

## Mommy Bloggers as Rebels and Community Builders

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### A Generic Description

*One site of female activism is mommy blogs, an emerging form of communication in which women can address the constraints and affordances of motherhood. However, female bloggers often face a lack of legitimacy. Generic criticism is one way to recognize female bloggers and address concerns of claiming “professionalism.” Viewing mommy bloggers as a genre reveals substantive and stylistic features that work toward organizing principles, which allow us to see mommy bloggers as a justifiable influence in our culture and in professional communication. This article specifically examines the genre of mommy blogging through the characteristics of the top ten mommy blogs in 2012. These characteristics reveal the two organizing principles of rebellion and community, which are rhetorical choices meant to strengthen the network of bloggers and to extend support to the audience. Mommy blogs offer support, particularly emotional, based on generic constraints in the mothering experience, take into account the context of a situation, act as a community to address the guilt and ambivalence in motherhood, and serve as reports of work, validating the home as a workplace and women’s issues as worthy of discussion and organization. Mommy bloggers engage in feminine rhetoric, finding similarities and engaging in a community-level consciousness raising.*

“Well-behaved women seldom make history” is Harvard history professor Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s homage to women like Christine de Pizan (circa 1363–death unknown), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), who rebelled against the conventions of their times in order to change the status quo (xiii). Today, we still have outspoken and strong women tackling pressing and controversial issues, but they are not necessarily writing novels, staging protests, or giving public speeches. One site of today’s

female activism is mommy blogs, an emerging form of communication and a forum in which women can connect with each other and address women's issues, especially pertaining to motherhood. However, one of the problems many female bloggers face is a lack of legitimacy. As one blogger expressed: "[W]e aren't treated as professionals ... being called a 'mommy blogger' seems to downgrade the status and influence that many bloggers have" (Beatrice). These women engage in the work of creating content, finding sponsors, and addressing important issues, yet they may discover that their contributions are minimized and dismissed.

Generic criticism is one way to legitimize mommy bloggers and address their concerns about being considered professionals. While I have previously established mommy bloggers as professionals through their integral relationship with an audience, social responsibility, and ethical awareness (Petersen), recognizing mommy bloggers as a genre gives the movement further legitimacy because it reveals substantive and stylistic features that work toward organizing principles, which allow us to see mommy bloggers as influential in our culture and in professional communication. This article will look at the genre of mommy blogging and identify the common characteristics of the top ten mommy blogs of 2012 through the rhetorical analysis of generic criticism. This analysis leads to two organizing principles of the mommy blog genre: rebellion and community.

### Genre and Generic Criticism

Foundationally, Carolyn Miller suggested that genre could be understood in five ways. First, "[g]enre ... [is] large-scale typification of rhetorical action;" second, "genre is interpretable by means of rules;" third, "[g]enre is distinct from form;" fourth, genre is "the substance of forms at higher levels ... genres help constitute the substance of our cultural life;" and lastly, "[a] genre is a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence" ("Genre" 163). Miller further reviewed that "Genre ... becomes more than a formal entity; it becomes pragmatic, fully rhetorical, a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of social action" (153). Her point is "not to trivialize the study of genres; it is to take seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed and the situations in which we find ourselves" (155).

One way to answer her call is to consider genre in practice. Miller explained, "that practice creates both knowledge and value and that the value created comprehends the good of the community in which the practice has a history" ("What's Practical" 69). Miller and Dawn Shepherd considered practice through the emergence of web blogs, tracing "ancestral genres that offer rhetorical precedents and patterns ... speculat[ing] about the recurrent rhetorical

exigence that has brought together motivations, forms, and audiences to create and sustain the blog as genre” (1). They found that blogs “were chronologically organized, contained links to sites of interest on the web, and provided commentary on the links” (4). Blogs may now demonstrate more complex characteristics (Friedman *Mommyblogs*; Petersen), but Miller and Shepherd’s genre analysis is a good description of the genesis of blogs. Nevertheless, they recognized that “[c]ontent is important to bloggers because it represents their freedom of selection and presentation” (5). They suggested that bloggers are concerned with “self-expression and community development” (6), and that “[t]he blog-as-genre is a contemporary contribution to the art of the self” (10).

Clay Spinuzzi’s ideas about genre tracing elucidate this art of the self. He argued, “Because imposed standards cannot account for every local contingency, users will tailor the standardized forms, information systems, schedules, and so forth to meet their needs” (3). He clarified genre as not “merely artifact types” but instead “a sort of *tradition*” (emphasis in original, 41). “[T]hey are culturally and historically grounded ways of ‘seeing and conceptualizing reality’” (41). He suggested, “In examining genres, then, we can gain an overall understanding of the activities they have historically mediated” (45). Blogs function as a genre in what Spinuzzi called an open system, which “can consist of an officially designed core that provides openings for . . . contributions” (204). Bloggers are not passively waiting for a designer to tell them how to present content. Rather, they innovate and develop their own responses to recurrent problems within their communities. Genre then becomes a typified response that engages in problem solving.

