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Mothers Who Blog: An Exploration of Advice, Personal Stories and Motherhood Online

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Graduate Program in Anthropology
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Abstract

Parenting blogs and websites reveal the ways that parents are using the Internet as a resource for information, advice and personal stories. Through two in depth analyses of the format and content of parenting blogs and websites, this thesis examines how the space and shape of these sites creates a foundation for sharing content, and looks at the actual stories, advice and writing that women online are engaging with. The Internet is a new kind of resource for parents to access that was not available for previous generations, and this research shows how integrated the online world is in our everyday lives and practices. Parenting blogs and websites are public spaces where women can discuss the ins and outs of parenting, their own personal connections to it, and the advice they want to share with others. This thesis explores how parenting blogs and websites present a complicated and messy view of motherhood, while also providing a public space for these discussions to take place on.

Keywords

Blogosphere, The Internet, Motherhood, Virtual, Mommyblogs

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Chapter 1 An Introduction to the Parenting Blog

1 Introduction

In 2013, the creator of blogs, or the “founding father of the contemporary blogosphere” Jason Kottke announced that blogging was “dead” (Caraher and Reinhard 2015). Kottke was really arguing that other areas of the Internet have taken over what used to be the blogosphere, or the set of blogs and bloggers that exist online (Caraher and Reinhard 2015). Blogging was once a popular practice, yet in the age of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, blogging is no longer a prominent form of sharing and interacting on the Internet. Despite this pronouncement, blogs continue to exist, and are still popular although they are now used in different ways than they were five or ten years ago. Parenting blogs are a strong example of this. Parenting blogs allow mothers to have a space where they can discuss their lives and how they parent, whether they are writing about a specific problem they are having with their child’s sleep schedule, or a parenting style or camp that they are incorporating into their childrearing. Parenting blogs are connected to social media sites, and other online resources to create a wider net of websites that parents can engage with. In this thesis I will explore different facets of parenting blogs through both the format and content, as well as the other kinds of online resources that are available to parents to show how blogging is still very much alive, especially within the world of parenting blogs, or the “mamasphere” (Friedman and Calixte 2009).

Blogs or weblogs are personalized websites where the author, or blogger, can share writing, photos, gifs¹ and other forms of media with a wider audience. Wilson, who writes about women on the Internet, defines a blog as “an online journal of the blogger’s opinions, thoughts and interests” (2005:51). Blogs are not necessarily personal in the sense that bloggers do not always post information about their lives on them, for blogs can also be centered around the blogger’s expertise in a certain area of knowledge or interests in certain topics, such as fandoms² or politics. Lu and Hsiao, who conducted research on how men and women use blogs differently, argue that “Weblogs are not only an ideal medium for experts who wish to broadcast their expertise to a large audience but are also suitable for other individuals who wish to share their information, stories or personal messages with small outside groups” (Lu and Hsiao 2009:136). Blogs are websites where people can document stories, advice, news, media, opinions and so on. There is an infinite number of possibilities for what bloggers can write about.

Parenting blogs are outlets of information and stories that allow for mothers to either post or read anecdotes, ideas, tips and recommendations. The format usually allows readers to converse with the writers of blogs if they choose to, and to interact with them on social media sites as many bloggers also add links to their Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest accounts. Parenting blogs are sites of connection. They represent an online resource that is potentially interactive and that can cover a wide expanse of parenting tips, tricks and thoughts. This thesis will explore parenting blogs in a number of

¹ A gif (or graphic interchange format) is an animated graphic file that is popular on websites and social media sites (Ince 2013a).

² A fandom is a group of people who are fans of, or keenly interested in a specific kind of text or media, like a band or television series.

ways, comparing parenting blogs to parenting websites, and categorizing blogs differently depending on their content, format and who creates and maintains them.

1.1 The Mamasphere

Parenting blogs are often labeled “mommyblogs” by people both inside and outside the mamasphere. Friedman argues that mommyblog is a patronizing term, but one that is unavoidable since it has become the label for parenting blogs run by women, and in some cases has been re-appropriated by women who blog about being a mother (Friedman 2013:10). In this way, it is hard to get away from the term, especially when research, like mine, focuses solely on blogs created by women, and not just *parenting* blogs created by both mothers and fathers. Although I use mommyblog, I understand that not all bloggers appreciate or identify with the term, but I also acknowledge how deeply the label has permeated discussions of parenting blogs both inside the mamasphere and by others outside of it.

To begin my research, I needed a definition of what a parenting blog actually consisted of. Parmaksiz, who studies parenting blogs in Turkey, defines mommyblogs as “online journals written by women documenting the experiences of motherhood” (Parmaksiz 2012:127). On these sites women discuss the ins and outs of parenting, what it is like to be a mother and the challenges that they face. Although they are called mommyblogs or parenting blogs, Friedman argues these sites often explore areas other than parenting, discussing topics such as relationships, fashion, politics, activism and popular culture (Friedman 2013:9). In my own research, I found over 400 terms in the twenty-four blogs that I analyzed for content that did not directly connect to parenting or children, including civic duties, fitness, wine and self-care. Parenting blogs become

spaces where women can write about their own lives, feelings and thoughts separate from their lives as mothers while also sharing narratives connected specifically to parenting.

Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that I found parenting blogs run by men, and posts on mommyblogs aimed at fathers; I also found a small male readership for some of the blogs with comments that were written by men. The question arises: does the mamasphere include blogs written by fathers, and what kind of presence do men have on mommyblogs? This is a complicated matter as the blogs I found were not all strictly aimed at mothers, even though they were mostly or fully run by women. I found a few blogs where the husband of the blogger would write guest posts³, or sites that would have the occasional male blogger. The topic of fatherhood was one that appeared in a few places, including one blog that aimed several posts at a male audience. For example, one blog post explains what new fathers can do for their partners after the birth of their first child, stating:

Well, yes, women undergo some serious hormonal and bodily changes during pregnancy. But, fathers are not completely excluded. They might not feel physical changes, but mentally, there is some serious turmoil taking place. When you first hold a baby in your hand, the feeling of fatherhood awakens within your mind; giving a completely new feeling. After all the drama and waiting, your child is finally here. Mothers, however, need some extra care, and that's when fathers come in.

This shows how the world of mommyblogs is complex and not only made by or for women, despite its label as the 'mamasphere'.

For my own research I studied blogs made up of female bloggers because my work explores how motherhood is presented and engaged online, yet this is not the only

³ Bloggers will often publish posts on their blog written by other people. Writers can submit posts to the blogger, or sometimes a blogger will have a friend or family member write a post for their blog. These are generally known as "guest posts."

story present in the parenting blogosphere. While I was collecting blogs to analyze, I found it challenging to figure out when sites were solely or mostly run by women, and dozens of blogs were left out of my sets because they were either run by men or had mostly male contributors. This was especially true with blogs that were run by larger teams or companies. Although my research on parenting blogs, like that of so many who came before me, (Friedman and Shana L. Calixte 2009; Friedman 2013; Johnson 2015; O'Connor and Madge 2004; Parmaksiz 2012; Song et al. 2012; Van Cleaf 2014) focuses solely on the stories of women who blog about parenthood, it is important to note that there are men who read and sometimes create parenting blogs. The boundaries of different kinds of parenting blogs are not strictly defined by gender. Despite that, the majority of parenting blogs *are* run by women (thus the name mommyblog), which is a pattern found on other spaces of the Internet that focus on parenthood. Tratner, who worked with parenting chatrooms, argues that the majority of participants on parenting websites are women, a view confirmed by a Pew Research report that states women are more likely than men to use social media as a parenting resource (Duggan et al. 2015:19; Tratner 2016:173).

1.2 Accessibility and Diversity

The Internet allows its users to share ideas, thoughts, writing and opinions in a way that is more accessible to a wider range of potential authors than traditional forms of publishing (Friedman 2013:43). Blogs are accessible because of their easily manipulated template and format, especially on blogging websites like Blogger or Tumblr. For Friedman, this is important for women because they are able to self-publish things that otherwise would not get into the public sphere (Friedman 2013:43). Wilson also

discusses accessibility in the blogosphere, arguing that interaction on blogs has allowed women to have a voice online, and one that does not need to mimic popular ideas or opinions (Wilson 2005:51). The blogosphere comes across as an equal space for all voices, as it creates more opportunities for bloggers to discuss issues that are not generally a part of public discourse. Yet Wilson argues there is also a hierarchy that exists on this plane (Wilson 2005:52). This hierarchy “reflects existing social mores,” meaning women have more opportunities to share their voices online, although what they say may not necessarily be considered important in a wider public discourse. (Wilson 2005:52). Although Wilson was writing in 2005, this pattern continues twelve years later, as can be seen in the following discussion of the narratives that are highlighted on the Internet and those that seem to be left out.

Parenting blogs do not represent every parent’s reality or perspective. Friedman argues that parenting blogs represent a privileged group of mothers who have access to the Internet (Friedman 2013: 17). She states, “While the mamasphere provides a broad and diverse picture of an extremely wide range of mothers, an extraordinary number of mothering experiences are not documented there due to the digital divide,” which is related to class, who has access to the Internet and even age, as mommybloggers tend to be younger (Friedman 2013: 17). The roles of one’s education and literacy levels are also important to online access. This means that not every parent may have the access to get online, although the Internet is becoming more widely accessible to many people across North America. Another factor that may hinder a woman’s ability to blog is time. Blogging takes up a lot of time, and unless a blogger is making revenue from it, she might not be able to maintain a blog and also work and/or take care of her children

(Lawrence 2009:135). There are limitations on the stories that are told on these sites, as they are unable to present all sides of motherhood.

Based on their experiences online, Friedman and Calixte argue that the mamasphere tends to be homogenous, often representing white, middle class parents, and does not often tackle issues of race or homophobia (Friedman and Calixte 2009: 29). Popular bloggers tend to be white, which creates an assumption of whiteness on these sites, while these bloggers also do not tend to raise issues of race on their blogs (Connors 2009: 100). In my content analysis neither racism nor homophobia appeared, and issues for LGBTQ+ parents appeared only once. Calixte and Johnson argue that there are representations of marginalized women on these sites, but they are not often acknowledged, or easily found, which reflects the online hierarchy Wilson discusses (Calixte and Johnson 2009:77; Wilson 2005:52). The world of parenting blogs is not completely made up of white, middle class, heterosexual women, yet these blogs are often on the forefront of the mamasphere, giving it the appearance of only presenting one side of motherhood.

It is difficult to find parenting blogs that represent marginalized groups. When Barry-Kesler became pregnant, she looked on the Internet for other pregnant lesbian bloggers, but the results were scarce (Barry-Kesler 2009:141). There were pregnant lesbian bloggers in the mamasphere, but they were difficult to find, and did not appear in Google searches of parenting sites (Barry-Kesler 2009:141-142). Despite this lack of diversity found within parenting blogs, or at least popular ones, Friedman argues that mommyblogs do “give a voice, and foster conversation and participation in a community” (Friedman 2013: 11). Blogs are spaces where women can discuss topics that

are not normally seen in mainstream publishing, and also where women can talk about challenging topics, which will be explored further in Chapter 4. It is clear that there are bloggers out there representing the voices of those who do not fit into a picture of the heterosexual, white, middle class mother, but their blogs are sometimes harder to find. Barry-Kesler herself has created a blog full of links to other blogs and resources for lesbian mothers, and parents in the LGBTQ+ community (Barry-Kesler 2009: 143). Not all the bloggers I found were middle class white women, yet my work does not represent the voices of all mothers, nor does it relay the voices of all bloggers in the mamasphere. To increase research in this area, studies in the future would benefit from exploring the roles that race, socioeconomic status and privilege play in the world of parenting blogs.

1.3 Theoretical Background

I will base this study of online parenting blogs on two frameworks. I will use the concept of virtuality as discussed by Bonnie Nardi and the theory of “self-presentation” which stems from the work of Erving Goffman (Goffman 1959; Nardi 2015). These two frameworks were major influences for both my data collection and analysis. While Nardi’s concept of virtuality relates to online activity, Goffman’s theories of self-presentation can be shaped to online presentations of the self.

As I am discussing an online space, as opposed to the “real” world, virtuality is a key part of my analysis of parenting blogs. The term is examined and reworked by Nardi in her article of the same title (Nardi 2015). Nardi defines virtuality as “human activity mediated through multiple digital technologies” (Nardi 2015:16). The idea of multiple digital technologies is important to my research. Although I focus mainly on parenting blogs and websites, I also ran across a network of other kinds of sites, especially social

media sites, which were interconnected with blogs, and used by both readers and bloggers. For example, in a few of the blogs that I analyzed bloggers would link to other resources, often news outlets, to share different perspectives and advice with their readers. Blogs do not exist in isolation on the Internet.

A significant aspect of the Internet is its relative novelty. Nardi argues that this means the Internet allows for, “forms of socializing not possible in the real world” (Nardi 2015:18). A large part of my research is built upon the idea that blogs are creating new spaces for interaction and also for the sharing of information and resources that was not present for the previous generation of parents. The Internet allows mothers to look up questions that they have any time of day or night, and to read other personal accounts of motherhood from women going through similar circumstances. The Internet has created a new resource for parents which becomes integrated into a larger support system made up of friends, family members, doctors and parenting books.

The next theoretical perspective that influenced this thesis is “presentation of self.” Initially this concept comes from Goffman, who argues that when people are around others they act in a certain way to express themselves and manage an “impression” to the people they are with (1959:2). In other words, he discusses the performance that individuals give when they are in an interaction with others both in how they consciously and unconsciously act (1959:15). This presentation is connected to language as well as non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions (Miller 1995:4; Papacharissi 2002:645). There are two spaces in self-presentation that people, or actors, exist in, and where we act differently: these include the “front” and “back” or “backstage” (Goffman 1959:22, 111). The first space is where we act around other

individuals (1959:22). The second place is where we act when we are in private, or with people with whom we are intimate, and where we relax and prepare for a performance (111–112). Goffman’s theories relate directly to face-to-face interactions, yet they can be used to explore how people present themselves online, which has been examined by a number of different researchers (Bronstein 2013; Mazur and Kozarian 2010; Miller 1995; Papacharissi 2002; Trammell and Keshelashvili 2005).

Self-presentation is different on the Internet as interaction does not occur in the same way it does in face-to-face conversations. Miller argues that Goffman’s work is based on “the depth and richness of everyday interaction” which is not the same on the Internet as it is offline because communication does not occur simultaneously and the “audience” of an interaction cannot see the performer (1995:2). Yet self-presentation still occurs on the Internet because a lot of online interaction takes place in a public space where bloggers present themselves to their readers through their writing (1995:2). Unlike mass media, there is the possibility of interaction, which is what the self-presentation hinges on, for bloggers are not just presenting themselves to a nameless, faceless audience who cannot speak back. Instead, readers can usually choose to comment on posts or contact the blogger privately.

Papacharissi discusses personal home pages⁴ and self-presentation, and argues that creating impressions online is about “manipulating” an online platform using both verbal and other cues, like images, to present oneself. The better one is at this manipulation, the better one’s website will be received (2002:644). She argues that it is

⁴ A personal home page is a website dedicated to sharing aspects of one’s “personality” or personal life online (Papacharissi 2002:643)

easier to make one's impressions and expressions (or the presentation you give, and the one that is received by the audience) line up online partially because there are fewer nonverbal cues to worry about (2002:645). While you can use nonverbal cues, such as posting a gif, there is a lot more control over them than there would be in face-to-face communication. Body language and facial expressions are not factors that change the impression that you are trying to create online, unless you are posting a video of yourself, and even then you have control over the video's editing.

I will use the concept of self-presentation to explore different facets of the Internet, including the format and the challenging discussions that occur on these sites. This lens will allow me to better understand the messages that are found on parenting blogs in both the content found in posts, and the format of blogs to see how bloggers are expressing themselves, and what impressions they may leave with readers. Alongside virtuality, self-presentation allows me to better understand the mamasphere, and the actions and interactions that take place in it.

1.4 Anthropology on the Internet – Methodology

My research is based on two main analyses: an exploration of the format of parenting blogs and websites and a content analysis of major themes found within specific posts. Studying blogs can be challenging. Bortree argues that it is impossible to figure out how many blogs there are, or how many are active at any moment because there is a constant shifting within the blogosphere (cited in Trammell and Keshelashvili 2005:7). This was something I noticed as I collected my data. During the process of my research, four blogs I had been looking at had either been taken down or hacked since I had first found them. Another blog had completely changed its format when I returned to

analyze it, only a few weeks after adding it to one of my sets. The blogosphere, and Internet more generally, is a constantly moving and changing entity, and there is a lot of fluidity between blogs and within them. This is an added challenge of researching the Internet, for a researcher will never be completely up to date with everything happening online. One way that researchers can combat this constant shifting, to some extent, is to only research one specific area of the Internet, as I am doing with parenting blogs (Trammell and Keshelashvili 2005:7). Even in one area (and the world of parenting blogs is not a small one) there is constant change, and so the data presented here represents a segment of the parenting blogs that existed in the summer of 2017.

