me. I feel at odds over ads on my site, too, but have justified that they have paid my hosting fees for this website and bought me some cheap shoes at Payless, in the clearance section. What bothers me about ads in general is that I have NOT posted things because I didn’t want what I was going to say to reflect poorly on an advertiser. Back in November when I did an entire month of giveaways, provided from some very generous sources, to “celebrate” my two year blogging anniversary, there were several posts that I WANTED to write, but due to their crass or controversial nature, I didn’t. Certainly that decision was good for “business,” but this blog didn’t begin as a business. How did turn into one?

I don’t really have a conclusion. There isn’t a conclusion. I do know that blogging is more often than not, no longer fun and that I just want to take a nap.

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 290434,292962 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

Now I have a kind of embarrassing confession to make about LAST year’s conference. (I swear this totally relates to this year’s experience, so just hang with me for a second.) Last year I was either 1) delusional or 2) cocky and I kinda sorta inflated my “importance” as a blogger and was pretty sure most people would know me that the entire conference would be spent fending off my fans and having to deal with squeeing upon sight. Of me. Which, wow. I, uh, can’t believe I’m confessing this.

I just thought more people would know who I was and when I met people who didn’t know me, it felt weird and shamefully unexpected. There was that awkward silence after introductions and unless the other person was an ace conversationalist, there really wasn’t a conversation at all because I was unprepared for giving my spiel about my blog and most times I failed to remember to ask about their blog. I walked away from that conference unsure of myself, wondering why I continue to blog. I walked away from that conference humbled. It wasn’t that I didn’t meet great people or have fun! I did! It was just that my expectations were WAY off and that is what marred my experience.

To continue with my embarrassing confessions, last year I didn’t really understand that it was okay to miss

some sessions. I mean, I PAID, I paid LOTS of money to attend, I HAD to attend the sessions, right?? Being studious and thirsty for knowledge meant that I missed out on lots of the behind the scenes stuff that went on.

This year was completely different and it was all because of my more realistic expectations of what to expect. Instead of expecting people to know who I was, I fully expected most people to NOT know me. Instead of focusing on me!, me!, me!, I went to the conference with the mantra, “don’t forget to ask them about themselves or their blog!” Instead of attending every session, I didn’t.

I got out of BlogHer what I put into it, I know I already mentioned that point, but it’s so important that it bears repeating. What I wanted out of the conference was to hang out with my friends and to make some new ones. Simple. And I’m so glad I allowed myself to do just that, rather than being a wallflower or worrying that people wouldn’t (or would) know who I was. Had my goal been to learn a ton about blogging, I would have been able to do that because the sessions were fabulous (or so I heard from many different people). If my goal was to make some contacts with PR people, I could have done that. All I would have had to do was try.

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 310231,311118 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

I have this really strongly worded post in my drafts folder regarding my current feelings on blogging and all of my insecurities that seem like they are highlighted by blogging. It continues to darken my drafts folder rather than my front page for several reasons, one of which being MY INSECURITIES.

I’m guessing that if you’re going to BlogHer in Chicago this summer, especially if it’s your first time, you’re probably nervous.

1. What if nobody knows who I am?
2. What if nobody talks to me?
3. What am I going to wear?
4. What if I don’t get invited to any of the parties?

This will be my second time attending BlogHer and #1-3 all apply to ME, but I know, logically, that mostly my fears are just my little demon insecurities creeping in and attempting to sabotage me. Fear number 4, though, you’re covered because you’re already invited to a party, a party that I’m helping to host.

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 311751,314682 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

1. What if nobody knows who I am?

I’m SWEAR I’m not trying to scare you, but many of the people you’ll meet will have never heard of you, or your blog, or your Twitter name. That’s okay, though. I’d never heard of Amy in Ohio or Mommy Bits and they hadn’t heard of me until last BlogHer and now this year, I’m driving from Tennessee to Cincinnati and driving with them the rest of the way to Chicago. It’s like, we all became friends or something. Weird. I know.

If someone hasn’t heard of you it doesn’t mean you’re not worth knowing. Introduce yourself to people and don’t be offended when they have no idea who you are.

2. What if nobody talks to me?

Okay, I swear AGAIN that I’m not trying to scare you, but you *might* have to talk to people first. I know it’s scary and all your insecurities start bubbling up in your throat and choking you at the mere thought of walking up to someone, sticking out your hand, and saying, “Hi. I’m Jennifer from Playgroups are no Place for Children.” The thing is, though, if you’re standing alone in the corner, it’s not very likely that someone is going to just come up and talk to you out of the goodness of their heart. That’s just not how it works.