In addition, María José Luzón explained, “when studying the different forms of communication of a community, researchers need to analyze them in relation to the community’s recurrent activities, its organization, and its members’ shared knowledge” (288). Studying genre consequently leads to better understanding of a community’s activities and relationships among participants. Luzón further suggested, “To understand the communicative practices of a community, it is necessary not only to identify the repertoire of genres used by that community but also to examine how genres work together to mediate social activities” (288). By establishing and uncovering genres, we can determine which rhetorical strategies and organizing principles create and maintain a genre and therefore mediate social activities and create community among participants.

### What is a Mommy Blog?

*Mashable’s* definition of mommy bloggers is: “Women who have at least one child in their household and have read or contributed to a blog in the past 30

days” (Laird). However, scholars have reached more nuanced descriptions of mommy blogs and their writers and contributors. Friedman claimed, “This practice of networked life writing online has created a collective of mothers who write shared experiences about mothering and, in the process, have built a sense of community and congruency. This cyberworld has come to be known as the mamasphere, and this genre of blogs are now known as mommyblogs” (*Mommyblogs* 9). She and others, such as Alice Bradley of *Finslippy*, have described mommy blogging as a radical act (34). It is “a collective response to dominant discourses of motherhood” (27). Through blogging, “mothers empower themselves and give voice to their mundanity and their multiplicity, and they connect to an audience of peers who are likewise empowered and validated” (87).

Mommy blogs display five characteristics, according to Friedman, that challenge “the stability of the mother subject” (11). These are diversity in location and experience, a large number of participants, relationality through dialogue and interactivity, an unending narrative that links to the past, and the performance of motherhood as opposed to expert prescriptions (11). Mommy bloggers present “a motherhood that rests in the desperate compromises and imperfections of lived experience rather than in the idealized view of what mothers *ought* to accomplish” (emphasis in original, 129). My generic description of the top ten mommy blogs will illuminate the characteristics that make such a depiction of motherhood possible, and how mommy bloggers rhetorically contribute to a nuanced and multidimensional view of what it means to be a mother and what it means to live life in the private sphere publicly.

As a genre, Lynne Webb and Brittney Lee noted the importance of community among mommy bloggers. The very nature of blogs, that writers often comment on each other’s work within a specific blogging platform, means that “mommy bloggers are basically writing to each other and forming a specialized blogging community” (248). Not only does the blog content create community through identification, but the way in which blogs are positioned to be supported by other bloggers means that community is a built-in feature of the genre. However, Webb and Lee explain that mommy bloggers are “positioned to provide and receive social support” that “can be quite meaningful” (248). They concluded that this sort of support can turn into friendship and that “a woman’s identity is impacted by being a member of the blogging community and by having a space to share ideas and thoughts” (252).

## Method

I am interested in uncovering the unifying concepts that make mommy blogs a genre and how those features can allow us to appreciate the contributions

mommy bloggers make. I will focus my analysis of mommy blogs on a generic description, in which a rhetorical critic analyzes artifacts in order to discover a genre by looking for similarities among a set of artifacts. These similarities include substantive features from content or stylistic features from form. These substantive and stylistic recurrent rhetorical actions formulate the organizing principles of a genre.

My guiding questions are: Does a genre exist among the top ten mommy blogs of 2012, and what are the characteristics of that genre? To answer these questions, I immersed myself in the top ten mommy blogs of 2012 as identified by *Babble*, a website created as a forum for all parents. *Babble* created the list through their editors and a group of parent bloggers. The process for choosing the top mommy blogs follows:

First, we asked a diverse group of parent bloggers to come up with lists of their own favorite blogs, and the blogs they felt weren't getting the attention they deserved . . . [O]ur editors reviewed the nomination section from last year's top 50 list. . . . Then, when we had a good long list of very worthy mom blogs, we had an expert panel . . . review the list, add some suggestions of their own, and rank them all. (*Babble* para. 3)

The top ten blogs seem to represent what mommy blogging is all about, based on *Babble's* specific criteria, so the characteristics they share reveal the specific features of the genre of mommy blogging. I chose to use *Babble's* list for my analysis because of its explanation for the process of choosing the top blogs. Many "top" mommy blog lists are available online, but this one demonstrated transparency through explanation, and I chose it because *Babble* is well known for addressing parenting issues and for supporting and promoting mommy bloggers.

Mommy blogs are well matched to generic criticism because of their grouping as a blogging phenomenon. Using this already established recognition of the movement to gain insight into what actually differentiates this sort of blogging from other forms lends itself to generic criticism because of the way the theory identifies similarities. Finding commonalities among the top ten mommy bloggers will establish mommy blogging as a more defined genre and contribute to research on mommy blogs as an important cultural force and an extra-institutional form of professional communication. Defining what constitutes a mommy blog is an important part of establishing legitimacy and contributing to further research on motherhood. This article will first identify the common characteristics of the mommy blogging genre, as the first step of generic criticism is a description of the artifacts. Second, I will explain how these characteristics reveal and compose the organizing principles of the genre

as community and rebellion. Lastly, I will analyze and discuss the implications of the mommy blog genre's features.