To find blogs to analyze, I performed a keyword search on Google using nine different combinations of keywords related to motherhood and blogs. My first set of eighty-seven blogs which I refer to as “personal blogs,” were all run by mothers and not companies or professionals, were based in North America, and had parenting as their main focus. During this collection, as will be discussed further in Chapter 1, I found it challenging to sort out what was considered a parenting blog and what was not. To broaden my sample of blogs, I then repeated the same keyword search and collected the websites that did not make it into my first set. My keyword search was influenced by the work of Trainer et al (2016), who looked at blogs related to weight loss. They also used a similar technique of searching for blogs on Google through a number of different keywords (2016:524). I used this method because it is similar to the way that a parent may use a search engine to search for blogs on their own terms, and I wanted to try and replicate that process, but on a much more massive scale.

In my second search, the requirements for the blogs and websites I collected changed slightly. The websites still had to be written predominantly by women (although there were some that had a few male contributors or editors), had to be based in North America, and had to be centered around parenting, but they did not necessarily have to be a blog. From my second keyword search, I gathered 171 websites and then sorted them into a further three sets: the second set was made up of websites that I refer to as “parenting websites”, and the third set was made of blogs run by larger companies, professionals, organizations or had a large staff working on the blog, which I call “corporate/professional blogs.” I also found a fourth group of sites which was made up of websites that fit my criteria, but which were not easily categorized as either a blog or a website. Generally, this last set was made up of websites that functioned like blogs, but did not label themselves as such, and did not necessarily resemble blogs in all aspects of their format. For this reason, I do not discuss this fourth set in my analysis, as there were very few sites in this set and it was made up of websites that did not fit in the other categories. My sets of personal blogs, parenting websites and corporate/professional blogs became the basis for my analysis.

My format analysis was conducted by sampling every third website from my three main sets, and then inspecting each site for twenty-two different format characteristics, including whether the site enabled comments, if they used tags, if you could search the blog, and the space of time between their most recent fifteen posts. I also checked to see whether the blog or website was active, and how long it had been active. This analysis allowed me to gain an understanding of how blogs were set up, which I was able to connect to some of the writing and content found on these sites.

In my thematic analysis, I looked at the actual content of parenting blogs and websites. From this examination, I sampled every tenth blog or website from my three sets, giving me twenty-four sites to explore. I read through the most recent twenty posts from each website and assigned themes based on the content of each specific post. For example, if a blogger wrote a post giving advice to new mothers on breastfeeding, I would assign the themes “newborn,” “new parents,” “breastfeeding,” “tips” and so forth based on what I read. Overall, I found over 1400 themes spanning from health to toys, and fatherhood to social media. Alongside finding themes, I also categorized each post based on its function, or what kind of post it was in general. The example post I gave above would be labelled as “advice.” If the blogger opened up about her own connection to breastfeeding, then it would also be categorized as “personal” and if on top of that it reviewed a specific kind of nursing bra, then it would also be categorized with “review.” Finally, in my content analysis, I also collected the tags and categories that the bloggers placed on their posts. Bloggers may choose to tag their posts with words summarizing their writing or promoting the major themes. Readers can then search the blog by tag to find similarly themed posts. Along with my keyword searches and exploration of the format, this is the methodology that created both my 3 sets of blogs and websites and formed the basis of my analysis.

1.5 Summary of Chapters

This thesis is split into five chapters, each having several sections within them. In Chapter 2 I examine the format of parenting blogs and websites and explore the differences between my sets. The format reveals how the site’s creators want to present themselves and their messages online, and reflects the connections they may have with

their readers. This means I am also able to look at the different motivations and focuses that website creators and bloggers may have about their sites. I look at how the format affects different aspects of a blog or website, from the intimacy that is created between bloggers and their readers through the different abilities readers have to interact with the blogger to the reasons for why corporate/professional blogs tend to have a shorter lifespan online.

In my third chapter, I look at the advice that is shared online. Advice is one of the most prominent themes found on parenting blogs and websites and reflects different practices and values of bloggers and contributors. This is because advice can show how bloggers are parenting in their own lives, the different parenting styles that they follow and the reflections they have on these practices. Advice is often related to parents and their experiences with motherhood, yet readers can also get advice from specialists through the corporate/professional blogs which tend to focus more on children. This chapter reflects on the specifics of advice online, how it is shared and what it says more generally about parenting blogs.

In my fourth chapter, I examine the personal challenges and candor found online. Personal stories are found throughout my sets, and ironically appear less on personal blogs and more on parenting websites and corporate/professional blogs. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that personal bloggers' desires for sponsorships may be influencing what they write about. Even though personal challenges appear less frequently on personal blogs, they are still present. This analysis highlights how blogs and websites allow women to have access to a public space where they can discuss

difficult moments of parenting, and of their lives more generally, as well as the positive, joyful moments.

In my final chapter, I reflect on what parenting blogs can tell us about parenting and the Internet, situate my research into the broader literature and suggest future pathways for this research to take. Parenting blogs and websites have become a public resource for mothers to access when they need information, inspiration, and even perhaps support through the shared stories and advice found online. This shows how integrated the Internet is in our everyday practices and actions, especially when it comes to parenting.

Chapter 2 The Platform

2 Introduction

Blogs, like any kind of writing or publishing, have a certain defining format. For example, unlike social media sites such as Facebook, blogs are more open and accessible to a public readership. Readers do not necessarily have to be a member of a blogging website to gain access to the blog, and bloggers do not need to “friend” readers to be able to connect with them, although some private blogs may require readers to gain permission from the blogger to access their content. All of the blogs I analyzed were open to the public. Blogs in general are made up of posts, which are contained pieces of writing that can include other kinds of media, like photos. Blogs often have comments enabled so that readers can interact with the blogger and other readers on specific posts. Most blogs have an “about” page that provides some background information on the blogger, and some blogs contain advertisements, earning the blogger money whenever these links are clicked on. Since the popularity of social media has been on the rise, blogs often have links to the social media sites of the bloggers, as well as the ability to share posts on different social media sites, connecting blogs to a larger sphere of the Internet.

In this chapter I will be exploring what the format reveals about a blog, focusing on online interaction, and the role that time plays on blogs in terms of blog activity. By examining the format, I am able to set up a base for understanding the actual content on parenting blogs, as the two are interconnected. This serves as a foundation for understanding how blog content works in the following two chapters.

2.1 The Format of Blogs

In her discussion of virtuality, Nardi examines the concept of “affordances,” or the potential that digital technology creates for its users based on the ways it has been set up (2015:18–19). This chapter examines different affordances found on blogs and websites to see how these characteristics allow for different online activities for both readers and bloggers. This chapter also looks at the interaction that can take place on blogs, and what affordances lead to this interaction, as well as the role that time plays in both the formatting of blogs, and in how they are used. By exploring the lifespan of a blog, as well as the time between posts, one can discern the blogger’s relationships with their own blog and their readers, as well as how readers may connect with a blog or website. These two aspects of format will be key instruments to uncovering the potential that lies within parenting blogs as resources for parents, and spaces where mothers can discuss important issues and stories related to parenthood.

By examining the format and space of a blog, one gets the sense of how these sites are used by bloggers and readers alike. For example, a blog that allows readers to link their own blog or website to their comment on a post allows for more links to be made between bloggers and readers, and connects blogs with one another. Although blogs follow a similar format, the specific characteristics differ from one blog to another and can differ greatly from parenting websites. This means various kinds of blogs and websites are also used differently by readers and bloggers or website facilitators. Alongside the discussion of time and interaction, this chapter also examines the three distinct sets of blogs that I categorized during my research and the differences between each of these groups regarding format.

A blog's format reveals the kinds of action that are possible for readers and bloggers to engage with online, and thus also shows how content is presented within the blogosphere. Chapters 3 and 4 explore two major themes found in parenting blogs: advice and personal stories. Although these chapters focus on the content of blogs, the format is intertwined into how these topics are discussed and how readers are able to interact with them. The next section of this chapter will explore the three research sets that I created from the blogs and websites that I analyzed to see the differences between each kind of blog and website.

2.2 My Research Set

My analysis consists of the three different sets of blogs and websites I collected through my keyword searches. Set 1 consists of personal blogs run by the women who also create the blog's content. Bloggers in this case may monetize their blog through advertisements or sponsors, but they generally run the blog on their own and the site itself is not owned by a larger organization, like a company or institution. Although some blogs in this set had multiple contributors, they did not have any staff taking care of the website as that was left to the contributors themselves. Set 1 also did not contain any blogs that were connected to websites of professionals or specialists, such as therapists. Although some of these women were professionals, the blogs in this set focused on the stories, advice and knowledge of the bloggers because of their experience as mothers and as women before their expertise in a certain field, like psychology. For example, there was a blogger who was also a dietitian, yet the main focus of her posts was on her own personal stories of being a mother.

Set 2 consists of websites that focus on parenting but are not blogs themselves. They may resemble or have a similar format to blogs, such as having separately written posts, however they are not blogs, and are not labeled as such. Parenting websites function like online magazines, with articles and posts updated frequently. They are generally owned by larger media companies. For example, there was a website in this sample that was run by a Canadian television station. These websites exist on a larger scale than a blog. The posts and articles are written by a sizable team of staff, and the website is usually updated multiple times a day, whereas blogs may update once a day, once every few days or even once every few weeks. These websites often use bloggers as contributors to their articles. This means that a notable or popular blogger may write posts or articles for these sites, although parenting websites also present the writing of journalists and research specialists alike. This is also a smaller set size than personal and corporate/professional blogs with only twenty-nine websites, as there were fewer of these sites in the results of my keyword searches.

The third category of websites in my research is harder to categorize than the previous sets. This grouping of websites is made up of all the blogs that were not personal blogs because they were owned by larger companies, institutions, non-profit organizations, professionals or had a full staff of writers and editors. These websites have amassed into something larger than a personal blog run by a woman or small group of facilitators, yet they are still blogs. The key difference between the two kinds of blogs exists in who owns and runs the websites themselves. Blogs with about pages will usually let the reader know who the blog is run by and if there are multiple contributors. For example, the corporate/professional blogs that are run by a large staff of writers will often

have a blurb about the creator of the blog, and then will give smaller bios on the other main contributors and editors.

Personal and corporate/professional blogs often resemble each other. For example, professionals from Set 3 may also be mothers, and bloggers from Set 1 may also be specialists, however it depends on how the blog itself is run and framed. If the blog is about a woman's personal stories and advice on parenting, and she occasionally mentions her position as a therapist or psychologist, then I assigned the blog to Set 1 as a personal blog. Yet, if the blog is run by a sleep specialist who writes as an expert and links her website to her professional work, but also adds personal anecdotes about her own experience as a mother, then I assigned the blog to Set 3, as a corporate or professional blog. The descriptions found in the about pages are also important in discerning the differences between personal and professional bloggers. For example, specialists will often cite their experience in their area of expertise on their about page, while personal bloggers may do the same but will also reveal information about themselves and their families more readily, as this is the center of the blog. One personal blogger describes herself as "a health and parenting writer, editor and mom to three busy boys." She writes about her own knowledge in health, but also gives you information on who she is as a mother. The about section for one of the professional bloggers, on the other hand, has three parts to it, one where she writes about her "story", a second about her practice specifically and then finally a section on common issues that her clients face. In the section on her story, the first four paragraphs are dedicated to her life as a psychologist, before she gives more personal details about who she is. The differences in

how bloggers frame themselves on these blogs are important indicators of whether they are personal or professional blogs.

The three sets of blogs and websites are the centre of my analysis and are representative of the variety of blogs and websites that exist as resources for parents on the Internet. The blogs and websites in these categories are not always easily discerned from one another, and the boundaries of what constitutes a parenting blog and what does not becomes blurred and fluid. There were themes found in my content analysis that were found in every set, such as food, summer, and travel, as well as formatting characteristics that appear in each kind of blog and website, such as comments, tags and advertisements, yet there are also major differences found between all three categories.

As my three categories did not contain the same number of blogs and websites, for they were not evenly distributed within the keyword searches, each set used for the format analysis is a slightly different size. For my format analysis, I examined twenty-nine of the eighty-seven personal blogs from Set 1, nine of the twenty-nine parenting websites from Set 2, and forty-one of the 130 corporate/professional blogs from Set 3. This next section will explore how the format of each set gives insight into the ways that interaction can take place within the mamasphere, as the format influences the ways that people are able to interact with a blog or with others online.

2.3 Interaction on Parenting Blogs

The blog is designed to allow for different kinds of information to be shared, and for specific forms of interaction to take place. Returning to the concept of affordances, the design of parenting blogs allows for a multitude of user possibilities, and thus illuminates the kinds of interactions and stories that exist on these sites. For example,

when a blog post can be shared onto social media sites (see below), it widens the audience of that post while simultaneously allowing readers to share the post with their own personal circle of friends or followers online. Such affordances point towards the potential for interaction on multiple blogging sites.

Interaction is clearly an important aspect of blogging, and there are many ways to interact on blogs, such as commenting on posts, sharing posts to social media sites and directly contacting bloggers via email. Communication on these sites moves in a number of directions, from the blogger to the reader and vice versa, although the reader and blogger do not have equal voices on the site. Bloggers have the largest voice on their own blogs, authoring their content, whereas readers have limited ways of communicating to bloggers and other readers. The vast majority of personal and corporate/professional blogs enabled comments from their readers on at least some of their posts, with twenty-eight out of twenty-nine personal blogs from Set 1 and thirty-nine of forty-one corporate/professional blogs from Set 3 allowing comments. More direct contact can be made between readers and bloggers as bloggers often post their own contact information on their websites as well, with only five of all seventy blogs from Sets 1 and 3 having no contact information at all. The vast majority of bloggers made their email available on their blogs. As email is private, readers can connect in a more intimate or personal way if they choose to do so.

Social media allows bloggers and readers to communicate, and bloggers will often post links to either their own social media sites or accounts connected to the blog for readers to follow. Blogs often have their own Facebook page which their readers can like for updates, and to stay connected to the blog in another way. When figuring out my

methodology I knew that I wanted to explore parenting blogs as interactive websites connected to a wide web of other sites, returning to the concept of “multiple digital technologies” (Nardi 2015:16). I did not want to view them in isolation, and although I am not able to analyze the websites linked to blogs on their own given the scope of this research, I wanted to highlight the importance of these convergences. Only five of the personal and corporate/professional blogs did not have any links to social media, and the most popular social media site linked to was Facebook. Most blogs allow readers to share posts to their own social media, with Facebook and Pinterest being the most popular. Caraher and Reinhard (2015) argue that social media sites help develop community building and maintenance on blogs by creating new spaces online for interaction. Studying convergence between websites is also found in Dalsgaard’s work, where he notes that many researchers have pushed for social media sites to be explored in relation to one another (2016:98–99).

At an earlier point in the history of blogging, blogrolls or lists of links to similar blogs, were an important staple of interaction within the blogosphere. Caraher and Reinhard (2015) argue this was important to community maintenance among blogs before social media existed. Blogrolls create a network of other blogs that readers may also choose to read, and they link bloggers with one another. Their use has shrunk significantly among current blogs; in Sets 1 and 3 I found ten out of seventy blogs used some sort of blogroll, however only three of those sites were still active, showing how the blogroll has become a rare occurrence. Caraher and Reinhard argue that comments overtook blogrolls as one of the most important ways that bloggers and readers communicate. They are a more direct way of communicating and interacting on these

sites and they can also create connections between blogs. Fifty of the seventy blogs in Sets 1 and 3 allowed commenters to share a link to their own website when commenting, while several more allowed commenters to share a link to their Facebook page.

The role comments play in interaction is highlighted by Dawn Friedman in one of her contributions to the 2009 anthology *Mothering and Blogging*. Friedman discusses how she did not initially want to allow comments on her first parenting blog, as she feared this would diminish its quality and create conflict. Finally, after a few years, she did enable comments and argues that it greatly improved her blog by adding “depth as well as breadth” to it (2009:39). She states that, “Giving more control to my readers promoted them to co-creator as they helped direct my narrative. Their comments have become part of my archives, stretching the conversation out in the discussions that run below entries” (2009:39). Allowing comments created an interaction between the blogger and readers that gave readers the chance to contribute to the content of the blog and brought more voices into the blog’s narratives.

While comments were common on blogs, I found that not all parenting websites enabled them. Although the majority of sites in all three sets had comments enabled, they appeared less frequently on parenting website with only five out of nine sites with comments, as interaction is less important on these websites. This is much lower than the high number of persona; and corporate/professional blogs with comments enabled. Although parenting websites may give readers contact information for getting in touch with the media company that runs the site, such as a phone number, there is generally no way of contacting specific contributors. These websites also share links to social media on their home page, but often it is the social media site for the whole company, magazine

or website. The social media accounts for individual writers can sometimes be found on the contributor page or in their individual bios, but not usually after articles, or on the website's home page. There is a distancing between the readers and writers. Generally, these websites work on a large scale, meaning interaction becomes less important and also less possible between individuals.