Every year after BlogHer, there is a backlash against the “cliques.” With THAT many women (especially women), who rarely get to see one another, there are bound to be groups that form. Many of the so-called cliques are groups of women who’ve known each other for years, send one another Christmas and birthday cards, call one another on the phone. In other words, they have a HISTORY together. It’s natural for people to hang out with the people they already know, and usually they aren’t purposely leaving anyone out.

I promise you, though, that if you go up to people, introduce yourself, ask them questions about their blog and where they’re from, most people will AMAZINGLY talk to you. If you’re with a group who decides to go to dinner, say, “hey, mind if I come, too?” If they are not complete a-holes, they’ll say, “Of course you

can!”

Something that I did last year with a group of people was to form a sort of support group and exchange cell numbers before leaving for the conference. That way I ALWAYS had someone to call if I was suddenly feeling like I had nobody to eat lunch with or to go to the free swag suites.

Remember that if you don't make an effort, you will SO regret it when you get home. Take the chance, it will be worth it.

3. What am I going to wear?

Go read this post by OHMommy.

During the conference, I'll probably be wearing simple tanks, t-shirts, jeans, and possibly a casual, flowy skirt. In the evenings, I'll probably go fancier with a dress and some cute wedges. Last year, I felt TOTALLY underdressed at all the cocktail parties. I won't be making the same mistake this year. Anymore fears that I didn't cover? Any questions?? I hope that you have RSVP'd by now for the People's Party!! See you in Chicago.

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 334753,335129 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

At this point, I'm not really sure what I should say about Carson and school. I don't want to jinx the progress we've made (because everyone knows that sharing on a success on your blog immediately activates Murphy's Law). Also, I really can't take anymore advice.

I'm saturated and feeling overexposed.

I feel like I need to guard my son.

I feel like I need to guard my heart.

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 335941,339551 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

I don't know anymore what I should and shouldn't post. Will I embarrass them, overexpose them? Now that my children are no longer babies, there is no longer a clear line of what constitutes an appropriate, but still funny topic. A story about poop involving an infant: Funny! ALL infants have poop stories. A poop story about a three-year-old: funny...maybe, embarrassing...definitely. In no way do I want to exploit my children's privacy and embarrassing moments for the sake of this stupid blog, for the sake of comments. I shudder to think that my children would ever be angry with me for PUBLISHING for ALL the Interwebs to see on MY blog something that could potentially horrify them.

Something tells me that this is only going to get even more complicated as my children get older. I'm certain that Ella would be mortified if I talked about her getting her first period. Carson probably wouldn't appreciate if I wrote in detail about his first heartbreak.

I mean, I'm supposedly a *GASP*mommy blogger. I've always blogged about my kids. (Most of the time) I love talking about them with all of you and hearing your experiences. But if I don't talk about my kids, then what the hell do I talk about?!

There's also this whole expectation about what you as readers expect when you read this blog. Playgroups are no place for children. A (mommy)blog about a mom who writes about her many moves, her two kids, silly marital strife stories, and pure nonsense. For awhile I wrote blog tips, but only on Saturdays because I didn't want to annoy my readers who had no interest in the subject. I'd love to start talking about some of my other passions like photography and cooking, but I hesitate because "blogging experts" say that every different topic should be it's own blog so as not to lose readers.

SIGH.

So I followed that advice. I started a recipe site about forever and an eon ago, but it's just never felt like my home, THIS blog. I've considered beginning to post recipes with pictures, because I LIKE cooking, I LIKE photography, I LIKE photographs of food, and I LIKE to talk about those things, but haven't because I didn't want people to think I was just copying other people who've done the exact same thing.

Can you see why I'm having this blogging crisis?!

I fear the repercussions of talking about my kids and I fear venturing into new territories because I don't have any NEW! and ORIGINAL! ideas.

Where do I go from here?

Even though I think that the name of this blog "Playgroups are no place for children" is frankly quite

brilliant (if I do say so myself), I feel so boxed in by it. Every time I'm referred to as "Playgroupie" I want to barf. My kids are getting older and I haven't been in a playgroup in a year and a half! The name, or really the BRAND of this blog, well...I just don't know if it works for me anymore.

I don't know if it is ME anymore.

What I really want to do is throw my hands up in the air and say, "Dammit! This blog may not be ME as much as it once was, but it is still MY blog. I can do whatever I want!" After more than two years of blogging, I think I'm finally in a place where I'm no longer really trying to grow my blog and gain readership, though if it happens, great! I do want to keep my readers, though, because I LIKE you. I really, really like you. It would be a shame to lose a bunch of readers because I decided to be ME.

Can I give myself permission to expand the content that I present on THIS site? Is it even allowed?

(This is officially the longest and most rambling post I've ever written. If you made it all the way to the end, I'd like to offer you a trophy.)