### Description of Artifacts

Because editors at *Babble* compiled data on the phenomenon, I relied on their list of the top ten mommy blogs of 2012 to perform my analysis and to narrow down my list of artifacts. The blogs are: *Girl's Gone Child* by Rebecca Woolf; *The Bloggess* by Jenny Lawson; *Her Bad Mother* by Catherine Connors; *Dooce* by Heather Armstrong; *Finslippy* by Alice Bradley; *Postpartum Progress* by Katherine Stone; *The Girl Who* by Monica Bielanko; *Confessions of a Pioneer Woman* by Ree Drummond; *Amalah* by Amy Corbett Storch; and *Sweet|Salty* by Kate Inglis.

### Substantive Elements

#### *Humor*

The top ten mommy blogs use humor as a way to connect with their audiences. They often downplay traditional housewifery and make fun of it. *The Bloggess* and *Her Bad Mother* make fun of Pinterest, a website that has drawn many women because of its use as a forum for swapping recipes, decorating ideas, and parenting tips. Many of these bloggers are not enthusiastic about Pinterest. *The Girl Who* has an entire post titled, "Screw You, Pinterest."

Jenny Lawson of *The Bloggess* is particularly humorous. She features posts of her cat wearing wigs and a homemade Halloween costume made from an old stuffed animal. She also makes fun of herself. In one post, she told of meeting Tony Danza and how she related to him a particularly stupid story because of her nervousness. She wrote, "So now Tony Danza probably thinks I have emotional issues and that I collect dead ponies. And that is a sentence I never thought I'd write" ("Hold Me" para. 9). The purpose of the majority of her posts is to be witty and humorous.

This element echoes the trend in mothering memoirs over the last decade. Samira Kawash found in a brief overview and analysis of these memoirs that the authors "are funny and strong, but they are also angry: angry at the high standards, competitive parenting, and impossible expectations of mothering that make them feel guilty or like failures" (985). Friedman noted that this humor also provides a critical look at mother's experiences ("It Takes" 358). This leads to the next two substantive elements: anger and guilt.

#### *Anger*

Underneath the humor of the mommy blogs is anger. The bloggers seem to be reacting to "an essentialist view of motherhood: if mother-love and

self-sacrifice are the natural expressions of maternity, then anger, violence, and even the mildest acts involving choosing of one's own needs over those of the child are not only wrong but unnatural, even monstrous" (Kawash 983). Anger versus tenderness is a theme in Adrienne Rich's book on motherhood, *Of Woman Born*, an important foundational text for motherhood studies. Mommy bloggers seem to be expressing anger as a way of relieving the inevitable stress of motherhood. As Friedman noted, mothers wish to relieve stress and gain emotional support, but often do so through their children. "Only on the Internet can (some) mothers easily connect without needing the excuse of their children to provide community" ("It Takes" 356). The anger expressed in mommy blogs is an emotional release, one done without the interruptions of children or the excuse of a play date.

Katherine Stone's blog focuses completely on postpartum depression, often examining expressions of anger. In one post, a guest blogger expressed that postpartum depression is a thief and a liar. She wrote: "I've lost some of those things, but for a long time I felt as though my experience with postpartum depression had stolen one thing in particular from me: the family I had always envisioned" (Farr). She is angry about her situation, but this anger stems from the cultural context that reinforces perfect and/or ideal families. Her anger grapples with more than her own emotions; instead, she is engaging in a larger conversation about expectations and impositions that make it hard for women to enact motherhood realistically.

Other anger is directed at political and women's issues. Stone frequently expresses anger at poor media depictions of mothers and of depression. She's an activist, and anger is part of her activism. She wrote, "Nothing infuriates me like ignoring the facts. Presenting only one side of the story" ("The Harm" para. 1). She is constantly addressing her anger when it comes to misleading information about women's issues, particularly postpartum depression. In this, we see political activism through the personal experiences of women that are largely affected by culture, media, and politics.

Two of the top ten blogs focus their anger on their former religion, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Their disillusionment from religious experiences as children seems to connect them with their audience through identification. A good example of this anger mingled with humor is on the blog *Dooce*. Blogger Heather Armstrong tells a story about sitting next to a strange woman on an airplane and not wanting to be associated with her. She writes, "If anyone asks I'm just going to shrug and tell them that we're Mormon" ("All Pain" para. 2). It's pretty clear that many of these bloggers are angry, and this anger stems from multiple sources, including the cultural pressure of perfection on mothers. This rejection of perfection or ideals is a large part of mommy bloggers' anger.

While releasing this anger may be therapeutic and attempts to counter the isolation and pressure mothers may feel, Friedman acknowledged that “negative comments may generate angry posts, and angry posts will generate controversy and often increase a blogger’s popularity. Insofar as popularity or readership is a measure of power, then, controversy is immensely powerful” (*Mommyblogs* 90). Anger might not always be about rebelling against cultural norms or empowering other mothers. It can instead serve bloggers as a way of gaining more power by creating more views and more shares on social media. Further research might examine how anger is used as blogging currency and in what ways anger is a ruse for click-bait, rather than a true reaction to the stresses and ambivalence of motherhood.