Caraher and Reinhard's research points out that on academic blogs, posts do not often get many comments (2015). This is a pattern that I also found on parenting blogs. Although most blogs had comments enabled, and had the potential for readers to interact on posts, many blogs had very few comments, and some did not have any in the fifteen posts that I analyzed. I noticed there was a common pattern wherein a number of blogs would have zero comments on the majority of their posts, but one or two posts would contain a very high number⁵ (see Table 1 in Appendix A). On other blogs, comments would be spread thinly throughout the site with most posts averaging zero comments, but some having two or three. There were a few blogs that elicited a higher number of comments across their posts (see Table 2 in Appendix A), and generally personal blogs had a higher number of comments than corporate/professional blogs. In fact, twenty-six of the forty-one corporate/professional blogs had an average of less than one comment per post, whereas only seven of the twenty-nine personal blogs had an average of the same. The differences in the number of comments point towards the different ways in which these blogs are read and interacted with. Comments appear to be more important

⁵ I often found that blog posts with an unusually high number of comments were due to the post containing some kind of contest that readers could enter into by commenting and not due to an intense conversation between readers.

on the more personal, or “traditional” blogs of Set 1, which run on a smaller scale than the corporate/professional blogs found in Set 3.

When looking at the low number of comments found throughout my sets, it is clear that engaging or interacting with others is not necessarily important to being a part of the readership of a blog. Unfortunately, statistics regarding a blog’s online traffic are not available on all of the blogs and so it was not possible to find out exactly how many readers were going through each blog post. The blogs that have one or two posts with a high number of comments, show that on those blogs there is a high number of readers (depending on the blog, there could be between thirty and a hundred comments on a popular post) who have at least looked at one post on the blog, but do not feel the need to comment on others. This means that readers are not necessarily interacting directly with the bloggers and other readers. Instead, there may be a high number of readers simply going on the websites just to read them, or perhaps to also share them onto their own social media sites.

Lurking is a term that has been commonly associated with readers who visit websites but do not interact (Johnson 2015:241) While there may be a large number of readers who do not comment on posts, the terminology of “lurking” does not necessarily work for parenting blogs. Baumer et al argue that lurking occurs on chatrooms, where there is a pretense of participation, because if no one added to the conversation, the chatroom would not function. A blog, on the other hand, does not need readers to comment for the blog to stay active, instead the blog is more dependent on the authorship of the blogger than a conversation between readers (Baumer, Sueyoshi, and Tomlinson

2011:4). Therefore, it is likely that there are a high number of readers who do not comment on blogs because conversation is not essential to their participation.

While the terminology of lurking may not apply, the examination of readers who do not participate directly on a website is very relevant to understanding readers and parenting blogs. Johnson, who looks at how first time mothers access health information online, argues that one does not need to participate to still feel connected to a website and states that it is possible to gain what she calls “invisible support” from reading advice or personal anecdotes online (2015:241). Parenting blogs can still impact readers who are not commenting or engaging with others. One woman interviewed by Orton-Johnson in her chapter from *Taking the Village Online: Mothers, Motherhood and Social Media* said that blogs gave her a “sense of solidarity” even though she did not necessarily interact with other mothers online (2016:22). Many of the personal and corporate/professional blogs contain personal stories as well as advice. Reading personal anecdotes about parenting may allow readers to connect with the blogger as they may have similar feelings or have gone through similar situations in their own lives. Readers may want to gain advice without having to disclose intimate details of their own experiences, which is possible on parenting blogs.

Although comment sections found on blogs are not often used by readers, they allow for the potential of interaction. There are readers who choose to comment on a post, speaking directly to the blogger and to other readers about how they feel about the content, or to share other resources about a specific area. The comment section, contact information of bloggers and links to external social media sites, give readers the potential to engage with bloggers and other readers as well as circles of people outside the blog,

yet there is no pressure to do so. One can be drawn into the world of mommyblogging simply through reading sites. The stories and advice shared on blogs are valuable in and of themselves, and interaction is not a necessity, but instead a supplementary aspect of the blogosphere. It is the potential for communication that gives blogs an openness. Their interactive format allows readers to know that they can directly connect with bloggers and other readers if they wish to do so, giving readers a freedom on blogging sites that is not found on every kind of website. The format of blogs influences the ways that readers and bloggers can use these sites, and can create the potential for interaction that does not exist in traditional print media, or in other online formats, like parenting websites, to the same extent.

2.4 Blogs and Temporality

In addition to interactivity, blogs have a temporal dimension, both in regard to how long they are active, as well as the frequency of posts. Time, at first, appears superfluous on the Internet as it is a place that can be accessed at any time of day or night, and interaction does not need to take place simultaneously. A person may respond to a comment on a post hours, days or even years after it has been put up, and blog posts themselves can be accessed at all times. This does not mean that time is unimportant on the Internet, just that time is significant in different ways on blogs.

The importance of time is evident in the different format characteristics of each blog. Not all of the blogs in my sets were active at the time of my research, and thus temporality can show variation in intensity and the duration of activity. My research was conducted in June of 2017, and at this time fifty-one out of my seventy-nine websites and blogs were still active. Nineteen were no longer active, and there were nine blogs from

Sets 1 and 3 that I was unsure of. It was difficult to tell if certain blogs were still active, as some blogs appear to update posts every six months, or even every few years.

Sometimes a blog will appear inactive for a few years before the blogger begins adding content to it again. Thus, I labeled some blogs in my sets as “unsure” when exploring whether or not they were active.

There was a difference in activity between my three sets. Every parenting website from Set 2 was active. This was not the case for my sets of blogs, as eighteen of the twenty-nine personal blogs in Set 1 were active, and twenty-four of the forty-one corporate/professional blogs from Set 3 were active (see Table 3 in Appendix A). Although inactive blogs were no longer being updated by the blogger, they were still found in my Google keyword searches. This means that readers may come across blogs that have been discontinued, and use older posts as resources. I did find that in the time between collecting blogs for Set 3, and analyzing them, several had been taken down, and their URLs could no longer be accessed, meaning not all blogs are accessible after they become inactive. Yet there were several that remained online as resources despite the blogger no longer updating them.

The parenting websites from Set 2 had no inactive websites because they would most likely be taken down if they were no longer being updated. They may also remain active because they do not rely on one blogger to create posts, but instead have a whole slew of staff and editors to keep the site running. Contributors on larger sites may come and go, but the website will continue to stay active because it is run by a larger company. Personal blogs are generally run by a small group of people, or by individuals who do not necessarily have the option of passing the blog onto someone else when they are no

longer able to write for it. Blogs from Set 1 are also personal, and so they represent the life and work of the blogger, as well as the life of the blogger's children whereas the websites are more general in their content, and thus articles and posts are not tied to their writers in the same way. This means it is easier to lose writers and gain new ones on parenting websites than on a personal blog.

The differences between Sets 1 and 3 point towards the various ways that they are used by both bloggers and readers. This is seen in the inactive blogs from both categories. In Set 1, six personal blogs were inactive, and from those six, four blogs had dates connected to their posts. The shortest-lived blog was only active for eight months, while the other three were all active for five to nine years. In Set 3 there was a much shorter lifespan for inactive blogs, as six out of the thirteen blogs (all inactive websites had dates attached to them) were only active for less than 18 months. The majority of the other blogs were five years or younger.

The shorter lifespan for inactive blogs from Set 3 may be because these sites are often supplementary to a larger website promoting the work of a professional, or company, with exception to the large blogs run by a staff. Professionals and companies may have experimented with a blog on their website to try and gain traffic or customers. Yet, as this is not the central focus of the website, they have less reason to maintain the site than a personal blogger. Personal blogs are directly connected to the lives of their creators, and are the central focus of their site. This may also motivate personal bloggers to blog more often, and to maintain their site for longer periods of time.

There was also a difference in the lifespan of blogs that were still active at the time of my research. The oldest active blog from Set 1 was created in 2004 and had been

active for over thirteen years. The oldest active blog from Set 3 was started in 2007 and had only been active for ten years. The majority of active blogs from Set 1 (thirteen out of fifteen) had been running for five or more years whereas just over half, or twelve twenty-two blogs from Set 3 had been active for five or more years (See Table 4 in Appendix A). There was a larger number of “new” blogs in Set 3, with four active blogs that were less than two years old, whereas only two of the blogs from Set 1 were active for less than five years.

As mentioned, bloggers in Set 1 may have more motivation to keep their blog active and updated because it is connected to their personal life, whereas blogs from Set 3 are generally the sideline of a larger website. A personal blog, however, is not connected to a company or professional’s work, but instead is the *raison d’être* of the website hosting the blog. Bloggers may have other jobs and commitments, but their blog represents a separate, all-encompassing project. If the main facilitator of personal blog were to stop blogging, the whole site would become inactive.

The timeline of activity within the mamasphere reflects the presence that parenting blogs still have on the Internet. Although there were not many recently created blogs in Set 1, many had been around for years and were still active. Not only were there active blogs, but many of those that are no longer being updated still have a presence online.

Time is also relevant when one looks at specific posts. The length of time between posts changes the ways in which bloggers and readers interact with a blog or website and indicates a further difference between parenting blogs and parenting websites. Most of the blogs in Sets 1 and 3 had dates attached to their posts, making it

easy to see patterns in updating. Fewer posts in Set 2 had dates (only four of nine), and they were generally organized by popularity as opposed to chronology. Blog posts may also be organized by category, so readers can easily find advice or stories related to what they are interested in, but posts are usually organized chronologically within these categories.

Parenting blogs are personal narratives and show the changes in motherhood from parenting stages and children's ages. Although individual posts are "fragmented" or separate from one another and do not need to be read in sequence (Lopez 2009:738), they do present an ongoing story of the bloggers' lives. There were several threads that I followed throughout specific blogs, such as the reoccurrence of one contributor on a larger blog discussing her challenges with post-partum depression, or another blogger writing multiple posts about the progress of her cross-country move. There is a sense of continuity as readers get to see the different stages and ages of a blogger's children. Thus, it makes sense that they are organized chronologically. Parenting websites are not as personal, and their posts do not necessarily mesh together, but instead are all individual pieces, with an occasional thread or theme running through multiple posts.

Corporate/professional blogs from Set 3, like the websites in Set 2, are generally owned by larger companies, staff or a professional, and thus are larger than the blogs in Set 1. Yet by using the blog template, the companies and professionals want their materials to feel more personal as part of their outreach to clients, as blogs are by nature more personal than regular websites. They allow facilitators to speak directly to their audience through individual posts that are organized to share a narrative. This does not

mean that websites do not contain personal content, but instead that the blog's format engages its readers in a more personal way than on a website.

On a very basic level, there is a difference between a blogger who publishes posts every day versus every few weeks, and a difference between blogs that are updated regularly, and those that are updated more randomly. There were several major patterns that occurred in both Sets 1 and 3 in how often bloggers update. In Set 1 the majority of personal blogs (twenty-one of twenty-nine) fell into two different patterns: they either updated anytime between one day and one week, or they updated anytime over one week and up to several months or even years in some cases. In Set 3 a large portion of corporate/professional blogs, twenty of forty-one, also updated either within a week, or between one week and several months, while also having nine blogs update somewhere between one day and one month (see Table 5 and Table 6 in Appendix A for examples of these patterns). This last pattern was much more scattered and random than the previous two. A blogger may make two posts within three days of one another, and then update the next post almost a month later. The majority of blogs in Set 1 updated regularly, even if there were long period between posts on some blogs. Personal bloggers place an importance on regular updates. This is the main reason readers are visiting the website, especially loyal followers of the blog, to see what is new whereas blogs maintained by professionals or organizations, which makes up the majority of Set 3, are not necessarily the center of their websites.

The frequency of a blog's updates will change how often readers go on the blog to read articles or check out any new posts. If a blogger is updating every day, or every week, then loyal followers will check in with the blog regularly, and this will give the

blog more traffic, which may be important to bloggers who make money from advertisements and sponsorships. Sponsors may also target blogs that have a high number of readers. A small number of blogs, eight out of the twenty-nine from Set 1, had a “media kit” on their blog, or mentioned that one can be emailed to potential sponsors. Media kits show statistics about the blog, including other sponsorships that have been successful, and the site’s readership numbers. Having a large number of readers may be important for personal blogs who are interested in advertising, especially those who are using the blog either as a supplement for their income, or as their main career. A higher number of blogs in Set 1 had advertisements, with twenty-three out of twenty-nine blogs as compared to the eleven from the forty-one blogs in Set 3. Posting frequently, then, may be seen as more important for those personal blogs trying to boost their traffic, as opposed to more corporate blogs who do not necessarily gain, but maintain a client base through blogging.

As the frequency of posts may influence how often readers are going onto a blog, most blogs both in Sets 1 and 3 have some sort of RSS feed⁶ or email subscription where readers can sign up to be notified whenever the blogger updates. Sometimes readers can also sign up for an email newsletter created by the blogger. This means that even if the blogger does not update frequently, or regularly, they may not necessarily lose readers who forget to check in, or lose interest in returning to the blog every few months for updates. The time between posts shows the blogger’s connection to her own blog, as those who update frequently indicate a close tie to the blog as a major priority in her life,

⁶ An RSS (or Really Simple Syndication) is a feed that allows users to sign up to receive updates from websites of their choosing (Ince 2013b).

and can point towards it being their job, or a supplement to other work they are performing. The length of a blog's life shows how long they have an active following, but, as mentioned, does not represent the end life of a blog. Time is an important, and often overlooked aspect of the Internet that can reveal hidden aspects of a blog like the connection a blogger has with their own site, while also showing further differences between personal and corporate/professional blogs.

Blogs do not exist in the same ways that they once did in the mid-2000s, since the format of blogs has changed. Communication on the blog has shifted from blogrolls, to comments, to the integration of social media sites. Alongside blogs run by parents, there are also blogs run by companies, professionals, organizations and teams of writers, as well as parenting websites owned by larger media companies. The world of parenting blogs has expanded to include social media sites where bloggers may have Instagram or Facebook accounts also documenting their adventures in parenthood. Readers now have access to experts and companies on the Internet offering their own advice alongside stories about parenting, as well as websites which collectively create dozens of articles and posts centered around parenthood and issues of childrearing every day. It is through this examination of timelines and lifespans within the mamasphere that shows how blogs continue to exist and evolve on the Internet.

2.5 What Does the Format Reveal?

The analysis of format is important because it shows how parenting blogs and other websites can be used and interacted with by both readers and bloggers. The differences in format indicate the differences between each set and category of blogs and parenting websites. For example, Sets 1 and 3 were more likely to have online stores

attached to their sites than Set 2. Set 3 was the most likely, with online stores connected to twenty-seven of forty-one blogs, as opposed to twelve of twenty-nine from Set 1. As mentioned, in Set 3, the blog is not always the center of a company or professional's website; a therapist may have a larger website for her work, with a blog as one part of the website where she can make her expertise and personal anecdotes available to potential clients. These blogs do not run in the same way as personal blogs, which is clear in their format characteristics.⁷

When a blog is run by a professional or organization, bloggers are motivated differently than personal bloggers. Bloggers from Set 3 may want to increase traffic on their blog to gain clients or customers, particularly the demographic most likely to purchase their products or to share a specific message about parenting. Blogs run by non-profit organizations often have a message they are trying to get across to readers, such as the importance of supporting mental health in teenagers, or creating a support system for young mothers. Professionals may try to promote their practice and the services that they offer, such as lactation workshops, or they may be promoting a specific kind of parenting style they work with. Mothers blogging about their personal lives may be trying to gain traffic to make money from sponsorships and advertisements. They may be motivated to blog because it allows them to tell their stories and interact with others. Pettigrew et al conducted a study with Australian mothers who blog and found five major motivations for starting a parenting blog, which included making online connections, helping out other parents, feeling validated, working on one's own skills, and feeling "mental

⁷ There is an exception to this, as three blogs from Set 3 were blogs that were run by a staff. The center of these websites was the blog, but they had a staff that maintained the site, and often gained revenue either through an online store or through sponsorships and advertisements.

stimulation” from the work (2016:1025). There are many reasons for women to begin blogging about their lives as mothers, and the motivations between bloggers from Sets 1 and 3 are different. These different motivations can be found in the format of blogs, and in the way that bloggers present themselves online.

The format of blogs reveals aspects of the blogger’s self-presentation. This is largely seen with blogs run by one facilitator, where bloggers are constantly performing to their readers through their content and the format of their blogs. Self-presentation still exists in larger blogs, but it is seen in a blogger’s specific posts. As the entire blog’s format is created by a team of people as opposed to an individual, this represents a group performance. In this case, a large blog’s format points towards the presentation that the company, or team wants to share about themselves.