PlaygroupBlog blogging 16 TEXT 394733,396188 Playgroups_NoChildren.rtf
Source Material:

It was two years ago that I decided to start a blog. The first incarnation of this blog was several posts that I copied and pasted from my Myspace blog.

If you weren't already aware, yes...I'm a GIANT dork.

I named my blog "What I Meant to Say Was..." Gee. Catchy, huh? While taking a shower one day, way back when IUSED TO(ha!) obsess about my blog, I thought of the name "Playgroups are no place for children." This was inspired by my love of cocktail playdates and basically wishing that I could just go hang out with my friends without my kids.

I've deleted most of those early and embarrassingly written posts, pre-dated some others in an effort to make it look like I had archives, so basically now I have no record as to the exact conception date of this blog.

To each of you reading, I cannot tell you just how much I appreciate your visits, comments, and emails. Before discovering this link to the outside world, I felt very isolated and one dimensional. You all have become my friends and support network. Even on days when I've decided that I QUIT! I'm not blogging EVER AGAIN!, somebody will leave me a comment or send me an email that makes me change my mind. Thank you. Thank you for being there through kidney stones and the birth of my daughter, my good days, my really, really low days, and while I tour the United States.

YOU are the wind beneath my wings. Let's hold hands and look out at the ocean while sitting in Adirondack chairs, mkay?

VodkaBlog blogging 10 TEXT 7177,8699 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

Some of you old-timers might remember way back when I got into a tiny bit of trouble for my blog.

It was handled by the "powers that be" DOWNTOWN, and after a lot of hysterical sobbing, talking, more sobbing, perhaps a spanking and even more talking, I chose to take this lesson and use it to improve who I was as a person, a writer AND a teacher.

I see myself first and foremost as an educator, as this is what I have devoted most of my life to; but I am equally comfortable with the fact that I am a writer. Writing has been a part of who I am for as long as I can remember, but actually sharing it with the world is still fairly new to me.

The administrator that handled my "case" did so with a firm hand, but all the while treated me with respect, intelligence and professionalism. He listened to what I had to say. He pointed out that I had to protect the identity of our schools, our children and our co-workers. Additionally, I was to remember that during the day I had a responsibility to the children entrusted to me, while at night I could (of course) continue to work on my writing and my blog; just no pictures, no names and complete anonymity.

I value my job, so I had to pay the piper. I did so with a smile and a renewed determination that this would only improve my work, and my writing. Frankly, I am sure it did. I was also encouraged to use this to mend

some rifts with my principal that had been neglected. I can honestly say that fixing that particular issue has been a good, good thing.

VodkaBlog blogging 10 TEXT 33470,33750 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

She recommended (among many other things) that I designate a space in my home for my “writing”; an office, so to speak. Surprisingly, she didn’t believe that my working on the couch, the dining room table, my bed or on the front porch would be acceptable to the taxman. Go figure.

VodkaBlog blogging 10 TEXT 61326,62326 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

So, I’ve tried very hard to keep this particular pain behind closed doors and out of this blog. But it hasn’t been easy. And frankly, Bitchy and I had a discussion about it not long ago. I shared with her that I was having a very, very difficult time writing.

“But mom, your blog is like your journal, you HAVE to write about what is happening. That is WHAT you DO. You write about your life- about our lives. You’ve written about everything ELSE for God’s sake! Just do it!”

And I’ve wanted to. I’ve wanted to write about everything that is happening, but I just don’t know how. I’m not sure if I trust what might end up on paper when I’m in a painful and angry state.

I know from experience, that things that go out on the internet are there forever. In fact, I’ve tested that theory MORE THAN ONCE, and yep; it’s true. That means that sometimes you get to re-live your mistakes over and over and over again. What fun.

And so I tread lightly as I open up about this horrible roller coaster.

VodkaBlog blogging 10 TEXT 83948,86214 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

Many of us who blog are spending quite a bit of time right about now planning and thinking about the BlogHer conference coming up in August.

I remember the first year I went some incredible, incredible things happened. I learned that there are amazing souls in the world, and I learned that each conference is what YOU make it. I would link to all those things, but they are among the 200 posts deleted after the incident. You remember that, right??

I am so thrilled that I am attending this year’s conference, and was honored to be asked to participate in a Room of Your Own proposal. Let me take a minute to explain.

Conferences consist of sponsors (who provide amazing meals, gifts, and other support for the BlogHer organization) speakers, volunteers, organizers and panels that facilitate and initiate discussions. (That’s not all, but my mind is a blur right about now.)

Each conference is geared towards meeting the needs of its attendees. The best way to do that, is to have proposals “put out there” to the general public, and see which ones would be well attended.

Here’s where I come in.

The amazing Stacey from anymommy called me and asked if I would be interested in participating on a panel for a session on creative writing.