### *Guilt*

The bloggers address the guilt commonly associated with motherhood, sharing feelings of inadequacy with their readers. They also address the guilt many women feel at not measuring up to popular images of the ideal mother. Yet the women, despite acknowledging guilt as part of the motherhood experience, also claim that being imperfect is acceptable. Part of acknowledging guilt is assuaging it. Rebecca Woolf of *Girl’s Gone Child* addressed this when she said:

No matter how much practice we have, how many births we survive, infants we care for, birthdays we celebrate, when it comes to children and relationships and pretty much everything else in life, we’re all flying blind. We’re all, no matter the what and the who and the how, first-time moms. (“Every Time” para. 7)

She expressed the ambivalence that is prevalent among mothers, which Brown contends is “also behind much of the guilt mothers feel about motherhood” (122).

The myth of perfect motherhood is perpetuated by the new momism. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels described new momism as “the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children” (4). It is motherhood to the extreme, and because of this perfection promoted through culture and media, mothers inevitably feel guilty. This guilt played out on *Girl’s Gone Child*. She focused a series of posts on the guilt she felt over not being the perfect mother when it came to her daughter’s birthday party. The first post, titled “Making Plans,” explains that she has done nothing to prepare. As a result, she said: “I feel guilt for being a terrible organizer. Guilt for not wanting to bake Fable a cake. Guilt for



wishing I could hire someone to do the whole thing for me. All fancy like the magazines. Guilt for thinking that those kinds of things matter in the first place” (para. 4). She seems to buy into the new momism, but rejects it at the same time. She cannot escape the guilt for not participating in what she perceives as good motherhood, and she cannot escape the guilt for realizing that her guilt is not warranted because it is a construct. She is participating in “intensive mothering, [in which] everyone watches us, we watch ourselves and other mothers, and we watch ourselves watching ourselves” (Douglas and Michaels 6). Both Woolf’s perception of the situation and larger societal issues, such as new momism, create her guilt. Woolf also presents herself as a student who is failing an exam. She wrote, “I am coming close to mastering the art of being ‘present’ with my kids but I fail miserably at the ‘planning’ portion of the exam” (“~~Making Plans~~” para. 5). She sees motherhood as some sort of test, as a way to prove, as she later says, that she’s “a human person” (para. 8). And her insistence on becoming an expert at “being there” for her children echoes themes of new momism, with the idea that mothers must be fully engaged with their children all of the time. Her guilt covers up all of the good that she does as a mother. She cannot move past it. In the discussion section of this article, I will analyze how readers responded to Woolf, showing that the guilt portrayed in mommy blogs can often lead to redemption through community.

### *Fame*

The bloggers are acutely aware of their fame. Many of them have received free items from large companies (including washers and dryers) and have large sponsorships of their blogs, which is how the women are paid. Their consciousness of this fame is revealed in their biographical descriptions, in which they offer contact information but hesitate to make any sort of promise to respond. Woolf of *Girl’s Gone Child* says: “[P]lease feel free to contact me . . . [I] have a PO Box that I’m terrible at checking because the line is always super long and the people who work there are super yelly” (“About” para. 4). She is telling her readers, in a nice way, that she probably will not respond because she is busy.

In a similar vein, Armstrong of *Dooce* wrote: “I have never been very good at returning email or phone calls for that matter. I get a lot of email so if I don’t respond to yours please do not take it personally” (“Contact Me” para. 3). She realizes that she is too occupied to respond but does not want to alienate readers. She does, however, warn them against stalking. She wrote, after giving a physical address: “No, that is not my home address, so if you show up there you will not get to peek inside my windows” (para. 6). Fame is part of being a popular blogger, so she keeps her home address private and uses humor to joke about stalkers.

Lawson, addressed her fame (and its consequences) in a blog post about an interesting and anonymous present she received in the mail. She wrote: “Someone sent me a box of dead hamster in the mail *and I don’t even know what that means*. Is it some sort of *code*? Is it a *threat*?” (emphasis in original, “Hello” para. 10). She’s using the situation to be humorous, but she is also highlighting the problems that come with being well-known through her blog.

As part of this fame, the mommy bloggers use their sites to advertise their books and products. Eight of the ten bloggers have published books (both fiction and nonfiction), and the two that have not are professional writers for *Babble* (one of them is the editor-in-chief). The women use their blogs to advertise their books and their writing that appears elsewhere. Catherine Connors of *Her Bad Mother* wrote, “*TIME* named this blog to its list of the 25 best blogs of 2012. Which, yes, I am totally bragging about, because I can” (“A List” para. 1).

### *The Female Experience*

The specific content among the blogs varies, but most of it centers around homemaking and the female experience. Writing for women in the workplace of the home has a rich history as a genre, including the work of nineteenth century domestic advisers in the United States “who wrote about the home (private sphere) [but] also remained connected to and interested in the social issues of their day (public sphere)” (Leavitt 18). Mommy bloggers’ topics largely stay focused on the home and domesticity, but are also connected to the social issues that affect women. This includes topics such as recipes, parenting, menstruation, birth control, friendships, gardening, depression, clothing and style, rape, marriage, breastfeeding, crafting, documenting their children’s activities, and housekeeping (or lack of it).