Specific formats convey information that bloggers and facilitators want to get across to their audience. As users cannot see each other’s faces or body language, there is less information being shared online (Miller 1995:4). Yet Miller argues that implicit information that does come through is either “paralinguistic,” meaning it is related to the “style, structure and vocabulary” of the language, or “paracommunicational” which is connected to the format of websites and how people use them (1995:4). Mazur and Kozarian also agree that the design and format of blogs play into the self-presentation of the blogger, on top of the content that they write (2010:125).

When blogs are run by individuals, a blogger’s choice to allow comments on her blog shows that she wants to discuss the issues and stories she brings up with others. The choice to post pictures of her family and children shows that the blogger is going to be open and forthright about her personal life, giving the blog a sense of intimacy that you

do not necessarily gain from a blog that contains very few personal details about the blogger. Although blogs follow a similar format, depending on the platform that the blogger is using (such as Blogger or Wordpress), there are details that facilitators can personalize and alter. A blog's format does not just show general patterns for types of blogs, but does lead to a better understanding of the blogger themselves.

Readers connect and interact with these sites differently. The personal blogs in Set 1 allow for the most personal connections to be made between readers and bloggers, whereas the corporate/professional blogs in Set 3 may have merit to readers because some blogs are written by experts and specialists as well as large companies. Set 2 is the least interactive category for readers, but parenting websites have the widest variety of opinions and articles as there are many contributors to these sites, and a lot of content is posted on a daily basis. These variations are connected to the differences in content found between the sets, as explored further in the next two chapters.

This chapter has focused on the characteristics of blog and website formats and their affordances to better understand how readers and bloggers/website contributors interact. In the next two chapters I explore the content of parenting blogs, which is mediated by a blog's format.

Chapter 3 Advice Online

3 Introduction

While I was scouring through the results of my thematic analysis, I realized that advice was deeply integrated into the posts found on blogs and parenting websites. Every single website or blog I looked at contained at least one post with advice in it, and eight of my twenty-one blogs from Sets 1 and 3 had some sort of advice in every single post, either through direct advice, reviews and recommendations or promotions of events and organizations. I found advice on many different topics, from mental health and wellness to shopping for a nursing bra. Mothers, professionals and contributors alike would share stories based on their own personal experiences with a particular parenting issue, or tips and tricks for dealing with a specific situation. Advice is incredibly important to the content found across parenting websites and especially on parenting blogs.

Advice is not always presented in the form of tips or directions to follow, but instead can be related to sponsorships from companies, personal stories and anecdotes about things parents have overcome or are currently going through, and general discussions of issues that are important to bloggers and writers alike. Across the three sets there is also a difference in the kinds of advice that are discussed, and how the advice is presented. This is especially apparent in the distinctions between advice given from the mothers in Set 1 and the specialists found in Set 3, which will be discussed further in this chapter. To tap into these differences, and the prevalence of advice in the mamasphere, this chapter will explore how advice appears on parenting blogs and what kinds of advice bloggers and website authors are discussing using data from the thematic analysis of my

three sets of blogs and websites. I will suggest why this advice is so important and prevalent.

3.1 Offering Advice

The importance of advice and information on parenting blogs and websites has been discussed by multiple authors exploring the ins and outs of parenting blogs, as well as other online parenting resources (Duggan et al. 2015; Gilbert 2009; Johnson 2015; O'Connor and Madge 2004; Palmer 2009; Parmaksiz 2012; Pettigrew, Archer, and Harrigan 2016; Quammie 2017; Song et al. 2012; Tratner 2016). There are a few reasons as to why the Internet has become an important space for sharing advice, and for why parents turn to the Internet when they have questions about their kids, or parenting style.

The Internet is accessible to parents as soon as they need information and help, as long as they have the technology (such as a laptop, and Internet connection) to get online. Two major sources argue that this is one of the reasons that parents go online to look up advice, as they can look up information whenever they need it (O'Connor and Madge 2004:361; Tratner 2016:174). In the last chapter I discussed the role of time in parenting blogs. Time is also an important factor in regard to parents seeking advice online. Blogs are accessible at all times of the day or night. As opposed to accessing information from friends and family over the phone or in person, you do not need to wait for the blogger to come online to access what they have written. If parents are struggling with a teething baby at four in the morning, they do not need to bother their friends or parents with a phone call, nor do they necessarily need to leave their house, as they can gain helpful tips and advice on the Internet from experts and other parents who have gone through similar issues.

O'Connor and Madge studied women who used a particular parenting website in the United Kingdom, and the majority of their participants, 71%, stated that the Internet was a more important source for parenting information than their own family members (2004:358). Some women did not have family members close by and others felt that they had different parenting values from their own parents (2004:359). The Internet is sometimes the most convenient way for parents to gain advice and information on parenting due to its open access and constant updates. For parents looking for different parenting trends, or who are interested in a specific kind of parenting discourse, the Internet becomes the perfect space to look this up and find other mothers with similar values. For example, parents who are interested in co-sleeping⁸ can find parenting blogs that have tips for this practice, and that share stories about other parents' experiences with it. As the Internet is constantly updated, it is easier to gain access to current discussions of parenting and parenting styles.

Accessibility also relates to the scope of information that can be found on these sites. Friedman argues that they represent mothers from different subject positions with various perspectives, although popular blogs may provide a more "mainstream" view of motherhood (for example, heterosexual, middle class mothers) (Friedman 2013:45–46). There is a lot written on the Internet for all sorts of parenting needs, and there are many different topics covered in parenting blogs and websites, from the challenges that surround helping a child with a learning disability, to the different kinds of food to avoid while pregnant. Parenting blogs may not represent every kind of parent, but they do present a myriad of topics related to advice, and O'Connor and Madge argue that the

⁸ This is a practice where you and your infant share a bed

different voices, perspectives and people participating on blogs is an important aspect drawing diverse readers (2004:359).

The diversity of opinions and themes that exist online is not always seen as positive for parents on the Internet, especially on social media sites. Quammie, a journalist who wrote an article in *The Globe and Mail* about Facebook parenting groups, claimed that there were too many different voices within these online collectivities. She argued that “merely being a parent is not a long enough common thread to tie together so many different types of people” (2017). Facebook groups are different from blogs because there is a lot more interaction between users, as readers can not only comment but also write their own posts on some Facebook groups. Quammie left the larger parenting groups on Facebook, and found a more specific parenting page, created for black mothers online. In this group, she was able to gain advice and information she could relate to, and join into discussions due its smaller scope. Specific online parenting resources dedicated to specific kinds of parenting situations are important since not all parents subscribe to the same parenting practices. Quammie’s experience with parenting groups on social media can be used as an example to explore how different perspectives and voices of parents fit into the mamasphere.

The Internet has a lot to offer in terms of advice, especially on parenting blogs and websites. While analyzing blogs for their content, I found myself feeling overwhelmed with all the information available. As a non-parent who would like to have children one day, I found that the amount of advice was bewildering, and must feel overwhelming for new parents as well. Yet unlike the larger parenting groups on Facebook that Quammie encountered, each blog is generally specific to the interests and

circumstances of the blogger. For example, I came across one blog that mainly discussed issues related to health, as that is what the blogger felt was needed in the mamasphere. There were also blogs written by mothers who were in specific circumstances and wrote about parenting within that situation, such as being a single mother, or raising a teenager. Friedman describes the different realms of blog topics as “multiple mamaspheres” (2013:106). Instead of sifting through mountains of advice on a chat forum or in the comments of a Facebook page, readers can focus on finding specific blogs that fit their needs. The entirety of the mamasphere is very overwhelming, but if parents can narrow down what they read by choosing a sample of blogs to follow that relate to their parenting situation, the advice becomes useful and manageable to take in.

I found that there was a lot of advice related to different ages and stages of kids, such as how to manage issues like a cross-country flight with a baby or toddler. There was also a lot of advice related to parents, such as how to make a marriage work with a newborn, or how to make friends as an adult with a small child. I was surprised to find that there was a large number of posts aimed at the concerns of parents instead of children. The majority of blogs from Sets 1 and 3 that also had at least half of their posts related to advice were centered around the emotions and challenges of parents, as opposed to those of their children.

Blogs are deeply connected to the narratives of mothers and parents. Friedman discusses how she was drawn to parenting blogs because they did not just present a mainstream view of motherhood but instead “showed [her] motherhood and mothers from within” (2013:6). She contrasts ‘mommyblogs’ to scrapbooks, which are centered around the stories and stages of children, whereas mommyblogs focus on the “maternal

experience” (2013:11). This notion is also echoed by Parmaksiz, who studies parenting blogs in Turkey (2012). She states that ‘mommyblogs’ involve writing about the blogger’s own life as opposed to solely focusing on their children (2012:128). She argues that mothers may begin blogging because they see parenting blogs as “an opportunity for self-expression [...]”(Parmaksiz 2012:128). Advice on parenting blogs does not just center on how to raise children, but also on how to care for oneself while breastfeeding, or how to manage finances with a new baby in tow. Friedman likens the individual posts on parenting blogs to public diary entries as they are not just guidebooks for other parents, but instead reflect the actual lives of the bloggers as they discuss their opinions, feelings, thoughts and actions as moms and as women (2013:42).

The amount of advice on the Internet, and the convenience of searching for advice online is a major motivation for readers when they need advice related to their own parenting situations; yet women are also motivated to share their experience as parents. As discussed, Pettigrew et al, who look at women’s motivation to begin blogging, argue that contributing to a larger set of knowledge and information is an important reason for women to take the plunge. Bloggers get to add to an online space where other mothers go for advice and support, and women in their study felt that they were able to help other parents out through their blog (2016:1029). The facilitator of a pregnancy blog interviewed by Palmer in the anthology *Mothering and Blogging* talks about how her advice is aimed at helping other women, arguing that her blog does two things: “it updates friends and family, but it is also a source of information for other pregnant women” (2009:47). Bloggers write to share information and advice with others, while

readers read to gain advice, and to join into the discussion through commenting or contacting the blogger if they wish to do so.

New parents generally have a lot of questions when they return home from the hospital with a baby, and find that certain tasks, like feeding, are more difficult than they had anticipated (O'Connor and Madge 2004:353). The parenting blogs from Set 1 allow parents to read advice coming from other parents who have either been through or are currently going through the same situations and issues. In the next section, I take a deeper look into the kinds of advice that are available for parents on blogs and parenting website and the ways in which this advice is shared.

3.2 What Does the Advice Tell Us About Parents and Blogging?

Advice can be related to very practical issues, such as tips for what to do when a toddler wants to start their day at three in the morning, to more general advice that focuses on dealing with a specific age range or challenge parents face, such as general advice on children starting school. This section will take a deeper look into the content of this advice, which covers a wide range of themes and topics.

There were 356 posts that contained some sort of advice in the sites I examined, including reviews and recommendations. There were many kinds of themes that related to these posts, from the most popular, health, to others relating to different ages and stages of children and themes connected to a post's format. 'Tips' was the format-related theme found the most often in advice posts, appearing eighty-two times throughout all of the websites and blogs I examined. 'Tips' is a theme I designated to a post if the author gave direct examples or tidbits of advice, or they gave instructions to follow, usually in

the form of bullet points, or clearly laid out paragraphs: tangible, practical advice that can be followed by readers. This is a major draw for those looking for specific advice.

The advice on parenting blogs indicates the kinds of practices parents take up in many different areas of childrearing. Advice related to babies and sleep can show if bloggers use sleep training⁹ or co-sleeping, whereas advice related to food can indicate if the bloggers are vegan or gluten-free, or if they cook daily or split the cooking with their partner. The specifics of advice on parenting sites show what kinds of issues readers are running into. Comments on advice posts can sometimes show if a reader wants to use the advice presented, has parented in similar ways or completely disagrees with the blogger.

Bloggers can reveal their reflections on their actions and anxieties as parents, especially when posts that are connected to advice are also personal. This is true for Set 1 and surprisingly also in Set 3. Generally, the majority of blogs contained more impersonal than personal posts, yet, most blogs and websites contained at least one personal post that was also advice related. For example, in a post about helping toddlers learn to speak, one blogger writes about her own fears and worries when her doctor informed her that her son was not speaking at the level he should be. The advice in her post is connected to her own situation, the emotions she felt about this issue and what worked and what did not when she was teaching her son to speak. She states, “When I couldn’t even coax three clear words out of my toddler, I launched into full-on worry mode. ‘What could be causing his delay?’ my husband and I asked ourselves.” She then gives advice in relation to what worked and did not work with her own toddler:

⁹ Sleep training most often relates to a practice of leaving one’s child alone in their bedroom for short periods of time while they were settling down before sleep to teach them how to fall asleep on their own.

“Don’t make the mistake I did when I kept saying ‘ball’ over and over to my toddler, thinking he’d magically repeat it after me. It doesn’t work that way.”

By shaping her advice around her own story, the post becomes relatable to other parents who can see exactly how she was able to help her son speak, and the methods that did not work. The post also reveals her anxieties and reflections on her actions as a parent in this specific situation.

Posts that are both personal and advice based are found across all three of my sets, even in the parenting websites and corporate/professional blogs. For example, on one of the corporate/professional blogs in Set 3, the blogger gives advice on how to teach children about money without giving them an allowance, using her own parenting choices to make her argument. She states, “Some may argue that I’m not preparing my children for the real world by not teaching valuable money lessons, but I say that can be taught without a weekly allowance,” and connects her personal story to the advice she offers. This connection between advice and personal stories points towards how online advice can be used to explore the actions of parents, as this content can also be related directly to real-life events and challenges that bloggers have undergone. It also shows how the advice found on the more corporate blogs of Set 3 can still have a personal connection.

Whether advice is related to a personal story or not, the advice found on parenting blogs indicates a pattern or movement within the online parenting community. Thematic research of blog posts reveals general and specific practices found across a large variety of North American families, and indicates different ideas and reflections surrounding this advice. Advice also points towards important values that both bloggers and readers have about their lives as parents. To gain a deeper understanding of key themes on parenting

blogs and websites, the next section focuses on one of the most prominent themes across my material: health.

3.3 Health: A Case Study

Health-related themes, such as mental health, physical health, healthy eating, and health insurance, appear seventy-five times in posts categorized as advice. This high number of posts is connected to different kinds of health concerns, and the advice differs when it is aimed at adults versus when it directly focuses on the health of children.

The theme of health branches into several different facets, from advice related to taking care of children when they are sick, to resources for healthy eating or exercise. Nearly half the health posts (thirty-four out of seventy-five) contained advice aimed at parents, generally mothers, while twenty-five had advice about children and sixteen posts had advice connected to both parents and children (See Table 7, Appendix A for distribution of posts focused on parents and children). Advice focused on mothers was largely related to pregnancy, with advice about the body and its changes, how to exercise and eat properly in the different trimesters and general risks associated with pregnant women. Health advice aimed at adults was also connected to healthy eating and fitness in general. Advice focused directly on children was related to a wider variety of health issues, from how social media can affect a teenager's wellbeing, to how to cope with a child's unknown health problem. This advice focused on illnesses, safety and children's wellness. There were only five posts focused on advice for children that were connected to healthy eating or exercise, while only one of the posts focused on adults had to do with a physical health condition. The majority of posts that discuss the health of parents generally focused more on the body, with posts related to pregnancy, healthy eating and

fitness, as opposed to the advice focused on children, which related more to health risks, such as safety and sickness.

There are also a few discussions that focus on mental health. Posts connected to mental health and mental wellbeing discuss issues such as post-partum depression and suicide among teenagers. For example, one professional blogger shares advice for parenting children with anxiety, and after the tips she shares, she writes: “There is no perfect method when it comes to parenting your child with anxiety, and not all of these tips will apply to every anxious child. Follow your instincts, and when in doubt show your child unconditional, physical love. Threading throughout each of these strategies is care and compassion.” The majority of posts with the theme mental health comes from Set 3, which contains blogs run by experts, organizations, companies and larger staff. As will be seen, a psychologist and therapist make up two of the specialists that run the blogs I analyzed, which explains why the mental health of children and adults is discussed so frequently. Mental health and wellness focus evenly on parents and children.

The difference between posts that focus on parents versus children point towards varying values that parents have for themselves and for their children. There is a lot of concern with children’s safety, health and wellbeing, with many posts related to the prevention of illnesses, or risks, and how to care for children if they do fall ill. This may be because children get sick a lot, especially when they begin going to school, something that I have heard from many of my friends and family members with children. It must be scary when your child is sick, and so it makes sense that bloggers share tips on how you can help a sick child, or prevent illness. Children also spend a lot of time in their early lives in doctors’ offices, getting vaccinations and checking their hearing and vision. It

makes sense that children's wellbeing, safety and health in the face of illness is written about a lot on parenting blogs.