Would I? WOULD I?????????

I felt like the girl who got asked to the prom by the best looking guy in town. “Cept she’s a girl.

I am devoted to the craft of writing, and am pinching myself each and every day that this audience is kind, grateful, patient, supportive and ha a GREAT sense of humor. (And a great sense of honor, of which I am also grateful.)

So, if you would like to attend a session facilitated by yours truly, anymommy and the talented Bon of crib cronicles, then click here and go to Post Process, from creative spark to blog post, by anymommy. All you have to do is say you’ll attend!!

And while you’re there, There are several others I highly recommend!! Scary Mommy, Anissa, Lucretia and Tech Savvy Mom all come to mind!!!! This is our conference, and we decide what we listen to and who we learn with. Make your choices!

And now, I have to go the gym. Frank was in rare form today, and I have to lift about a thousand pounds before I can even talk about it.

(The good news? I still love him.)

VodkaBlog blogging 10 TEXT 127524,127972 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

2. I woke up the other morning and discovered I had over 100 new followers on Twitter! This continues to amaze me because frankly, I have nothing of any value to say. Babble decided that after spending the last 20 years screwing up my children, that I had earned something, and named me a Twitter mom. When I look around at the others, I’m convinced that they had me confused with someone else. However, I’m going to take the trophy and run with it.

VodkaBlog blogging 10 TEXT 142978,143445 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

We had a wonderful conversation, and I am no longer shocked when I find myself engaged in an interesting and fascinating conversation with a stranger. The fact that we felt connected by our blogging experiences and similar blogging friends was not a shock, as I’ve learned that we are almost all connected in some interesting and magical way. (My daughter’s have long given up on their quest to SHUT ME UP, so they just ignore me, and allow me to be who I am. Mostly.)

VodkaBlog blogging 10 TEXT 148512,150223 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

Oh sweet Mary and Joseph, am I the only one around here NOT running for the Real Housewives of Blogging Country? Am I the only one NOT jumping at the chance to share my dysfunctional family and hideous haircut with the whole civilized world?

Everywhere you click on the blogoshere you’ll find bloggers vying for the chance to be on the Project Mom reality show. (Frankly, you should go leave a comment for Ann, Amy, Brittany and Jess. THEY would seriously kick butt on this show.)

Well, this is MY post on why I don’t want ANYONE nominating me or contacting me regarding an audition for this opportunity to cut myself open in front of the whole continental United States. (Plus, and correct me if I’m wrong, this MIGHT interfere with my daily quest to maintain my anonymity.)

These other bloggers are amazing women and I have to applaud their bravery in their attempts to have their every move recorded for billions of viewers to enjoy. I, however, am not one of these women.

Top ten reasons why the producers of the show do NOT want me.

10. My children hate me.
9. Some days I hate my children.
8. My husband occasionally hates me.
7. Occasionally, I hate my husband.
6. My dogs bark too damn much; but unfortunately, they love me.
5. I hate the dogs.
4. I hate to clean. I DO it, but I hate it.
3. Bitchy and Sassy say the word fu*& so frequently, that they'd be bleeping through the whole bleeping show every bleeping night.
2. There are about five billion empty/ripped water balloons under the second-hand couch in my 6x10 ft sunroom. I forget they're there each day, and remember when I go in there each night to relax and watch OTHER people on reality shows.
1. My hair is too damn short.

VodkaBlog blogging 10 TEXT 199003,200309 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

In these last two years of blogging I have NEVER insulted anyone, I have NEVER used derogatory remarks about any person and have tried to remain faithful to what is in my heart. I blog with honesty and integrity. I share true stories about my life, my wonderful job, and my crazy, imperfect, wonderful family.

Occasionally, I have asked for some votes here and there (perhaps MORE than occasionally, but who's counting. Oh wait, that would be you.) and the only person I seem to have offended is you. (And perhaps that four or five people that unfollow me each day, but that's a whole other topic.)

I have asked people to vote for me because the agent that I am (in my own mind) working with, has advised me (and may other bloggers) to work on my platform. That means, in essence, to not only hone those writing skills that I hold dear to my heart, but to broaden my readership. One important way to DO that, is to be recognized by these various sites that hold contests. Some of them are reputable and held in somewhat high esteem by those in the publishing industry.

With that being said, I hereby remove the badge from my site, and any reference to the contest. I will not beg anymore, because frankly I don't think I can take stuff like this.

You know what? I'm dang tired.

I think I need a nap.

VodkaBlog blogging 10 TEXT 214488,214992 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

I started this blog to just put to "paper" the thoughts that used to swirl through my head on a daily basis. It replaced the old worn-out journals that now sit in my attic in an old cardboard box. Throughout this blogging process, I have always been honest and have laid in front of you the contents of my life, and my

heart. I have tried to maintain my integrity and authenticity throughout this past year and a half. I blog when I have something to say which, fortunately, seems to be almost every day.