Many of the bloggers strive to be authentic or what they describe as “real.” This authenticity reflects the idea “that providing an honest view of motherhood [means] including both the joyful and the painful experiences associated with mothering” (Brown 124). Mommy bloggers also engage in what Sarah Leavitt calls “uncovering the way certain women understood the connections between their homes and the larger world” (5). Mommy bloggers attempt to make sense of social issues by connecting the public and private spheres. They publicly address the issues that most affect women privately by writing from their perspective as mothers. Writing about the female experience encompasses both and relates to the next substantive element of loss.

### *Loss*

Loss is a common theme, which may be related to the nature of life, but the bloggers focus on it as a way of connecting with their audiences. In particular, Kate Inglis of *Sweet|Salty* recounts the loss of one of her children: “I became

pregnant again, this time with identical twin boys. In May 2007 they were born three months early. One survived and one did not. . . [He] whispers to us every day” (para. 2). As a result of this loss, she started a group for babylost. Her blog is a place where women who have lost children can connect. Even the title of her blog reflects this theme. She wrote: “Why sweet | salty? Because that’s what it is” (para. 5).

Additionally, the other women write about loss as well. Armstrong of *Dooce* became famous after blogging about her institutionalization for postpartum depression. During her treatment, “she gave [her husband] notes scribbled in longhand to type onto her blog. Two thousand readers wrote back. By the time she came home, her Web traffic had quadrupled” (Belkin para. 20). *Postpartum Progress* focuses specifically on this issue for women, one that coincides with a loss of identity during a transition into motherhood. Other mommy bloggers focus on the terminal illness of one of their children, the death of other people’s children, or just missing their children when they are gone. This theme of loss creates identification with an audience, but it also reflects Rich’s assertion that “only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will truly be ours” (9). Sharing loss with other women can be an empowering and productive way of conversing.

## Stylistic Elements

### *Photos*

All of the blogs have photographs, particularly of their children. Ree Drummond of *Confessions of a Pioneer Woman* has older children, but she still includes photos of them with their friends. She also gives her readers the opportunity to feature their own pictures of their children. She calls this series YOUR [insert adjective: fabulous, incredible, fantastic] Mobile Phone Photos. Some of the bloggers include photos of their animals. These usually feature family pets, such as cats and dogs, but there are also photos of farm animals, particularly cows and horses. The photos of the children (and pets) serve to bond the blogger to her readers through their common characteristic of being mothers and caretakers. They enact Webb and Lee’s summation of “personal blogs [as] more journal-like [that] feature disclosures of events occurring in daily life and informal photographs” (243). These photos may show the messiness and randomness of their lives, uniting and engaging readers as a community.

However, inclusion of children, whether through photos or storytelling, is problematic. Mommy bloggers have been called “exploitative and foolhardy” for exposing their children to the same fame they have sought (*Mommyblogs* 131). Issues of privacy for children are debated and many wonder how the

children of bloggers, especially those with the most fame, will react to their most embarrassing moments and childhood mistakes being online for everybody to witness, criticize, and judge. Photos then become a rhetorical device in this debate, and become part of the concern over exploitation and commercializing one's family members.

### *Events*

The blog posts revolve around the rhythm of domestic life. The blogs are organized according to the seasons and cyclical happenings with children. Some examples are posts about getting the children off to school in the fall, posts celebrating the birthdays of children, posts announcing anniversaries, posts relating to upcoming holidays, and posts recounting family weddings. All of these posts organize the women's lives and show that their thoughts are directed by a domestic, Christian, Western calendar. This event-driven posting reflects the idea that "male domination in the political economy and the household is the driving force in family life" and reinforces "a dichotomous split between the public sphere of economic and political discourse and the private sphere of family and household responsibilities" (Collins 311). This is interesting because the women seem to be trying to buck some parts of patriarchy through discussing taboo topics and expressing anger, but their schedules at home still center around a patriarchal economic system.

However, from a different perspective, the event-driven posting can be said to "assign meaning to the stages and cycles of life that may otherwise be missed in their busy existence, if not chronicled" (Webb and Lee 246). Posting about events is also a way of chronicling the history of the domestic household and recognizing that what happens privately is worthy of recognition, discussion, connection, and analysis within that community. Not only are these mothers documenting the lives of their children, but they are documenting their own lives, giving voice to the work women have always done and that has always been forgotten in official narratives of history. This chronicling of the work women do in the home is unprecedented, and just might prove to be as radical as Alice Bradley of *Finslippy* declared it was in terms of remembering often-forgotten women (Webb and Lee 244). Twenty-first century women might be the first generation to have their voices and experiences preserved so carefully and specifically through this online medium.

### *Branding*

Branding is an important part of success for a business; mommy bloggers are not an exception to this. They accomplish branding by focusing on one particular aspect of their expertise or lives. *Confessions of a Pioneer Woman's* brand has to do with her cooking (she has a show on the Food Network), although

she has other sections called photography, home and garden, homeschooling, and entertainment. Other bloggers focus on photography, dealing with depression, style and beauty advice, art, writing, or music. There are also many subcategories and a blurring of the lines of expertise.