A large part of parenting discourse shows that parents want to care for their children's health in the best way possible, yet there is also discussion of taking care of their own wellbeing and appearance. Health advice, whether it focuses on the health of children or parents, is written for parents to read, and suggests what they can do to maintain their own health and that of their children. The center of the blog is the mother who is writing about her own personal narrative of parenting, even if she is discussing the health of her children. This provides a space where parents can talk about their own health, and how they are trying to eat better, or exercise more because parenting blogs value the life of parents beyond their children. Even posts about pregnancy and health are not solely related to the health of the fetus, but instead focus on issues like the discomfort of swollen feet, or how to try and relieve some of the symptoms of morning sickness.

In discussions of the health of parents, there are relatively fewer posts about women getting sick as the advice surrounding health is focused on prevention and care, as well as a maintenance of an idealized body shape through dieting and fitness. There are posts that share tips on how to lose body fat after pregnancy, or maintain a healthy diet even when one is busy. In Chapter 4, I will discuss how parenting blogs sometimes go against societal expectations of women and motherhood by discussing intimate details about women's thoughts and bodies. Yet blogs do not always go against the societal grain, as seen in these posts that highlight the importance of maintaining a certain body shape or weight.

Health advice is clearly an important topic, and there are several reasons why this is a common thread online. Johnson, who discusses “intimate mothering publics” or spaces where online discussions of health occur, argues that the Internet allows for discussions of health that would not be found in mainstream public spaces (2015:238–239, 242). Johnson focuses on health in relation to pregnancy, which she argues is not generally discussed in mainstream public spheres as issues related to pregnancy are seen as “embodied experiences” which are intimate and meant to be private. This often happens with discussions pertaining to women because women’s issues are seen as more “bodily” (2015:239). Discussions of women’s health, beyond dieting and weight loss, are not commonly discussed in public spaces in North America, especially in relation to pregnancy and childrearing. According to Johnson,

These intimate publics are important not only because they allow candid discussions of intimate health and mothering concerns, but also because they are central to how women strategically gather both specialist and lay knowledge in their negotiation of early-motherhood (2015:239).

For her the Internet is a public space where women can gain practical advice related to health, and openly discuss the ins and outs of parenting and pregnancy, while sharing “experiential stories” or personal narratives, which she sees as more emotionally supportive than going to a clinic (2015:243). This is because parenting blogs and websites are full of the stories of other mothers going through different health issues. These are places where women can discuss their health concerns and read advice from others which is empathetic and understanding.

Personal blogs from Set 1 are written by mothers who have either gone through similar health issues, or have an interest in sharing information and advice surrounding health. The blogs from Set 3, however, contain advice from specialists and companies, as

well as organizations and mothers on larger staff. Therefore, when accessing these sites, readers are able to gain advice from a number of different perspective and expertise.

Parents may choose to use professional blogs to research issues surrounding health, either for themselves or their children, because they may be seeking aid from a specialist, and are using these blogs as a resource. Readers can gain professional, albeit general, advice on different issues surrounding health. They may feel uncomfortable discussing these issues with the people in their immediate circle, especially because issues related to mental health like post-partum depression have a stigma connected to them when they are directly related to an individual's own mental health concerns. Readers from the United States can also gain free health advice, whereas seeing a doctor even for a consultation can be expensive. The Internet can provide advice that may be the beginning steps for parents to seek out help in other ways, such as finding a health professional in this area or talking about the issue with family and friends.

Health-related advice highlights the significance of advice sharing on blogs and parenting websites, and reflects different values and important issues found within the mamasphere. To continue discussing the different kinds of advice that exist online, the next section will consider specialist and maternal advice within the mamasphere, focusing on blogs from Sets 1 and 3. This will highlight further differences in the kinds of advice that are present on parenting blogs, and why readers may choose to seek this advice out.

3.4 Specialist Versus Maternal Advice

While analyzing the corporate/professional blogs from Set 3, I noticed there were a few blogs that were written by experts or specialists.¹⁰ They had a different voice from the bloggers in Set 1, who were writing from the trenches of parenthood. Instead, the specialist bloggers in Set 3 wrote from a professional standpoint and this set included experts in different areas of parenting, including psychology and sleep consultation. These blogs are either linked to or directly a part of the expert's own professional website where they offer services depending on their expertise. In all of the blogs in Set 3, I found there were consultants who would promote sessions available for parents in person, over video-conferencing software, over the phone or even through email. Some specialists also offered online courses or sold books related to different parenting issues. These websites present advice that is from someone trying to drum up their professional business. For example, one specialist's 'about' page states at the beginning, "Her work has supported families with young children in all aspects of parenting for over 30 years," foregrounding her expertise as a professional.

For this particular section, I want to look at the personal blogs from Set 1 in comparison to those from Set 3 that are written by specialists. Here I will explore only the individual specialists who create blogs to promote their services.¹¹ Four blogs from

¹⁰ Note that the term "specialist" means that the blogger has training and qualifications in a specific area of parenting, health and so forth, and works in that profession. Although in this section advice from Set 1 is called "maternal," it is not because the bloggers are not knowledgeable and experienced in parenting, nor does it mean that specialists do not give maternal advice. This relates to how the blogger frames their blog, and their position either as a specialist or mother.

¹¹ There are a lot of different kinds of blogs in Set 3 including those written by non-profit organizations, which I will not be considering here.

Set 3 were written by experts and specialists, including a therapist, psychologist and two consultants. The advice comes from a professional perspective, and usually focuses on one particular issue that the blogger specializes in. Thus, a breastfeeding consultant would write their blog primarily about breastfeeding, whereas the psychologist in my set mainly writes about issues concerning mental health.

To better understand what kinds of advice both parenting bloggers and specialists give, I analyzed the themes that appeared in advice posts from each category, using the eight personal blogs from Set 1 and the four specialist blogs from Set 3. This analysis focuses on the 205 advice posts from the specialist and personal blogs. The vast majority of posts from specialists were advice-based. There was also a lot of advice in Set 1, although it was not as prevalent. There were 132 advice-based posts out of the 160 that were found on all the personal blogs and seventy-three posts that contained advice from the eighty found in all my specialist blogs.

One major difference between expert and non-expert advice is that blogs from Set 1 had a lot more advice surrounding reviews and recommendations of products and services. Fifty-six of the 132 advice posts from Set 1 contained either a review or a recommendation while only three of the seventy-three expert advice posts had either. Experts are not necessarily there to give readers advice on what kind of car seat to buy or what museums are good for birthday parties. Instead, they write mainly about the issues that they work with, which could, but do not necessarily include recommending products or services. The mothers from Set 1, however, are not usually just writing about one specific area of parenting, although they may have particular interests. Their blogs cover a more general look at their own parenting as a whole. There is also a much stronger

connection within the mommyblogging world to write about the products you use as a mother, or the restaurants you visit, partially because many of these reviews are sponsored and are a part of the income that bloggers can make from blogs. Specialists do not need sponsors, as they earn a living through their profession, and having sponsors may make their own work seem less professional. This connection between reviews and parenting blogs is important, and thus will be discussed in more depth in the next section.

The focus of advice on both kinds of blogs is another difference between personal and specialist blogs. As discussed in the second section of this chapter, the majority of blogs from Sets 1 and 3 contain advice related to parents as opposed to focusing on their children. The four blogs written by experts are an exception to this rule, as three of the four focus more on children than on parents. There are also more themes related to the ages and stages of children mentioned in the advice posts from experts, with stages such as “teenager” or “newborn” appearing fifty-three times in the seventy-three posts (with some stages appearing more than once per post). In the advice posts from Set 1, on the other hand, ages and stages appear forty-three times in the 130 posts. Parenting blogs written by parents are more focused on the blogger’s own life as a parent, whereas experts center a lot of their writing on children, as kids are the main focus of their own professional work.

As professional bloggers and personal bloggers have different focuses in their writing, the content they share is unique. This is found in the themes connected to advice in Set 1, which are much more related to mothers, with advice on healthy eating, fitness, do-it-yourself crafts, recipes, pregnancy and breastfeeding. Although these themes are also about children, as crafts and recipes are usually ones that can be made by adults with

children in tow, and pregnancy is related to the foetus the mother is carrying, there is a much larger focus on the actions of the parent. The four expert blogs, however, had very few posts about healthy eating and fitness, and instead focused on the broader facets of parenting, such as discipline, sleep, children's development and mental health. These themes also relate to both parents and children, but are based on parents' actions in direct connection to their children, and not themselves. Children are the center of this advice.

Part of the reason why experts have a larger focus on children is because this is what they specialize in. Their parenting blogs are written in connection to their practice, which usually centers around children's wellness, behaviours and health. At least three of the four expert bloggers have children of their own, but because their blogs are connected to their specialisations, they write more about their professional expertise and less about their own personal lives, actions and emotions as parents. When they do discuss their own children, it is to highlight an important issue or discuss an important problem that they are having with their own children to talk about a larger issue. For example, one specialist discusses her own child more frequently than the others, but does so generally in relation to advice. She explains the importance of communicating with a toddler using examples from her own life. She writes about her daughter, stating,

But we have always been and are always) [sic] in conversation with each other and my goal has always been (and still it) [sic] to try to listen and understand, and to allow her to feel heard, seen and accepted for exactly who she is.

The blogger uses personal experience with her own toddler to make a point about the importance of conversing with one's children. Expert bloggers are less likely to discuss their own personal feelings as parents, and when they do, the focus of the post is generally still related to providing advice.

Experts are more likely to discuss negative circumstances or emotions in their advice than the bloggers from Set 1. In seventy-three advice posts from the four specialist blogs, themes related to difficult situations and feelings, such as frustration, miscarriage, and suicide, appear forty-three times, with different negative themes often appearing multiple times in a single post. For Set 1, however, themes related to negative experiences appear only fifteen times in the 130 posts. The specialists in Set 3 are consultants, therapists and psychologists, meaning their work is directly connected to helping those going through difficult situations, or helping clients with a particular parenting challenge. One specialist writes about what to do when a child has an undiagnosed illness, giving advice both on the practical actions that must be taken and how the parent can overcome the fear and worry that comes with a situation like this. The specialist writes,

Take it step by step, and tell yourself you can handle this. One phone call at a time, one day at a time. You might want this to be a sprint, yet be prepared for a marathon, or at least a 10K. And as much as you feel overwhelmed, you can do it.

Her advice is understanding, but impersonal. The blogger does not need to have undergone this kind of situation to write about it, as she specializes in mental wellness and how to cope with anxiety as a parent, as well as a child.

The personal bloggers from Set 1 are writing about topics that are related to their own lives, or about topics that they are interested in. Although not all posts in Set 1 are personal, they are connected to the blogger's life as a parent and not as an expert. Discussing difficult or challenging aspects of parenting can be sensitive for those who have been through a particular challenge, and those who have not experienced, say postpartum depression, may choose not to write about it because they do not have a background in it, either professionally or in regards to their personal lives. The expert

bloggers in Set 3 discuss challenging topics more frequently because it is a part of their work as specialists, and not necessarily a part of their lives that they have to divulge online to discuss the issue.

Challenging topics are an important theme found throughout all of my sets, even in the blogs from Set 1. Although challenging topics do not appear as much in Set 1 as they do in Set 3, such topics are still present. Blogging about parenthood is not only about exploring the best parts of raising children, but it is also about talking about problems, from smaller issues such as being frustrated with a child's poor grades and not knowing how to help, to larger ones of suicide rates among teenagers or the difficulties of going through a miscarriage. For some parents, facing these problems will be what draws them to a parenting blog, for they are able to read about other mothers who have faced these difficulties, or gain expert advice on them. The discussion of problems and the honesty that exists on parenting blogs is important to the mamasphere, and is the central focus of the final chapter, where I will discuss challenging topics not only in relation to advice, but also in regards to personal stories, how they are presented online, and why they are so prevalent.

3.5 Reviews, Recommendations and Sponsorships

Advice found on parenting blogs commonly appears in the form of reviews and recommendations. Companies and organizations will sometimes sponsor bloggers to write about their product or service, compensating the blogger for their review or recommendation. Bloggers will also write reviews for free based around the products or services they like and dislike as parents. To better understand the significance of reviews and recommendations, this section will examine posts from the three sets of blogs and

parenting websites that are categorized as a “review” or “recommendation” in my thematic analysis. I will also discuss sponsored reviews and posts centering on specific messages that companies and organizations want the bloggers to share with their readership. Reviews, recommendations and sponsorships make up the bulk of this analysis, which explores what other themes these posts are related to, what kinds of blogs they are most often found on, and how each kind of post is presented online. I will also examine the early discussions of commercialization within the mamasphere, using data from both my thematic and format analysis.

There are several kinds of sponsored posts, reviews and recommendations that appear throughout my sets. In review and recommendation posts, the blogger generally posts her opinion on the product or service, and sometimes suggests her readers try it out. One blogger writes about her favourite nursing bra, stating,

After three babies in less than five years, breastfeeding for those five years straight, and trying more nursing bras than I thought humanly possible I am ready to offer some opinions on the most comfortable and best all around nursing bra.

By sharing her positive opinion on the product, this blogger is giving readers reasons why they might also want to purchase this specific bra. Reviews and recommendations can be sponsored, while other sponsored posts are full of specific advice on a topic that an organization or company wants to promote. For example, I found several sponsored posts that discussed safety and comfort on family road trips, which were sponsored by a few larger organizations that wanted to promote travelling safely with children. The majority of reviews, recommendations and sponsored posts, however, are centered around products of some kind, from maternity clothing to board games.

Reviews and recommendations make up seventy-one posts altogether from my thematic analysis. Around half of the reviews and recommendations consisted of posts

that bloggers were not paid to write (or at least where they did not acknowledge a sponsor) and that focused instead on products or services that the bloggers wanted to promote or warn readers against.¹² Forty-seven of the seventy-one reviews and recommendations were related to products, while other posts reviewed movies and television shows, facilities (such as a restaurant or children's park), services (such as a company that delivers fresh food to families) and events (such as a fair). The most reviewed products were clothing of some sort, with books coming in a close second. The reviews and recommendations focused generally on younger children, with babies, toddlers and children represented in the themes, but not pre-teens, teenagers or young adults. There were also quite a few reviews related to breastfeeding, with bloggers discussing nursing bras, breast pumps and clothing that makes breastfeeding easier and more comfortable, especially in public. Reviews can be positive or negative, but I found that bloggers were more likely to blog about products and services they enjoyed using.

The vast majority of reviews and recommendations, or fifty-six, come from the personal blogs in Set 1, whereas there is only one from Set 2 and fourteen from Set 3. Their prevalence in Set 1 shows how they have become a staple of writing about parenting as parents use a lot of products and services while raising their children, including diapers, toys, apps, and strollers. Reviews and recommendations become one major aspect that distinguishes the personal blogs in Set 1 from the sites in Sets 2 and 3. They are an important part of personal blogs but are less significant on the blogs or websites written by media companies, organizations, specialists or institutions. Reviews

¹² Bloggers generally acknowledge when a post is sponsored, and often have a disclaimer page about how they are compensated by companies.

reflect the value of advice that parents can share about the products they use, whereas the other sets focus more on advice surrounding parenting per se. Personal bloggers have more freedom to post reviews and recommendations because they do not have the pressure of trying to remain professional to gain clients or customers, nor do they necessarily have to worry about promoting their own services above the products or services of others, although some bloggers do have products, like books, on their blogs.

Sponsored posts occur when a company or organization approaches a blogger, and asks them to write a post about a specific product or service that the company offers, or to relay a specific message that the company wants to spread to the blogger's readership.¹³ The blogger is then compensated either financially or through a gift of whatever product or service the company is trying to promote, and generally acknowledges the sponsorship at the beginning or end of the post. As mentioned in the previous chapter, some bloggers will post 'media kits' to attract sponsors, where they give statistics on readership numbers or previous sponsored campaigns to convince companies to sponsor them. In all of the sets I examined, fifty-one advice posts were sponsored. Thirty-six of the fifty-one posts were connected to reviews and recommendations; there were also sponsored posts that were instead trying to spread a specific message.

The emergence of advertisements, and sponsorships within the mamasphere was not initially seen as a positive change. Connors discusses how the blogging world was

¹³ There is another kind of sponsorship called an "affiliated link" where bloggers can put links in a blog post to a company's website as a form of advertisement. The blogger then is compensated financially whenever the links are clicked by readers. Since these links are not associated with advice, but instead are more related to advertising, they are not a part of this discussion

changed once marketing and commercialization became a part of it. There was a fear that blogs would become less honest after commercialization, a sentiment that Lawrence echoes, stating there were arguments that advertising would make the blogging world less “authentic” (Connors 2009:94; see also Lawrence 2009:129, 131). Connors discusses the worry that advertising and sponsorships would turn the blogosphere into a popularity contest, where bloggers were only interested in growing their readership for revenue purposes instead of discussing issues that are important to parents who read the blogs (2009:95). Lawrence argues that commercialization may make blogs less honest, and so there must be a balance between allowing women to make an income from blogging, and being able to discuss important issues in an open manner (2009:135–136).