VodkaBlog blogging 10 TEXT 214994,216487 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

Those of you who know me personally, know that I DO have an incredibly busy, crazy, hectic wonderful life, that I wouldn't trade it for all the vodka in Russia. I tend to bare myself here, without question, and feel that if I am not myself then there really is no point to this. I try to be true to who I am, and try never to blog at the expense of someone else. I've tried to not offend anyone, or injure anyone - it's just not my nature. However, I DO tend to rant and rave about my family. I hope you all know that I love them more than life itself, and would lay down my life for each and every one of them. (Well, perhaps not the dogs. Perhaps.)

Through it all I've been amazed at the support and love I have felt from so very many of you. By caring about my life, and what I write, you have given me a new lease on life. I have been provided with a missing piece of a puzzle I DIDN'T even know I was MISSING! I read each comment, respond and visit as often as I can, and feel very connected to all of you.

I am also convinced by all that has happened this past year, that there are real angels on earth, and if there is anyone out there who doesn't believe it, you come on over and we'll share a glass or two. I've got some stories of generosity to tell that just warm my heart.

I will be raising a glass tonight to my dear family and friends, the dearly departed who hold a special place in my soul, and to each and all of you.

clink.

Now, let's all be safe out there. Ya hear?

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 67528,67770 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

lows.

I sighed again. "Sweetie, you're sleeping." His hands continued searching. "Let me guess," I continued, "snakes?"

He paused. "You're going to laugh at me," he said, in a small voice.

"I promise not to laugh," I said, and I meant it. (Bec

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 83103,83646 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

I sleep all the way there he won't have to carry me around when we arrive. Wish me luck.

Big feelings

by MIR on MAY 6, 2011 in ASPI(E)RATIONS, OFFSPRING: ECSTASY AND AGONY

I'm trying to learn a little bit of self-discipline in the form of not blogging when I'm overly emotional.

Which probably means I will never blog again. HA! I kid. See, that's me being all casual and detached.

Ahem.

So yesterday, I popped up my blog dashboard four or five times, and in the end, closed it again, because I just wasn't able to think of anything to say

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 148921,149459 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

Oh, sure. My successes at this point still outweigh the failures, by a lot. But every now and then I make a recipe that just... misses. And to add insult to injury, the misses are almost always when I've bought some sort of expensive specialty ingredient specifically for that dish. ARGH. But, you know, it happens. No

biggie.

[Brief unsolicited plug: This is why I nearly always pull new recipes from blogs I like, these days. The commentary is invaluable in helping me to decide if I really want to try that dish or not. It's a level of in

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 189699,190041 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

the UPS guy showed up, and she leaped up to give him what for (I am not sure what “what for” is, but I suspect it sounds like a LOT of barking), and just like that, everything is back to normal.

Even over sharers have limits

by MIR on NOVEMBER 16, 2010 in IT'S NOT A REGRET, IT'S AN "EXPERIENCE"

Someday I'm going to sit down and diagram what

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 195430,195542 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

s to hear a story about whether or not your spouse can get off.

I'm trying very hard not to hold this against him

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 212072,212913 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

Me: :) love you hon (Chickadee: :)

It's the little things, you know. Little things like that, that keep me from strangling her when just a few hours later she's being so very... twelve.

(Also, the folder structure delights me. “Hey Mom, can you fetch me my science notes which I have carefully buried five files deep because I believe such impeccable organization will totally make up for the fact that most of the time I can't even remember I had homework in the first place?”)

Loving as best I can

by MIR on OCTOBER 7, 2010 in GROWING

I don't have the words to tell you all how much it means to me when the Internet proves, once again, to be a place filled with kind and thoughtful and just plain NICE people. Yesterday I needed to let it all out, and I did; then my finger hovered over the “Publish” button as I wondered what backlash might

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 223885,224309 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

away. My husband is away. I've had the ENTIRE DAY to myself and I hardly knew what to do first. I ended up going “out for coffee” quickly... you know, for nearly three hours. Can't do that when the family is around! And then I went to Goodwill, with all the other party animals. And finally, I've spent some serious quality time petting the dog, doing laundry, and catching up on America's Next Top Model. (Spoiler alert! Jasle

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 316148,318031 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

until I could stand on my own again, it was during this time that one very special woman—while fighting her own battles—opened her heart to me. The heart ornament came from her later, after both our lives had improved and we both were feeling abundantly blessed. But that heart has been the focal point of our Christmas tree ever since.

I think of her when I look at it, of course. She is still one of my dearest friends, and the closest I'll ever have to a sister. But that's not why I need it right in front. It's a reminder to me that the greatest of these is love, indeed.