### *Giveaways*

Almost all of the top ten mommy blogs I examined have some form of prize-winning for their audiences. Some of the bloggers hold the commercial giveaway events more often than others, depending on the amount of money and sponsorships they have, but all of them encourage participation in the blogging community by hosting giveaways that require comments. These giveaways are usually sponsored and act as product endorsements for companies. There have been giveaways for diaper bags, kitchen knives, KitchenAid mixers, car seats, children's clothing, and baby products (such as bottles, pacifiers, and toothbrushes).

The one exception to this is *Sweet|Salty*. Author Kate Inglis has made it clear that she does not believe in giveaways because her blog is not about selling products for companies. Her “giveaways” come in the form of emotional support for women who have lost children. She seems to be aware of Friedman's observation of “the tensions between the desire for attention and adulation and the desire for authentic discourse and validation” (*Mommyblogs* 88). Inglis wants to focus on connecting with her readers and the serious problem of losing a child, rather than cheapening such discourse and connection with commercialization and advertising.

Sponsorship and commercialization of mommy blogs is a controversial issue, one that might lead to a mother's success and popularity through blogging, but it might also compromise the integrity of her writing. Friedman acknowledged, “Monetization is changing the style of ‘women's writing’: instead of the traditional (and arguably stereotypical) style that foregrounds intimate and personal knowledge, writers—women—are supplanting personal content with content calculated to generate revenue or free products from sponsors” (*Mommyblogs* 145). Such sponsorship might call into question the integrity of the blogger and the trust that readers can have in her posts, especially when the posts involve promoting a product. They become marketers rather than mommy bloggers, “without the platform of their own honest experiences as a background to the products under review” (145). Inglis seems to understand the problematic nature of advertising and sponsoring giveaways on her blog, which is dedicated to mothering through the loss of a child. Such marketing might cheapen her message and create a blog space that becomes unsafe to grieving mothers. The intimacy of her connection and conversation with readers would be lost through advertising for companies only interested in profit.

*Ethos*

Mommy bloggers establish ethos through their knowledge of motherhood from a learner's perspective. Having ethos usually denotes some sort of expertise, but it also means that one has the authority and the morality to speak on a particular topic. Mommy bloggers have developed this authoritative voice by being mothers, by writing honestly about that experience, and by presenting their lives realistically. They use interpersonal writing to reach a mass audience, revealing a human side of mothering, and therefore gaining credibility through identification. Friedman sees blogs as an easy way "for an increasingly wide range of people to assume an authorial voice" ("It Takes" 354).

*Conversational Tone*

The bloggers do not employ completely formal conventions in their writing. Many of them are professional writers and editors, and they follow good writing and use of standard language principles, but they do not attempt to alienate their readers with intellectual prowess. Instead, the bloggers seek identification through conversational writing that engages readers with any level of education. This is a rhetorical technique familiar to female writers of all eras. Elizabeth Tebeaux found that seventeenth century female technical writers in England, who focused on midwifery, education, and medicine, adopted "a conversational style ... [as a] way of establishing a relationship with her readers" (112). These early technical writers "illustrate one important quality of women's technical writing: the sense that they are talking with their readers rather than simply providing objective, succinct information" (113). Mommy bloggers engage in this same quality of writing.

All of the bloggers are masters at engaging their audiences with this conversational tone, but one example is Monica Bielanko of *The Girl Who*. She wrote, "And while we're talking about grandma, let's just all go ahead and admit that most of our grandparents are still slightly racist. Using the adjective 'slightly' is probably being a little generous, even" ("Surviving" para. 3). This is just one example of the tone and use of creative language structure that engages blog readers on a casual and comfortable level. The substantive element of humor also serves this purpose. Friedman stated that more popular blogs (she used *Dooce* as an example) have gained "notoriety precisely *because* the version of maternity that they present is unmasked ... they are far from politically docile" (emphasis in original, 359). Taking off masks and presenting an authentic voice on motherhood is part of this conversational tone.

*Organizing Principles*

The organizing principles of the genre are rebellion and community. The women approach many of their topics as rebels, addressing traditional stay-

home motherhood issues but admitting that they do not measure up. They do not fit an ideal image of motherhood, and even if their “failure” bothers them, they do not let it stop them from blogging, commenting on the tensions and ambivalence, and moving forward as mothers. More specifically, two of the top ten mommy bloggers focus on rejection of religion as their rebellion. Similarly, Woolf titled her blog *Girl’s Gone Child*, reminiscent of going “wild.” She sports tattoos and refers to her life as “crazy” on several occasions.

Another blogger seems to be the more typical, perfectly groomed, demure housewife, but her content focuses exclusively on postpartum depression, a topic that was somewhat taboo until a few years ago. She is rebelling by speaking out and addressing an issue that many women face but are embarrassed to admit they have experienced. This consciousness-raising—through the substantive features of humor, anger, guilt, fame, the female experience, and loss—works toward rebellion. In these rebellious attitudes, the admitted guilt, anger, or failure is usually followed by participation from their communities, the other organizing principle.