Connors and Lawrence wrote in 2006, and eleven years later the results of my analysis show that there is a high number of sponsored posts and advertisements of the kinds Lawrence and Connors are discussing. In a recent article from the *Washington Post*, Bailey argues that mommyblogs have become less authentic and more connected to creating shiny, perfect images of parenthood since the late 2000s and blames this change partly on bloggers’ partnerships (2018). Instead of banner advertisements¹⁴, which do not affect the content of a blog, companies prefer to pay bloggers to write posts sponsoring their products (Bailey 2018). This changes the content of the blogs. Companies may not want to sponsor posts about difficult content like post-partum depression or a toddler’s tantrum, which in turn may lower the number of posts about these challenging topics

¹⁴ Banner advertisements are ads that fit into the website’s format, and appear at the top, bottom or sides of pages, but are not connected to the actual content of blog posts.

according to Aries and Todd (2018). This will become an important argument in the next chapter, which looks at the incidence of challenging topics online.

Although advertisements and sponsorships were controversial as they began to spread through the mamasphere, they are common on current blogs, and I did not see any posts opposing their use. Hunter also discusses this pattern towards commercialization, arguing that advertisements and sponsorships became normalized over the last decade (2016:1307). One reason for this is that they allow bloggers to earn income from the time and effort spent on blogs. This may allow some women to blog who would have otherwise been prevented by financial constraints (Lawrence 2009: 135). Blogging can supplement a family's income, and in some cases, bloggers are actually able to leave their jobs and blog full time.

3.6 Conclusion

As is clear throughout this chapter, advice is intrinsically connected to the content found on parenting blogs and websites, and exists in many different forms. Advice is given by mothers and experts alike. Bloggers share advice regarding a whole range of different topics and themes based on issues that appear in their own lives and work, as well as topics they believe are important or need to be discussed widely. There is also no risk of stigma in seeking advice from a blog, which may happen when parents ask their own family members or friends about different aspects of parenting. As O'Connor and Madge argue, the Internet is both frequently updated and more convenient for some women than their own family members, as you can get answers right away (2004:361). Parenting blogs and websites are a convenient way for parents to get advice related to the challenges of raising children.

Parenting blogs take in a larger scope than any parenting book can, as they exist without the boundaries of pages and publishers. They are easier to publish, and access. Bloggers can freely discuss topics that are important to them or related to personal matters without pushback from an editor, and readers can sift their way through dozens of blogs before finding one that contains advice and content related to their own lives and concerns as parents. The interactive state of the Internet does mean that bloggers risk finding negative reviews or statements in the comments sections of their blogs as well as their inboxes, but it also means bloggers can get direct feedback on their writing while readers can participate in discussions if they wish to. Parenting blogs and websites become an ideal platform for parents, specialists, companies and organizations to share advice to a larger readership.

Chapter 4 Imperfections, Candor, and Difficult Topics

4 Introduction

One aspect of my data collection that surprised me over the course of my research, was the effect that some of the writing had on me. There were a few nights when I would finish up for the day feeling the weight of some of the content I had read. Blog posts in the mamasphere are personal and some were deeply moving, delving into challenging or difficult situations. Sometimes these stories were based on terrible things going on in the news, and other times they were about personal tragedies or circumstances that had befallen the blogger, their friends or family. Although I did not conduct any interviews in my research, after a day of running across several of these kinds of posts, it would feel as though I had spent my day talking to the various bloggers whose sites I had made my way through. Parenting blogs do not only present tales of successful parenting, advice on how to create elaborate Halloween decorations, or images of exceptionally styled infants. Instead, there was also content where the bloggers opened up to the reader, made themselves vulnerable and shared intimate details about their lives, their feelings and their role as parents. In this chapter I will be tackling this content, and the writing that uncovers the difficult parts of parenting, and the challenging emotions that come with this.

In my thematic analysis I found a multitude of different themes appearing in the 460 posts I examined. I found that the majority of posts were either categorized as “personal,” meaning they related a personal narrative or perspective, or they were “advice” based, meaning the author shared some kind of advice with the reader, as dissected in the last chapter. Posts were often connected to these two categories at the

same time, especially when bloggers would write advice based on situations they had gone through. While Chapter 3 considered the advice found on the websites in my sets, and how it is shared, this chapter will take a closer look into the topics that are strongly related to the personal stories, ideas, thoughts and emotions that are spread throughout both parenting blogs and websites. To better understand personal revelations that bloggers and website contributors alike write about, this chapter examines the frankly messy side of parenting. I will look at personal stories, challenging topics, candid discussions of parenting mistakes, guilt and worry, and how these topics are integrated into different kinds of websites to create spaces where parents can access advice and stories that stretch beyond the perfect picture of parenthood.

The idea that parenting blogs present a candid and imperfect view of parenthood is not new. Friedman and Calixte in their anthology *Mothering and Blogging* argue that

On the one hand, motherhood is reduced [on parenting blogs]. Yet for many fans of the genre, mommyblogs put forth a version of motherhood more candid and raw than any representation of motherhood found elsewhere (2009:22).

They consider mommyblogs to be “unsanitized” as bloggers tend not to shy away from the realities of parenthood, and do not only focus on the positives of parenting. Although parenting blogs do not discuss every aspect of parenting, and so parenting is scaled down to a certain extent, the characteristic candor of the blogs discussed can be revealing and expose vulnerabilities. Parenting blogs and websites consider the flaws and virtues of parenting, alongside everything else in between.

4.1 Discussions of Difficult Topics

The difficult themes I ran across were written from different perspectives, such as through the lenses of mothers going through a struggle, professionals suggesting coping methods, and companies and organizations broaching a topic because they felt it was important to discuss. These difficult situations or topics existed on a wide scale of intensity, from the problems surrounding taking care of a crying baby, to the trauma of suffering a miscarriage. In general, there were over 100 difficult themes found in the twenty-three blogs and websites I analyzed, some of which were clearly distinct, such as stomach aches, which was connected to a specific situation, and other themes that were much more inter-related, such as guilt and blame. I designated a theme to be difficult if it related to any kind of challenging or negative subject, including bullying, judgment, feeling overwhelmed, and trauma. These topics were not all related to the same kind of problem, nor did they all represent the same level of hardship, and often multiple difficult themes would appear in the same post. Throughout this section, I will be looking at the different kinds of problems that appear, and where they are most often found.

In my research there were some themes, like ‘tantrum’ that appeared more frequently than others. A lot of the themes that appear the most are related to emotional states, such as stress and guilt. The frequency of challenging emotional states is really important to parenting blogs, as it represents a part of that raw honesty, where parents are able to discuss the emotions and feelings that they experience as mothers, or the feelings that professionals want to highlight about parenting. Yet there were also themes, like “struggle” that reflected a specific challenge that a parent had to undergo. This challenge

could be connected to a number of different situations, from coping with a divorce to dealing with a difficult adoption process.

One theme that came up often is that of ‘tragedy’. It is found nine times across all my blogs and websites, and is related to different events, although very generally tragedy is connected to some kind of loss. Sometimes tragedy was related to a personal moment, such as losing a loved one or a miscarriage. In others, tragedy related to a public event, like a mass shooting. In other words, the theme of tragedy does not just relate to one kind of difficult situation or emotion, but instead is discussed in a variety of ways on different parenting blogs.

There are other themes that are related to a narrower scope of discussion. Tantrum, for example, is mainly related to “toddlers,” “discipline,” and “tips.” It is not written about in many different ways, and is usually associated with the same kind of narrative. One expert gives tips on dealing with tantrums, arguing,

Never underestimate the power of Being Boring. When we give our attention to a behavior, we risk encouraging more of the same. Sibling rivalry, temper tantrums, silliness, talking back, defiance and rude word are all examples of behaviors that will **decrease** as you become boring and practice purposeful ignoring.

This is a typical post about tantrums, which generally outline advice on dealing with children who are acting out. Not every difficult theme is written about in the same way, and like tantrum, not all topics are connected to a wide variety of other themes.

Challenging topics can be written about in impersonal ways. Posts that are advice-based and not personal contain practical or general advice or they provide an extra resource on how to deal with the problem, such as anxiety. This means that the blogger or author does not write about their own connection to the challenging topic, but instead offers their advice on the theme to help other parents with the particular problem. For

example, one expert blogger writes about how to celebrate Mother's Day when you have a complicated relationship with your own mother. She writes,

And how about you? Can you celebrate yourself? You should! I bet you are doing better than you know! Celebrate the fact that while not perfect (none of us are), you are mothering your own children in ways that perhaps you were not. And that alone, is worthy of a stack of pancakes and a mimosa!

The post is not personal, and instead the blogger gives advice based on a difficult topic, or having complicated relationships with an abusive mother.

Personal posts present a narrative of the blogger or contributor who has undergone or is currently dealing with the difficulty they are writing about, while posts that contain both a personal and advice perspective show advice given through a personal narrative. For example, one woman writes about how hard she found moving, but she does not offer any advice to other parents on this process. Instead she uses the blog as a platform to share this difficult situation in a personal way, stating,

Moving sucks. Really, it does. Everything about it is overwhelming and exhausting.

And then there are the goodbyes. Boy, are those awful. We're talking *rip-your-heart-out, gut-wrenching, sobbing-like-nobody's-business* awful.

The blogger acknowledges the challenging event, but does not need to share advice in the process, and instead just relates her struggle. Although there is no advice in this post, it does not mean that readers will not take anything from it, as confessions of struggle allow mothers going through similar situations to know that they are not alone in their feelings and circumstances.

Posts related to difficult events or problems can also be connected to recommendations, reviews, opinions and the discussion of articles or other blog posts found online. Difficult topics can appear as stories about a personal struggle, tips related

to overcoming a difficult situation, or a recommendation of a book or resource that may help with the issue at hand. As I will show, having a variety of opinions, topics and discussions available online is attractive to parents who turn to the Internet as a resource for advice and support around childrearing.

The majority of the negative themes that I found come from Set 3, or blogs that are run by organizations, companies, professionals or blogs that have a large staff of contributors and editors. For example, the majority of posts that contain each of the seven most common difficult themes, except for “mom guilt,” are found in Set 3. The prevalence of negative topics in Set 3 was discussed briefly in Chapter 2 in relation to advice from experts, and will be analyzed further in this chapter.¹⁵

These discussions represent professionals who feel that difficult topics, like stress, are important to discuss with parents reading these posts. One expert writes about how to talk to a teenager about suicide. She says,

Do let your child know how much you trust her. Preface your conversation by telling your child that you are not worried about her, and that you know she will make the right choices. Not only does this open your teen up to conversation, but it also helps reassure her that she *will* make the right choice.

The blogger does not mention talking to her own teenager about suicide, and instead writes this piece of advice based on what she feels is important to share with other parents. It would be more difficult for a personal blogger to have this conversation without having any expertise in mental health, or personal experience with talking to teenagers about suicide. The differences in how difficult topics are approached or written

¹⁵ Although difficult topics are found more often in Set 3, it does not mean that parenting blogs run by mothers only focus on the positive side of parenting.

about in Sets 1 and 3 is an important distinction between these two kinds of blogs, and I will discuss it in more depth later on in this chapter.

4.2 Mom Guilt

The issue of “guilt” was among the most common difficulties mentioned in the blogs and parenting websites I analyzed. I read narratives of women who felt guilty for returning to work after having a baby, others who felt guilty for making mistakes as parents and further discussions of how mothers are made to feel guilty in general. The theme of “mom guilt” is found throughout parenting blogs and websites, with seven appearances altogether, making it one of the most written about challenging topics. “Mom guilt” is a theme attributed to any post where the blogger discusses feeling guilty as a mother, usually about how they are raising their children, or what they could be doing better.

Mom guilt is related to a number of different stories and challenges, yet it generally circles around a strong idea of feeling that one is letting one’s children down, in one way or another, as well as the gendered nature of this feeling. For example, the theme “feminism” appears once, in relation to being a working mom, while “gender inequality” and the differences between the guilt that moms and dads feel is also discussed. In Hochschild’s *The Second Shift*, she argues that women tend to bear more of the brunt of parenting responsibilities as household work is seen as “women’s work” (2003: 33). Although there may be changes in this with the prevalence of ideas like “co-parenting,” clearly women are still feeling the weight of responsibility, as seen in the writing around mom guilt specifically. Two bloggers write about the differences between parenting as a mother and a father. In a humorous list, they highlight how fathers do not have to deal

with challenges of work-life balance, and how they can get away with pretending they do not know how to do basic parenting tasks, like getting the kids ready for school. At the end of this list, they point out: “Bonus: Dad guilt DOES NOT exist. They believe they are the world’s best dad and high-five themselves on the daily.” Another blogger writes about the prevalence of guilt as a mother, stating, “We’ve all felt it, even as early as when we were still pregnant. We worried about all the things that could go wrong, then blame ourselves when they do.” This guilt is strongly associated with motherhood, and the ideals and expectations placed on mothers.

Yonker, who discusses maternal guilt, argues that it is seen a lot in writing about parenthood, and is connected to feeling like a bad mother. She cites Douglas and Michaels, who argue that maternal guilt comes from not being able to reach the ideals that the media pushes onto motherhood (2012:28). She states that

The inherent contradiction of the expectation that mothers preserve identities of self and also serve as the sole source for their children’s well being - in addition to the expectation that mothers effect their children’s well being in perfect fashion – can create an unavoidable vortex of guilt (2012:30).

Not only are women supposed to be perfect mothers and raise well-adjusted children on their own, they are also supposed to do so in “private spaces” and not share any of this publicly, which can push mothers into isolation (2012:35). This is reflected in the themes connected to “mom guilt” such as “returning to work,” “blame,” “mistakes” and “motherhood” which all show how the blogger or contributor connected maternal guilt to not achieving a kind of “perfect” or even societally accepted motherhood because they have returned to work, or made parenting mistakes.

Faircloth also looks at maternal guilt by exploring “intensive parenting” or the idea “that parental actions should be organized around what is presumed to be best for the

individual child, in isolation from the wider family or social considerations” (2014:36). She focuses on the United States and United Kingdom, but argues this movement is seen elsewhere as well (25). There is a current view that children are “more ‘vulnerable’ to risks impacting on physical and emotional development than ever before” (26). While children are seen to be at constant risk, parents are seen as “Godlike” or the actors who have the sole power and responsibility to control the person their child will grow into. This means that a mother’s needs are always put second to a child’s (26). One blogger confirms this feeling, and argues the importance of self-care for mothers. Self-care is when one takes time for oneself in different ways, like taking a bath or mediating in the morning. She states, “Self-care is especially important for moms. We are constantly caring for others and letting our own needs suffer.” Mom guilt can arise in women who take time for themselves, either through small moments like going out for a night with friends, or larger periods, like returning to work.

One of the major contributing factors to mom guilt is that although many women are in the workforce, they are still bearing the brunt of childrearing, both in practical tasks like taking care of the house, and also in parenting responsibilities such as making sure a baby is developing physically and mentally (Sutherland 2010:4). Two bloggers write about this burden of responsibility in parenting by writing,

We are responsible for the planning, organizing and executing of all things, no matter how big or small. We are responsible for keeping these little people alive (not to mention we were responsible for growing them in our stomach for nine months and then giving birth to them). We are responsible for keeping our household up and running. And to top it off, we’re responsible for keeping ourselves from going absolutely insane due to all of the things we’re responsible for!

In this post the bloggers were not even discussing guilt, but instead their role as mothers, yet it is clear how guilt can stem from the burden of responsibility that mothers feel. This pattern continues even as co-parenting and stay-at-home dads become more acceptable and popular.

“Mom guilt” is not found evenly within the three sets of blogs and websites that I analyzed, and instead is found once in Set 1, and three times each in Sets 2 and 3. Mom guilt is a common topic that parents are discussing, but it is also very common in media written about parenting (Sutherland 2010:2). Thus it makes sense that the media companies from Set 2 would allow or even push for this topic to appear on their sites, as it is clearly important to discussions of motherhood, and is a popular theme. Mom guilt shows how the websites in Set 2 may be owned by a media company and are not blogs, yet they reflect certain aspects of blogs, and can contain personal stories that breach difficult topics.

The three posts from Set 2 that contain mom guilt are all personal, with one that is also advice-based. The one mom guilt post from the personal blog in Set 1 is also both an advice and personal post, while the three from the corporate/professional blogs of Set 3 are all either based on advice or opinions, with no personal input. This shows how the websites from Set 2 can present personal stories from the website contributors who are not just journalists or professional writers, but instead are also usually mothers, and sometimes bloggers as well, who can write about their personal experiences with different parenting issues. It is actually Set 3, in this case, where we see the impersonal posts that are more strongly related to advice or opinion than they are to personal narratives or stories. This further shows how various topics and themes can be discussed

in completely different lights across the sets, and not every kind of blog or website talks about every theme in the same way.