So I will continue to love without regret or fear, as best I can. And that—as the saying goes—is the reason for the season.

Happy Love Thursday, everyone. Let's all help each other remember, okay?

Literary slut, visual prude

by MIR on NOVEMBER 10, 2009 in HAVEN'T BEEN HIT BY LIGHTNING YET!

It occurred to me this weekend that I have a complete double-standard about sharing stuff online. And not just for me—which would be fine, you know, setting standards for myself—but I find myself getting all Judgey McJudgerson about other people, which is quite frankly both exhausting and probably just bad karma.

And yes, I know that everyone has their own boundaries. Everyone has to decide what they can live with, and what makes them comfortable, and if it makes ME uncomfortable, I am free to look away, and blah blah blah BLAH let's sing Kumbaya! I get that. I do.

Nevertheless, I realized this weekend, when I found myself face-to-face with someone's naked boobs, that I am much more tolerant of the written word than I am of photography. Specifically, I am not bothered by an entire post about your breasts (particularly if it's funny) (I think I've written a couple of those) (at least, I hope they were funny), but I'd rather not be ambushed by a giant picture of them.

It's not you, it's me. Your breasts

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 318900,319620 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf

Source Material:

ense.

Further evidence of my double standard:

Good: Trashy, slutty novels if the sex scenes are relatively well-written. (This would exclude the words "heaving" and "throbbing," in case you're wondering.) (Bad: Pornos. I am too busy being embarrassed for the actors and/or wondering who actually wrote the ridiculous dialogue to, uh, get into it.

[Side note to my father: I just made that up. I've never seen a porno in my life. Also, I didn't inhale. Love you!]

Good: Funny story about your husband's underwear malfunction. (Bad: Picture of your husband's junk. NO THANK YOU.

Good: Cringe worthy retelling of that time one of your kids walked into the room at a very inopportune moment. (Bad: Picture of your vibrator ins

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 323394,324027 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf

Source Material:

of coming back to BITE YOU ON THE BUTT. I'm just trying to help.

I SAID, stop rolling your eyes.

Go do the dishes.

Love,(Mom

* * * * *

Dear Licorice,

Thank you for saving my sanity this last month. You're a delightful little beastie.

I totally forgive you for taking that ice cube you were playing with in the kitchen this morning (so cute! bat it! get it!) and putting it in your crate. You didn't know.

However, please stop dragging your ass across the carpet. Because... ewwwww.

Love,(Mom

* * * * *

Dear Spellcheck,

Imaginer IS TOO a word.

Hmph.

Love,(Mir

Love finds the right currency

by MIR on SEPTEMBER 3, 2009 in OFFSPRING: EC

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 324029,325497 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf

Source Material:

TASY AND AGONY

The post I wrote for BlogHer yesterday about writing unsavory things about your children was a hard one for me. The subject of my post has, in my mind, crossed the line. Hell, she can't even SEE the line anymore. It seems pretty black and white, to me.

But I write about my kids. Many writers I admire write about their kids. I think it can be done respectfully, and I cringe when I hear the baby-with-the-bathwater arguments for parents to never say a single word that's less than glowing about their offspring. It's dangerous territory, but I refuse to believe a few people making poor choices should mean that everyone else has to just shut up.

So this has been on my mind. And I've been taking stock of what I say and what I don't. I don't think I always get it right (though I hope I do most of the time, of course), but it's part of what I deal with when it comes to sharing, here.

If you think I've written less, here, this past month, it's because I have. It's because we're struggling with some things and while it was easy enough for me to decide "this is not my story to tell right now," it was harder to remove all of that from my brain and find something else that felt worth discussing, instead. Sometimes one of my kids is rotten and I come here and write about it and say, "Good lord, MY KID IS ROTTEN," and I trust that 99.9% of you understand that while I am human and frustrated, I am also the person you'd need to go through to so much

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 330677,331699 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

slowly. I have to be careful. Right now all I know is that the right age is "not yet." But if I give her a number, come hell or high water she will march up on her birthday and demand access. I guess I'm hoping this is one of those "I'll know it when I see it" kinds of things. "Older," I finally conclude. It feels lame. She affirms my ineptitude by pulling a face.

"I know OLDER," she says, rolling her eyes. "But how old? You must swear a lot on there, to not want us reading it." She sounds vaguely envious, and I squelch a chuckle.

"It's not because I swear," I tell her, thinking about how she busts out with "OOOOOH! YOU SAID A MODERATELY BAD WORD!" whenever I drop a "damn" or "hell" in her presence. "It's because... it's for grown-ups."

"But it's about US," she protests.

"Some," I agree. "But not entirely."