Mommy blogs, as all blogs, are community-based. The bloggers’ photos, event-based posts, branding, giveaways, ethos, and conversational tone help to solidify this community of mothers. This community feeling is essential for mothers when facing some of the toughest parenting challenges. Friedman explained that, “the ability to create community independent of physical space is a tremendous boon.... The virtual nature of the Internet means that child care is not required for participation” (“It Takes” 354). The women who participate in the communities that mommy blogs offer are involved in exploring mothering challenges by commenting on the bloggers’ posts and giving her (and other readers) encouragement and advice. This encouragement serves to reinforce rebellion. The women reject stereotypical views of motherhood, and when they allow guilt, anger, resentment, depression, or loss to creep in and cause doubt, their communities pull them back into a rebellious mode, reminding them of their inspiration to others despite not being perfect.

## Discussion and Analysis

The principles of rebellion and community are rhetorical choices meant to strengthen the community of mommy bloggers and to extend such support to their audience of mothers. Such content is a choice that “grow[s] out of knowledge (often tacit) of the values and conventions of communities” (Com-prone 99). Therefore, the stylistic features, while seemingly spontaneous and agency-driven, feed off of each other. Blogs as a genre have emerged and evolved into important community sites where women express the realities of motherhood, but they have become sites of community and rebellion because

of the connectedness of their content and situations. As a genre and through rhetorical choices, mommy blogs are “constrained by genre and context of culture or situation” (99). Genre theorists “argue that rhetorical choices are the result of a writer’s ability to manipulate linguistic and formal patterns that are passed on from one situation to another” (99). Because of the public nature and visibility of mommy blogs, their stylistic features and rhetorical choices are dependent on others within the community engaging in the same behavior and arriving at the same exigence.

What does this mean for motherhood? If the online forums in which women share their personal journeys through motherhood are organized by community and rebellion, we learn that motherhood is a fraught and ambivalent site for many women, at least those participating in this genre through writing a blog or reading one. We know ambivalence in mothering has been well documented (Brown; Rich), so what else do the principles of community and rebellion suggest?

Blogs are communities that offer support; however, because blogs are virtual communities, this support is mostly emotional. Friedman pointed out that blog community “provides tremendous solace and comfort to millions of mothers worldwide” (“It Takes” 352). Women certainly need the support of other women in order to successfully navigate the role of mother. These women cannot necessarily trade babysitting, meet at a park, or share a carpool. They can, however, talk about these issues the same way face-to-face mothers would, finding like-minded individuals who share their concerns and building a community based on typified situations within motherhood.

Mommy blogs as a genre then become a way of finding mothers facing similar “generic” constraints in the mothering experience. Those who have lost children find community on *Sweet|Salty*, while those who struggle with postpartum depression find a community at *Postpartum Progress*. Not only is the genre organized by the principle of community, but mothers tend to find that community among lines of genre as well. Too often, however, these similarities may be based on white, middle class, “patriarchal motherhood,” but Friedman also acknowledged that unusual, diverse, and cross-cultural connections among women can occur (352, 359). However, Webb and Lee argue, “Mommy blogs were never developed to appeal to everyone but rather to fellow mothers in similar circumstances” (248).

Mommy blogs as a genre take into account the context of a situation. Joseph Comprone defined rhetoric “as focused on situation ... [it] leads directly to an understanding of text making as essentially the dual act of comprehending the context of situation and developing strategies for managing textual production” (103). By accounting for context, mommy blogs develop strategies for mothers to manage their own contextual situations. Mommy blogs have



sprung up through what scholars call rhetorical exigence, which “causes a group of speakers, readers, and writers . . . to function as a social network and to produce texts that address each other within a consistent, systematic framework” (103). Such rhetorical action is a way of solving the problems and addressing the ambivalence present in the motherhood experience.

One specific example of community acting to address and assuage the guilt, ambivalence, and pressure of perfection in motherhood occurred on *Girl's Gone Child*. Previously, I outlined Woolf's guilt over not planning the perfect birthday party for her daughter. Follow-up blog posts to that expression of guilt led to redemption. First, Woolf responds to her own blog post with a post called “Screw a Plan.” It features one picture of her daughter Fable presumably at her birthday party. She is flanked by children and is wearing a pink construction paper hat with sparkly letters that say “Fable.” She wears a wide smile, with squinty eyes and pure joy radiating from her face. This photo has no caption, nor does it need one. It shows, through the rebellion, that having a planned birthday party does not matter, for Woolf's daughter is happy anyway. The results of the party serve as redemption for Woolf.

Second, Woolf's redemption comes through the community of blog comments and the willingness to rebel against idealistic motherhood. After the first post, in which Woolf denigrated herself for perceived failures, her blog followers rallied, using several rhetorical techniques to assuage her guilt. One commenter said:

I love being present with my child, but when it comes to planning, I have a million great ideas . . . but struggle to ever make these ideas reality. I try to remind myself that my family would rather have me present than running around like a crazy lady . . . it's a struggle to convince myself that I'm not screwing this up. (Jenny H.)