“Mom guilt” does not appear as frequently in Set 1, where it is only seen once. This is a pattern that is seen throughout the different challenging themes found in parenting blogs and websites: these themes are often found more in Set 3 than in Set 1. In this case, there are also posts about mom guilt in Set 2. This pattern is one that I will explore in more depth in a preceding section of this chapter, for it reveals the connections that bloggers and contributors may have with their blogs and websites. For personal bloggers, writing about difficult topics faced as a mother makes them vulnerable for they are writing about their own personal experiences with the specific problem. Mom guilt may be a common emotion among parents, but it may also be easier to discuss when there is a larger number of contributors also sharing their stories or you are a professional giving your opinion on the matter. On blogs and websites with a larger number of contributors there are more opportunities to discuss “mom guilt” from different writer perspectives.

4.3 Personal Challenges

In this chapter I have discussed difficult situations and topics that appear throughout parenting blogs. This section will explore difficult themes that appear in personal posts which are directly related to the blogger or contributor’s own emotions, circumstances or past experience. Personal posts are where a lot of the most honest writing is found, as they present stories and narratives from the bloggers themselves.

There are a few different ways through which personal posts that discuss problems are framed. When a blogger or contributor writes personally about a problem,

they are often discussing something that they are either going through, or have gone through in the past, and thus there is a vulnerability that comes with the narrative. Illness, which is written about several times throughout the blogs and websites that I analyzed, is one example of this. One woman wrote about her mother falling very ill, and described her emotions and actions related to this event. She writes about finding out her mother was ill while leaving the airport to visit her family,

I remember being on the tram at the Minneapolis airport during our conversation, sobbing through my words to my brother. I felt dizzy, my senses overloaded as I took in all the people and the movement swirling around me. When I stumbled outside with my lightly-packed carry-on in tow (as I was only supposed to be staying for one night), my brother got out of the car and hugged me like he never had before. He's never been very emotional with me (that's *my* job!), so his affection frightened me even more.

The blogger discloses her personal feelings and emotions alongside the story of this family problem that she had to face. The story is personal and revealing, and does not gloss over her difficult emotions and thoughts as she finds out her mother has been hospitalized and is in a serious condition.

Bloggers may also discuss their own more general personal state or the larger emotions that they have as parents or as related to a current life situation, instead of discussing a specific tragedy or challenging event. "Mom guilt", which was explored in the last section, is a great example of this, which is not necessarily connected to a specific event, but instead can also be connected to a pervasive state or ongoing situation. For example, "mom guilt" is attached to a post about a mother feeling guilty for returning to work. Returning to work was not necessarily a single event, like a family emergency, but instead is an ongoing circumstance that the blogger is writing about. Personal posts allow the reader to gain insight into how bloggers are coping and thinking about a difficult

situation, how they overcame or struggled through a tragic event and/or the emotions they are going through as they write the post.

Personal posts that discuss difficult topics address a number of different situations and issues. There were fifty-five personal posts that contained difficult topics altogether. Five posts were connected to reaching out for support, four were related to sickness, mostly serious and terminal illnesses, three posts were connected to adoption, and five were connected to guilt or mom guilt. This is just a small sample of what is discussed throughout these posts. There are also a number of posts (twenty of the fifty-five) that offer advice alongside a personal story. In these posts, bloggers and contributors use challenging topics that they have a personal connection to, to also offer advice to readers on how to cope with said challenge. For example, one blogger tells a personal story of being physically assaulted while travelling abroad, and gives advice to young adults on how to stay safe while travelling alone, and to parents who may have children travelling by themselves. In her post, she writes, “I’m no expert in life. I’m not even an expert on world travel. I’m simply someone who has been humbled and had my eyes opened.” It is through her personal experience with a challenging event that makes her able to offer advice for young people and their parents.

Reading about someone else’s experiences with a difficult problem can make readers feel less alone if they are also dealing with similar problems. Although not all of the personal posts discussed in this section offer advice for readers to follow, there is a sense that readers can gain support through reading the personal stories of mothers online. Personal narratives create an intimacy between the reader and blogger/contributor, something that drew Friedman to parenting blogs, even though she did not always have

the same values or agree with what other bloggers were writing about. She says that “I nonetheless found that the depth of narrative and intimacy in each account gave me insights into different parenting choices and practices” (2013:5). By discussing difficult topics personally, bloggers and contributors are making themselves vulnerable to their audiences. This happens when bloggers write about a personal tragedy or challenging event, and the difficult emotions they feel as parents.

There is a lot of writing about how blogs are spaces of support, where parents can share positive and negative details about their lives. Pettigrew et al. discuss how parenting blogs are not places to show how to be the “perfect” parent, but instead are spaces where mothers can find support and discuss problems they are having alongside their successes (2016:1030). O’Connor and Madge argue that by sharing and reading online information about parenting, mothers can feel like what they are going through is normal. In their study, one participant talks about her own connection to parenting blogs, stating: “It is comforting to find that you are not the only one experiencing the problem/issue” (2004:361). Through blogs and websites, readers are able to gain access to other moms who may have undergone similar difficulties.

While the discussions of difficult topics and personal stories may create a sense of intimacy between readers and the blogger, and readers may gain support through these conversations, the Internet is not conflict-free. Parenting blogs especially are often seen in the media as spaces of conflict and “mommy wars” (Steiner and Bronstein 2017:63). Tratner argues that on the two parenting chat forums she analyzed, there is a lot of support as well as “snark” and sarcasm (2016:177). Tratner witnessed a great deal of conflict between mothers, some of which could become heated and personal. In my

analysis of parenting blogs and websites, I kept this presence of conflict in mind, and was surprised to find little to no conflict, snark or mean comments on all the sites in my thematic analysis. There were a few mentions of the arguments that *could* exist, but I did not witness any posts that called out other bloggers. Conflict did not seem to be a large part of any of the blogs. This does not mean that conflict does not exist on parenting blogs, but it does show how perhaps this conflict has a smaller presence on blogs than expected. Steiner and Bronstein, who look at conflict on a parenting blog run by an institution, argue that the mommy wars between blogs are generally “manufactured conflicts” that writers in the media highlight and exaggerate (2017:63). While conflict still exists online, it is not as prevalent as the media makes it out to be.

4.4 The Differences Between the Sets

Challenging topics are found across parenting blogs, whether they are run by mothers, or by organizations, companies and professionals. This section will look at how online spaces facilitate discussions of challenging topics and honest reflections on parenthood. In particular, I will examine why there is a larger number of challenging topics in the corporate/professional blogs from Set 3, and what this means for parenting blogs in general. I will also look at the different kinds of challenging topics that are present on the personal blogs from Set 1 to explore the difficult subjects and personal narratives that mothers are writing about online.

One of the differences between Sets 1 and 3 is that challenging topics are written about more from a personal perspective in Set 3. Gilbert (2009) suggests that there are women who read parenting blogs who do not have children because they want read truthful accounts of parenting, and gain information that you cannot get from a magazine

or book (62). She herself used the stories and advice found on parenting blogs to make the informed decision to not have children, as she found the stories, advice and information showed her the challenges and difficult aspects of parenting that she had not really given thought to previously (2009:63).

Some posts dealing with difficult topics are more than personal, and present insight into the blogger's thoughts and feelings. I categorize these posts as "intimate." For example, one blogger writes about the theme of hope in the light of the current political climate. She came across prayer flags in a forest that had messages of hope written on them. They moved her:

After a long winter leadened [sic] with fraught politics, social media sniping, tragic news around the world, and a few personal medical issues that tested my resolve, it was a moment I needed. It was just - nice.

She does not talk extensively about difficult topics, or reveal any specifics on her own personal challenges, yet her post is personal and reflective. There are many posts where bloggers reflect or expand on their current situations, feelings, and thoughts, and although they do not all broach challenging topics, there is still a sense of intimacy in these posts; they make the reader feel closer to the blogger. Other examples of this appear with the themes "personal anecdote," "reflection" and "memory."

These intimate posts do more than tell stories, as they really allow the reader to gain an understanding of the character of the blogger, at least as presented online. For example, one woman writes a post about her youngest and last child turning one years old. She writes,

Motherhood is the greatest and hardest adventure. My oldest is graduating from preschool this week and entering kindergarten this fall. My middle baby, my son, has recently decided he only wants his dad to put him to bed right now. This is fine with me. I have done it for years! Rocking and nursing and cuddling him to

sleep every single night. I can use a break. But as each child moves towards a new stage of independence this mama is feeling a little bittersweet.

In this post, the blogger reveals personal emotions connected to her watching her children grow up. She gives the reader insight into more than just the general details of her life, and shares an intimate moment with her audience. These posts show how candor exists on parenting blogs even when bloggers do not delve into challenging or difficult topics.

The major difference between candor found on blogs from Set 1, and those from Set 3 is, of course, the fact that there are more challenging themes found on the blogs run by organizations, companies, professionals and hired teams. As some of the blogs in Set 3 are run by professionals who help families with specific challenges they may face, and institutions that specialize in different parenting issues, it makes sense that these blogs would contain a lot of discussions about difficult topics, like struggles with depression, or cyberbullying amongst pre-teens. Yet Set 3 also contains a high number of personal challenges, as discussed in a previous section in this chapter. For example one woman writes about her own experiences with postpartum anxiety and depression. She writes,

I remember thinking that it would never end, that I would always feel this way. I remember thinking if that were true, I wanted to die. Those thoughts catapulted my thoughts to being hospitalized and my children taken away from me. It was a spiral, and I couldn't decipher between reality and my worst fears.

This blogger reveals very intimate details about her thoughts as she went through challenges with her mental health after giving birth. I was surprised by this intimacy on a corporate/professional blog. In this section, I want to explore why differences exist between Sets 1 and 3, and why there is a much larger presence of challenging themes in the latter.

One factor may be differences in how these sites are set up and run. Personal blogs from Set 1 are run generally by one or two bloggers, and reflect their lives, stories, and opinions. Most of the corporate/professional blogs from Set 3 have multiple contributors and it may be easier for bloggers to write about their own personal lives when they are not the front and center of a blog. These larger blogs also often have editors going over their work, and there are other bloggers on the site writing personal and impersonal posts. Bloggers, then, may also be divulging personal information less regularly and come under less intense personal scrutiny. The lack of intimacy between the readers and bloggers on corporate/professional blogs might actually make it easier to reveal personal information that can make the blogger vulnerable.

Another factor that may reduce numbers of challenging personal topics is sponsorships. As mentioned, one of the major fears of commercialization is that it may make the blogs less authentic (Connors 2009:94). This is echoed in Hunter's article on the commercialization of parenting blogs, where she analyzes conversation threads from the website "Get Off My Internet" (GOMI) (2016:1307–1308). One of the common conversations that appeared on the website was based on the fear that bloggers with advertisements and sponsors wrote more about promoting companies and products than "telling authentic stories" (Hunter 2016:1312). Participants of GOMI argued that bloggers were leaving out the negative and "gritty" parts of their lives and glossing over them because they were now sponsored and had to create content that advertisers would want (2016:1318). Given the increasing popularity of corporate partnerships, the need to create sponsorable content may be one of the reasons why fewer challenging or difficult conversations appear on personal blogs.

The format of a blog or website may also influence bloggers to feel comfortable sharing personal details about their lives. Bronstein discusses the online boundary between readers and bloggers, which she calls the “physical invisibility” of online interaction. This barrier makes bloggers feel more comfortable sharing personal information on their blogs because they cannot see their readers (2013:173). It may be less threatening to share intimate details to an imagined audience because bloggers do not know who their readers will be.

Another aspect of a blog’s format that may affect bloggers’ choices to reveal personal information is the amount of control they have over the interactivity and privacy of their blog. Bloggers can turn off comments, take down their contact information, or decide to make their blog private, so that readers need permission to be able to see the blogger’s content (Bronstein 2013:163; Eastham 2011:357). The control that bloggers have over the information on their blog can influence them to share personal information that “is not easily expressed in person” (Bronstein 2013:163). This means that bloggers may feel comfortable because they have control over what they share. The same can be said for the readers who do not see their audience if they choose to comment on a post.

Personal stories, intimate details and challenging topics that are all found on parenting blogs show the multiple sides of parenting and allow readers who are undergoing similar situations to feel connected to bloggers and contributors. They also show a side of parenting that is not seen frequently in public discourse, especially in media about parenting, and motherhood. This brings us to the role of self-presentation on parenting blogs using the theoretical perspective developed by Goffman.

4.5 Reflections of the “Everyday” on Parenting Blogs and Websites

A major influence on the work in this thesis is Goffman’s idea of self-presentation, (1959). Goffman writes about the “front” space where we perform around others and the “backstage” where we are able to relax and prepare for the next performance (1959:22, 111). In the front space, actors tend to perform in the parameters of societal norms, and their actions do not necessarily reflect the actions and values of the performer, but instead tend to follow social expectations (1959:35, 41, 43–44). Parenting blogs and websites are public spaces, but bloggers do not necessarily follow the expected scripts and instead discuss topics that do not fit into expectations of mothers and women.

Sometimes a front becomes institutionalized so that when you perform in an established role, there is already a front that you can take on that may be expected of you (Goffman 1959:27). In North America mothers are subject to a large set of performance expectations, especially with the prevalence of “intensive parenting” (Faircloth 2014). There are also expectations about how a mother is supposed to look and how she should present herself, and some researchers argue that these are factors in the incidence of maternal guilt.

One of the striking aspects of parenting blogs is that they often depart from these expectations and offer alternative forms of self-presentation. Lopez argues that “Once women become mothers, their lives are taken over by society’s strict set of rules and expectations” (2009:732). But parenting blogs do not depict motherhood in the same way as television shows or magazines featuring celebrity moms. Instead, motherhood is presented in a more realistic manner on parenting blogs. Lopez (742-743) discusses how

Mommy blogs are developing their own voice for discussing motherhood and it is distinctly different from the radiant image of the good mother that has dominated our media, with its impossible demands and assumptions about women...

In fact, she goes on to say that blogs present an “ugly side of motherhood” (743). In the parenting blogs from both Sets 1 and 3, bloggers write about miscarriages, having sex after having a baby, how to avoid conflicts with extended family and the challenges of balancing children, work, a household, a personal life and of course trying to get some semblance of sleep in that mix. Parenting blogs are also spaces where women can talk about very personal matters, such as the inability to breastfeed a baby, or the difficulties surrounding becoming a single parent. Parenting blogs do not present a clean or simple reflection of parenthood, and talk about the messy, mundane, controversial and complex.

Motherhood has been generally seen as a “private” topic (Lopez 2009:731) although how to parent, and what makes a good or bad mother are common topics of public discussion (Faircloth 2014:28–29). These public conversations do not reflect to the practical and actual realities of mothers’ experiences. The unattractive aspects of motherhood – the bodily, the gross, and the tiresome – are not talked about in public, much less personal faults and flaws. Even within anthropology, Ortner (2000) argues that women are not discussed in academic research. She argues that subjects such as “women, children, families, genders, sexualities, and all the politics thereof seem beneath sustained notice” (2000:990).

Although Ortner was looking back on anthropology at the beginning of the 21st century, there is still a focus on men, and discussions of motherhood and childrearing are not common. Walks, who looks at studies of motherhood in anthropology, argues that it was only recently that mothering “was considered appropriate for anthropological study”

(Walks 2011:2). There are exceptions to this, for example Tratner (2016), who studies online parenting forums with a look at how mothers use them, yet within anthropology, discussions of motherhood are few and far between.

Motherhood has been pushed into the private sphere, and so by publicly discussing the realities of parenting, mothers disrupt and defy expectations for what they should be sharing with the public. As a society we are still arguing about whether or not public breastfeeding should be allowed, while mommybloggers are openly writing about the best kinds of breast pumps to try out, or nipple cream that is good for chafing and pain. All of this relates back to self-presentation and the ways that bloggers present themselves online.

In self-presentation, performances are generally staged around the setting, the audience and what the audience already knows about the actor (Goffman 1959:221–222). Bloggers curate their image by framing their self-presentation around the blog itself, who they believe their readers to be, and what their readers already know about them through their posts. The audience is very important to self-presentation, and although the actors usually try to tailor their performance to shared values, they are also performing to influence their audience (1959:15). But bloggers do not know exactly who their audience will be. Marwick and boyd argue that the online audience is “often imagined and constructed by an individual in order to present themselves appropriately based on technological affordances and immediate social context” (2011:115). Although they are writing about Twitter, their comment is applicable to parenting blogs, where bloggers do not know who will read their blogs, but do create an expected audience to write for, and frame their work around. This expected audience is made up of other parents.

During my research I read through a lot of About pages where the blogger invited the reader to sit down, grab a warm beverage and enjoy the blog, and this invitation was plainly aimed at other parents. This is seen in one blogger's About page, which reads,

With the help of expert sources and everyday moms whose genius ideas motivate me everyday, I'm determined to create a place where parents can find cutting-edge health information as well as fun, not-impossible ideas for helping kids eat well, stay fit, rest easy, and generally just feel good.