Her forehead creases as she considers this; she is clearly imagining what that might mean. Obviously I am beating around the bush, and my blog is a place where I use the word "fuck" with abandon, inbetween

WouldaBlog blogging 13 TEXT 356141,356525 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

It makes me feel powerful. No, not like Wonder Woman powerful... but "I can make food from not-food" powerful. I turn powders and liquids into actual food. It's like ALCHEMY. It's something our ancestors did with little thought, and something that too many of us think doesn't apply to modern life. It does. It should, anyway.

When I pack lunches for my family, now, it feels like a pr

Case	Code	Frequency	Type	Reference	Source
GoonBlog	friendship	2	TEXT	136559,137008	Good Squad .rtf

Source Material:

About ten minutes later there was another knock, and this time I was prepared and I went to the kitchen door first.

It was the new neighbor mom and she was looking for her daughter.

I think I actually have my own back door friends.

And now I understand the sign.**

Back door friends really are best. I think it is the idea that there are no formalities.

Then my new neighbor brought me a beer. I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

GoonBlog friendship 2 TEXT 180424,181557 Good Squad .rtf
Source Material:

Once upon a time I had friends from high school and friends from college.
Then I had high school friends and college friends and work friends.
Then I had high school friends, college friends, work friends, neighborhood friends, friends from the twins club and eventually blog friends.
You get the picture.
Sometimes we would have a birthday party and your work friends would meet your regular friends and maybe a mom or two that I knew from twins club. It was okay. A little weird, but pretty normal.
Enter blog friends.
At one point in my life, my blog friends were pretty much contained on the internet. I would comment on their blogs, they would comment on my blog and occasionally there would be an e-mail exchange.
Then I moved.
When I moved here I only knew a handful of people that lived in the Washington DC area, but I knew that some of my blog friends lived here. Suddenly, some of my blog friends were real life friends.
It was sort of weird, but it still wasn't a huge deal. Most of my regular friends knew that I was a blogger and internet dork and they didn't make fun of me.
Well, they only made fun of me a little bit.

VodkaBlog friendship 4 TEXT 22592,22958 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

I'm FIFTY.....and proud of it.

I've been tumbling around on a sea of varying emotion as of late.

And I don't think I'm the only one.

But in these moments when I feel like I want to crawl in bed and stay there for days, I have friends who send me things like these.

And then LIFE is pumped back into my veins, and I smile.

My dear friend P - thank you.

VodkaBlog friendship 4 TEXT 39215,39551 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

I've learned that your friends will wrap you in love and comfort. Reach out to them and they will lift you up.

I've learned that self-respect and loving who you are is priceless.

And while last but certainly not least, integrity is something we teach our children through our actions. And I am so proud that I have chosen to act.

VodkaBlog friendship 4 TEXT 46075,47689 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

I have a lovely friend who I've known since 6th grade - SIXTH GRADE for God's sake. She's a beautiful woman- inside AND out. She tells it like it is, listens intently, has experienced her own struggles, offers

great advice and reminds me of what friends do; they listen, they don't judge, they hand you a glass of wine and they help you laugh like crazy.

She emailed me yesterday and invited me to make the forty-minute drive to my hometown to watch the annual County Fair Parade with her. Sassy encouraged me. (GO GO GO, Mom!!!)

And so it was that two giggling fifty-year old women sat along a curb and watched as American tradition marched by

We were drenched in sweat and memories as we saw well-worn fire trucks and marching bands filled with young people in uniforms that were too large and bulky for their youthful frames. We watched young girls twirl batons with all their hearts, and moms trailing along side spraying water into their excited faces. We saw white patent leather boots by the hundreds, vendors selling various light-up contraptions and parents opening their wallets.

We saw Shriners on their four-wheelers, and little league teams riding atop flatbeds waving to their neighbors and friends. We saw dance teams, drill teams, football teams and softball teams.

But in the end, I saw something more.

I saw and felt the spirit and soul of small town America. It was MY small town America, and it made me proud.

(And Elaine? Thank you for kicking this fifty year olds' butt, and reminding me that each day is important. But this time it's your turn to make the drive.)

VodkaBlog friendship 4 TEXT 82300,82646 VodkaMom.rtf
Source Material:

I spent an amazing weekend with some kind and generous friends.

While we did spend time laughing, writing, walking, EATING, yoga-ing and singing, MUCH of it was spent talking.

I came away with some amazing thoughts, but this is one I am holding close to my heart. It is a story that reminds me that one must always try to walk toward the good.

WouldaBlog friendship 7 TEXT 74417,75017 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

But tell her to get him out of there before it gets any worse."

She also asked my friend to email her and let her know how Monkey is doing.