This effort to connect creates identification and may have signaled to Woolf that her guilty thinking is flawed in some ways.

Another comment from onlyconnect said, “[A] refreshing change . . . from all the mommy blogs with ‘themes’ for their kid's birthday party . . . Moms are all different. Not everyone wants to do that, and if that's not thing [sic], you're no less of a mom.” In a similar fashion, Kelly expressed admiration for Woolf by saying, “I'm in awe of your ability to parent in a way that makes your children feel secure and loved and supported.” She explained that her mother had created picture-perfect planned parties; however, they do not have a meaningful connection with one another. She made the point that connecting with one's children does not require fancy parties, or, symbolically, living up to an ideal version of motherhood. Lastly, jen P wrote, “please son't [sic] beat yourself

up for not being some '50s mythic super-mom type." All of these women, in their own way, are creating redemption for Woolf by downplaying her guilt and identifying with her anxiety.

They engage in feminine rhetoric, finding similarities and engaging in a community-level consciousness raising, to lead to enlightenment and redemption. We see that "identity can be influenced by the performance itself" (Webb and Lee 246). The bloggers, the readers, and all mothers can experience redemption through community by engaging in Woolf's performance of motherhood as it appears publicly. Friedman described this as a way for mothers to acknowledge community and shift "their own narratives in response. This response . . . emerges as the isolation of motherhood—especially non-normative motherhood—is interrupted by the virtue of the relationality of mommybloggers" (*Mommyblogs* 82). Woolf's series of blog posts is one example of redemption from isolation and guilt, and it shows at the individual level how community and rebellion as organizing principles function within the genre of mommy blogs.

This online rebellion for mothers through resisting norms and allowing themselves leeway is explained by Friedman as a result of the cyborg and the queer. First, the idea of cyborg is represented in the "Cyberfeminist Manifesto," which declared to be "rupturing the symbolic from within" (cited in *Mommyblogs* 24). We see this through the way mommy bloggers vocalize guilt and anger, highlight domestic and maternal activities and rhythms as important and worthy of validation, speak openly about loss, and reject professional writing prescriptions in favor of motherhood ethos and connection with a lay audience through a conversational and humorous tone. Second, queer theory applies to mommy blogs because it is "an act of resistance" (26). It recognizes that individual subjects can be destabilized and that identity is performative and practiced (114). By viewing mommy blogs through these lenses, we see the possibilities for women to challenge norms and statuses that do not work in favor of their lived experience as mothers.

While ultimately these top ten mommy bloggers reinforce and live many norms of whiteness, heterosexuality, and patriarchy, they approach these issues in "ways that challenge or at least trouble in some way 'natural' and reliable notions" (*Mommyblogs* 116). They seem to recognize that motherhood is messy and contradictory, especially through inflexible social categories, and resist stereotypical representations of their lives, despite very much living the norms. They have "shifted [motherhood] from a starkly defined enterprise to one more open to contradiction and ambiguity" (118). They demand individual consideration for their experiences, even if others share those experiences or perspectives, because blogging as life writing acknowledges the uniqueness of the individual and her ability to find her own way while engaging in dialogue with others.

Mommy blogs additionally serve as a way of recognizing the work that

mothers do, as we know that when work is feminized or domestic, it is often discounted (Thompson and Rothschild; Kynell; Durack). Cynthia Haller wrote, in her analysis of North Carolina Canning Clubs from 1912-1916, “Reports of work, then, appear to play an important role in the politics of recognition” (283). Similarly, mommy blogs serve as reports of work, legitimizing the home as a workplace and highlighting the issues women face as worthy of discussion and organization. We know that blogging “provides validation” (Friedman, *Mommyblogs* 11). From this perspective, we not only recognize women’s concerns, but we come to understand the depth of the work they do as mothers and just how complicated it can be in practice. Documenting that work then becomes important in recognizing mother work, and mommy blogs as a genre accomplish this legitimization.

## Conclusion

The genre of mommy bloggers has specific substantive and stylistic characteristics that lead to the organizing principles of community and rebellion. The features I have identified may not explain or organize every mommy blog, for the genre is large and messy, but the blogs I examined give us a view of the features of mommy blogging and of what makes these bloggers successful. Status as a genre for mommy blogs opens up legitimacy in the blogging world, but also works to legitimize their status as writing and mothering professionals.

Motherhood is often a site of guilt because of cultural trends like new momism (Douglas and Michaels). However, mommy blogs serve as places of community and rebellion, where the bloggers, the readers, and all mothers (and parents) can experience connection through community and empowerment. This cycle reflects polyvocality, of which Kenneth Gergen wrote that “the boundary between author and reader is diminished,” and “when the author speaks from experience I am likely to participate as an equal” (121). Women participate in a community that allows them to conceive of themselves in multiple ways and allows for identity building through rejection of norms and favoring of the individual lived experience. Mommy blogs are a genre that rebels against ideal forms of motherhood by revealing and promoting a more nuanced and multi-dimensional version of women’s lives. Mommy blogs display the raw realities of parenting by diminishing boundaries and sharing experiences with readers.

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