Now. That my friend thought to take this opportunity to put herself in front of Temple Grandin to ask for advice on my behalf, on my kid's behalf, touches me deeply. That she was thinking of us is a testament to what a kind and generous friend she is, and I am incredibly grateful.

That Temple Grand in was willing to talk to a stranger about my kid, that she engaged and displayed real concern, I'm grateful for that, too. She didn't have to. She's an incredible

WouldaBlog friendship 7 TEXT 137962,138455 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

jig in times of happiness and gives really good hugs, but mostly Emotional Me is a hot mess of angst and I consider it Logical Me's job to keep Emotional Me in a half-nelson as much as possible.

The good news is that I know this about myself. The bad news is that Emotional Me is a slippery bastard.

When it comes to Matters Of The Children, I am mostly good at letting Logical Me deal with the rule-setting and the expectations and the consequences, and sure, occasionally, things go sideways

WouldaBlog friendship 7 TEXT 205482,206020 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

tion is that I am just exhausted; physically, mentally, spiritually. I want a nap. About 30 hours should do it, I think. HAHA. Yeah. Anyway, there's that. I am tired and overwhelmed and let's face it, I am probably not the world's greatest friend to begin with, but when I am tired and overly hurt-y about everything, I am an even worse friend. I retreat, and then I wonder why I am wallowing all by my lonesome. Lather, rinse, repeat. It's delightful, except not really.

Fortunately I have a small group of folks who always poke into my b

WouldaBlog friendship 7 TEXT 337415,338485 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

nd more than likely hold her down as she has a biopsy of the rash. Just one item on the list; just ruling out a couple of the possibilities. The biopsy will get sent to Emory, the holy grail of medical knowledge 'round here. We'll be able to check off those possibilities, and it's all part of getting to the answer, and getting her feeling better.

After the biopsy she'll go on another course of prednisone to clear her up enough that she can have the next round of allergy testing. The steroids make her crabby and snappy and make it hard for her to sleep. Right now there is nothing else that works, and so right now this is what we'll do.

Eventually we'll have some answers, and then we'll be able to make her feel better (I hope), and I am (supposedly) doing everything right, so why do I feel so guilty?

(On the up side, I'm thinking ice cream after the biopsy. Right?)

Love is enough

by MIR on JUNE 4, 2009 in FRIENDS

I tend to think of myself as somewhat friendship disordered. I have never had a big crowd of friends, and even the ones I've had tend to be intens

WouldaBlog friendship 7 TEXT 339870,340634 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

grad school.

Well, let's be clear: I have CONTACT with all sorts of people. Through the miracle of Facebook, sure, yes, I periodically do talk to a couple of people who were in my kindergarten class with Mrs. Hemseth. Two of my best friends from high school write on my wall occasionally, and I on theirs, but we only recently got back into touch and I wouldn't call it a deep relationship. Facebook is kind of like a floating class reunion, and it's a lot of fun at first, walking down memory lane, but then it sort of fades into the background. Wow, your kids are really growing up. Congrats to your husband on the new job. Hey, I like your hair like that. Not exactly deep stuff, is my point. Not the sort of thing I was reading about, where time hadn't eroded t

WouldaBlog friendship 7 TEXT 341035,341815 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf
Source Material:

opinion that I was simply so intolerant that I would never be able to sustain a prolonged relationship with anyone, sure, and my very real secret fear that maybe he was right, but also the fact that some people I had thought to be my friends either abandoned or downright turned on me in the wake of that particular crisis. I was already cautious when it came to relationships with others, beforehand. Six years later, I still feel like I'm navigating a minefield sometimes when it comes to interacting with others in positive ways.]

But anyway: Back to who has known me the longest, excepting family. The answer? Otto. Heh. We've known each other for twenty years this September. (Me: "And I'm so glad we finally figured this all out, because clearly I wouldn't have been able to

WouldaBlog friendship 7 TEXT 341817,342787 wouldcouldashoulda.rtf

Source Material:

arry ANYONE ELSE, because the length of our relationship somehow assures me that you actually know me and I actually know you.” Him: “... okaaaaaaay....”)

Aside from Otto, when I recount my close friends, FEMALE friends, the tally is low. One good friend from back in New England. A few dear friends made through blogging, years ago, who remain my champion supports and hand-holders in time of extreme neurosis. And a handful of I-wish-we-were-closer-but-I'm-not-sure-how-to-go-about-it folks 'round here, women I adore and have good relationships with, but feel clumsy about strengthening those bonds in a way that doesn't make me look needy or desperate.

(I'm okay with BEING needy and desperate, if I'm somehow able not to LOOK it. Because I'm logical that way.)

And so I sat there, wondering who I would call in a crisis; who would surround me if I needed it? Was I somehow lacking in the support I would need if push came to shove?

In relatively short order I snapped ou