She is clearly writing for other parents who have questions about their children's health and is creating a space for them.

If bloggers are writing for other parents, there is an expectation that readers will understand and empathize with what the blogger is going through. Bloggers also write advice directly aimed at other parents. For example, a review of a diaper pail, or the best kinds of shampoos for children are specifically written for parents who use these products. One blogger wrote a piece on what to do when you have to bring your child to the emergency room of a hospital. She writes, "There are few circumstances where we feel less in control than headed into the E.R. with a sick child in arms, and yet, it ranks high among situations when we'd most like to have our wits about us." The intended audience for posts like these is unambiguous. The blogger uses the pronoun "we," pulling the reader into the conversation as a fellow parent.

Mazur and Kozarian argue that "blogs give their authors an unprecedented opportunity to control their public persona through their writing and management of personal information" (2010:125). They do not necessarily need to worry about other aspects of their performance, such as body language or visual appearance, which plays a large role in face-to-face interactions. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Miller calls this

“implicit information” (1995:4). The performance exists in the writing and the format, as opposed to the ways that they speak and hold themselves.

The publicness of blogs is another question that comes into play when looking at self-presentation online. The Internet may be public, but Eastham says that blogs are “simultaneously private and yet very public” (2011:353). She argues that blogs do not easily fit into solely the private or the public sphere because although they may publicly disclose intimate details about the blogger. Although Eastham sees this as convergence between the public and the private, it is clear through all of the blogs that I analyzed that the bloggers are writing for a public audience.¹⁶

The control bloggers have over their sites and the boundaries between readers and bloggers can make bloggers feel comfortable revealing intimate details about their lives with readers. As Miller suggests, embarrassment is less likely to occur online because embarrassment is “one of the regulating and controlling forces to face-to-face interaction” (Miller 1995:3).¹⁷ Revealing personal stories, talking about challenging situations and feelings, and discussing the details of one’s life allows readers to gain a certain amount of trust and intimacy that may pave the way for important discussions of topics readers may be unable to raise in other contexts.

¹⁶ I should point out that all of the blogs I consulted for this thesis were found through straightforward Google searches.

¹⁷ This was truer when Miller was writing than today in view of current concerns over trolling and cyberbullying. Trolls are people who post controversial, mean or otherwise inflammatory remarks to start arguments or “flame wars” on the Internet (Ince 2013c). Doxing is also a current concern: publishing private or personal information about someone online as a technique of harassment (Honan 2017).

4.6 Conclusion

Parenting blogs and websites broach a number of different topics throughout their many posts. One significant area of themes found on parenting blogs and websites alike appears in the personal and difficult topics that mothers, professionals and contributors write about. I was surprised to find that personal stories do not only exist on the personal blogs found in Set 1, but instead are very prominent throughout both parenting websites, and the blogs owned by companies, professionals, organizations or ones that have a larger staff of contributors and editors. I was also surprised to find that there were more challenging topics discussed in the corporate/professional blogs. Personal stories were not as prevalent on the blogs found in Set 1 than I thought they would be, yet the personal stories that I did find were moving, intimate and sometimes broach topics that are not often discussed in public spaces, especially surrounding the difficulties of motherhood.

This chapter has presented the different ways in which candor about difficult topics is found throughout parenting blogs and websites, and suggests different reasons as to why these websites become spaces for such discussion. Future studies of parenting blogs should focus on the connections that readers make through these personal, intimate and sometimes complicated and awkward discussions, and interview bloggers to learn more of their personal motivations for blogging about these topics. The act of writing about parenthood in all its glory and difficulties is a vital aspect of the parenting blog. Blogs give mothers a platform to discuss challenging and personal stories, as well as share practical advice and the successes of their children, be it a teenager graduating high school or a baby finally settling into a regular sleeping pattern. Parenting blogs are sites of connection, although not always places of interaction, where readers and bloggers can

share in a mutual understanding of the problems and successes of parenting, as well as everything left in between.

Chapter 5 Where Has This Research Taken Us?

5 Introduction

This thesis has explored the complex, active and everyday world of online parenting blogs and websites. Despite Jason Kottke's statement about blogs being dead, parenting blogs are still very much alive and kicking (Caraher and Reinhard 2015). They are still being created, and blogs that were set up five or even ten years ago continue to be maintained. Yet, parenting blogs do not exist by themselves online, but instead are surrounded by and connected to a myriad of other kinds of blogs, websites and social media sites. Parenting blogs represent an area of the Internet where parents can gain information on childrearing, share stories about their own lives and interact with each other on a number of different platforms. I have examined the format of blogs and websites, and also explored two main kinds of narratives that exist on these sites: advice and personal stories. My goal is to create a base for further study of parenting blogs and websites, as well as other online parenting resources. This final chapter will look at how my research is situated in the literature surrounding parenting blogs, suggestions for future studies in this area and finally, a discussion of what my research has illuminated in terms of motherhood and blogging.

5.1 Where is my Work Situated?

The literature surrounding parenting blogs and online parenting resources is not overly large. While parenting blogs may not be a major area of study for the social sciences, there is research by anthropologists, sociologists and gender studies scholars that focus on how motherhood is represented and engaged online. These works examine

parenting blogs, chatrooms, and social media sites to analyze the discussions, conflict and support found on these websites as well as the ways in which mothers connect online. As there is not a large amount of literature on parenting blogs, and because parenting blogs and online resources are constantly changing, this area of study continues to need updating.

There are not many resources written specifically about parenting blogs. One of the most comprehensive comes from Friedman and Calixte's 2009 anthology, *Mothering and Blogging*, which presents different papers that look at generally women's connections to blogging, and the ways that parenting blogs have been viewed in the larger society. This collection has articles about different aspects of parenting blogs, such as creating a sense of community and the role of advertising, but one of the most unique aspects of the book is that the majority of the authors write about mommy blogs using their own online experience. For example, one contributor, Ferris, is a deaf-blind mother of twins with a quadriplegic partner who used parenting blogs to find a community of mothers to relate to when she struggled to connect with her neighbours (Ferris 2009).

While Friedman and Calixte compile work by researchers who have read and/or created parenting blogs, there are a number of other researchers who either interview women or use surveys to gain insight into the mamasphere and online parenting resources (Johnson 2015; Lee 2011; O'Connor and Madge 2004; Orton-Johnson 2016; Palmer 2009; Parmaksiz 2012; Pettigrew, Archer, and Harrigan 2016; Tratner 2016). This research leaves a gap, for although many researchers use examples from parenting blogs, or discuss blogs that they or their participants have read, there are fewer authors who actually analyze the writing and stories found on blogs (with exception of Friedman

2013; Tratner 2016; Van Cleaf 2014; Yonker 2012). Doing so would allow researchers to take a closer look into what women are actually writing about online.

The research for this thesis was not based upon interviews or surveys, and there was no point when I spoke with bloggers or their readers. Yet my focus on blogs and websites gave me a larger scope to examine what parenting blogs actually are and take a comparative look at them and related websites. I was able to take a deep look into the kinds of narratives that appear on these sites through the content found in posts, and the actual shape and space of blogs through their format. This allowed me to create a comprehensive study of online spaces for mothers, while creating a foundation to further examine these themes in the future.

My research covered different kinds of parenting blogs and websites, rather than just focusing on a small section of the mamasphere. So, for example, although Tratner studied the content found on parenting chatrooms, she only examined two forums (2016:171). Her work is valuable for discussions of parenting online, yet it does not cover a wide variety of online forums as she is not only conducting in depth online analysis through participant observation, but she also interviewed mothers who were a part of these discussion.

Conducting research on parenting blogs and websites meant that I was able to analyze my data as an outsider, and with fresh eyes. I could not take anything I read in these blogs for granted, and it took me a while to figure out the common themes found on parenting blogs, and to take in all the advice and stories I was consuming. This is not to say that research written from the perspectives of mothers and women who create or read parenting is invaluable, the truth is quite the opposite. However, my research does add a

different kind of perspective into this area of research, and this perspective allows me to grapple with my data in a unique way.

5.2 Where Do We Go From Here?

My thesis contributes to the growing collection of research on parenting blogs and websites, but, I was not able to touch upon all aspects of the mamasphere. As I discussed, the Internet and the world of parenting blogs are constantly shifting. In this section, I suggest future areas that research can focus on to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this area of the Internet.

One area that gains little attention concerns the fathers who take part on these blogs. Exploring parenting blogs online in regard to mothers as well as fathers may reveal the reasons why there are generally more women present on these sites, and also point towards a changing North American culture of parenthood, where co-parenting is becoming a more common practice, as are stay-at-home-dads. In research of parenting blogs, there is a lot of writing about how mothers are able to find support online, or how these spaces have become important to mothers (see Johnson 2015; Pettigrew et al 2016; Tratner 2016 for examples) while there is little discussion as to why mothers are the ones seeking these sites out more often. Song et al argue that, at least in terms of health, women are more pressured than fathers to make decisions, which is one of the reasons they go online (2012: 774) while other writers, like Parmaksiz and Pettigrew et al point out that the Internet has provided mothers a way of dealing with the changes that come alongside motherhood, or the isolation of being a new mom (2012: 124, 2016: 1026). Yet there are very few discussions of the men that do go on these sites, and even create their own blogs.

In my research I was able to touch upon the different social media sites that have become important points of connection between blogs and other online platforms. Instagram, Twitter and Facebook appear to play an important role in not just the promotion of blogs, but also in self-expression for bloggers as well as readers, who are also able to share posts onto their personal social media sites. These sites have become a part of a larger network of parenting resources online, and they show how parenting blogs do not exist in an isolated sphere of the Internet, but instead are a part of a larger realm where parents can share stories, advice, reviews, and support.

Finally, as I have mentioned several times throughout this thesis, the world of parenting blogs is constantly shifting. I could see changes in the blogs I was reading even as I conducted my research over four months in the summer of 2017. By continuing work on movements and shifts in parenting blogs, researchers will be able to see how the mamasphere is changing, how blogs are being used in different ways and how the readership is shifting as new mothers continue to access these websites. Research on the Internet can be a challenge to keep up with due to its constant and rapid changes, yet if researchers continue to explore specific areas of the Internet, such as parenting blogs, then we are able to gain a better understanding of how online worlds work, and what they mean for larger society through snapshots of different areas of the Internet. The work on online research is a continuous process, and as we begin to dig into one area, like social media sites, it shifts and changes at a speed too fast to keep up with, and our work is far from finished.

5.3 What Do Parenting Blogs and Websites Tell Us?

Online parenting resources make up a complex realm of blogs and websites, and can reveal a lot about motherhood in the 21st Century, and about blogging in general. Not all blogs are run the same way, although there seems to be a general format that bloggers use, such as enabling comments or creating a newsletter or mailing list to update readers. A blog becomes a good space to share advice alongside personal stories, and the format can create an intimate connection between the blogger and reader through the individual posts, which, as mentioned, Friedman likens to public diary entries (2013:42). Yet blogs do not need to be personal, and instead can contain advice and information detached from the writers' own personal stories and life.

Alongside blogs, parents can also access websites that clearly take inspiration from blogging, either in format, or in the way that they share content through individual posts. This is especially seen in how parenting websites will hire bloggers to write their content. Yet, these sites are not blogs, and do not label themselves as such. Instead, they function on a much larger scale, with funding from media companies and multiple posts coming out every day. They add to the list of resources available for parents to gain information, stories and support.

This compilation of online resources points towards the integration of the Internet into many peoples' daily lives, and also the actions people take offline. Parenting blogs and websites also show the actions of the readers through suggestions and advice. For example, the blogger who wrote about her experience teaching her son to talk reflects on her own parenting actions, and also may induce or nudge readers to change the ways that they are teaching their own children to speak based on her own actions. In this way,

blogging can have real effects in the lives of parents while simultaneously reflecting part of the blogger's own life.

By examining a number of different blogs and parenting websites run by mothers, this research is also able to examine dimensions of contemporary motherhood. There is clearly a prevalence of women on these sites, as discussed in the first chapter: most of the blogs were run and written by women. The intended audience for most blogs appears to be parents, yet bloggers also write posts that are specifically aimed at other mothers. This is seen in personal posts about the challenges of motherhood, or in advice posts clearly aimed at other women, such as those dedicated to advice about mom guilt. Bloggers sometimes use the pronoun "we" when talking about different aspects of motherhood, such as pregnancy. Women are really at the forefront of these discussions online. Could this mean that the brunt of parenting still falls to mothers?

As is seen with the theme "mom guilt," there can be a lot of pressures facing mothers. Hochschild and Machung (2003) discuss the "second shift" in their book of the same name, where women who work often come home to do a second shift of childcare and housework. The bulk of their research comes from the 1980s, and parenting has changed since then, with co-parenting (where both parents take an equal share of parenting tasks) becoming popular. Yet, a study by Hays found that modern moms still feel tired and overworked (cited in Faircloth 2014:27). In intensive parenting, a current parenting ideology where parents' actions are expected to revolve around what is best for their children, a mother's needs are often put second to a child's (Faircloth 2014:27, 36). Perhaps, then, as Sutherland suggests, mothers are still largely responsible for their children in more than just practical tasks (2010:4), and so it makes sense that online

resources are generally aimed at women, who go on not only to find support but also are the ones looking up advice and tips related to childrearing.

Mothers are the centre of personal parenting blogs, as a mother's perspective is key to the content found on these sites. Everything on a blog is mediated through their voices, emotions and thoughts. In my samples, I came across the voices of mothers who wanted to share advice with others because they felt they had a lot of experience with different aspects of parenting; others wanted to share stories about their home lives, and the everyday realities of parenting, and many voices that fell somewhere in between. Personal blogs are also a way to gain access into stories, advice and writing about motherhood from "within" (Friedman 2013:6).

While personal parenting blogs allow readers to peek inside the lives of different mothers, they also represent a need for this kind of new, public space for women to write, share and connect. Alongside the many other kinds of online resources dedicated to parenting, such as on forums, social media sites, and larger websites dedicated to issues of raising children, it is clear that mothers need a space where they can vent to one another, or to go to when they need advice, or just to acknowledge that someone else has undergone what they have. Yet parenting blogs are not just spaces for sharing advice, for parents are also able to access a number of private resources, like speaking with one's own parents or peers. Instead, the accessibility of blogs creates a public space for this discussion to occur, where women from many different locations can connect with one another and join in the discussion or participate by engaging with Instagram pictures, blogposts, and Facebook pages. Although not all mothers feel the same way, or go through the same situations when raising children, there are themes that appear frequently

on these sites – such as health – and connections that are made simply by sharing one’s own stories of motherhood, or reading someone else’s. These repeated themes reflect different threads that are woven throughout these blogs and websites, showing that there are concerns, ideas and topics that bloggers write about frequently. Experiences of motherhood are widely different depending on the blogger’s own situation, yet there are still shared points of connection online not just through interaction, but through the themes that are written about.

Parenting blogs and websites present many different kinds of narratives, but they largely share both personal stories based around the actual lives of the mothers writing, whether about challenges or everyday routines, as well as the advice shared. They are places of connection, and reflect the ways that parenting is moving into online spaces, and the blogosphere is moving into the lives of parents across North America. This research has opened my eyes to many aspects of parenting I was unfamiliar with while also exposing me to a vibrant and lively area of the Internet. Although I may not have clairvoyance into the future of parenting, or indeed of the Internet, it is clear that through the increased use of blogs, websites and social media sites, these public online spaces will only increase in size and activity. This is a constantly growing, shifting and expanding space for us to connect with and explore as parents, and as researchers.

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Appendix A Tables

Table 1

Number of Comments per post from a Blog in Set 1	
0	8
1 – 9	5
10 – 19	1
20 – 49	0
50 – 99	0
<100	1
Total	15

Table 2

Number of Comments per post from a Blog in Set 1	
0	0
1 – 9	6
10 – 19	4
20 – 49	2
50 – 99	2
<100	1
Total	15

Table 3

Blog Activity			
	Set 1	Set 2	Set 3
Active Sites	18	9	24
Inactive Sites	6	0	4
Unsure	5	0	13

Table 4

Years Active	Age of Active Blogs	
	>1 – 4 Years	5 - 13 Years
Set 1	2	13
Set 3	10	12

Table 5

Blog From Set 3 – Updates between 1 Day and 1 Month	
Days Between Posts	Number of Posts
0-4	7
5-9	0
10-14	1
15-19	2
20-24	0
25-29	2
30-34	1

35-39	0
40-44	0
45-49	1

Table 6

Blog From Set 3 – Updates within a Week	
Days Between Posts	Number of Posts
0	1
1	6
2	1
3	2
4	2
5	1
6	1

Table 7

Posts Containing Health-Related Terms Focused on Children versus Parents				
Set	1	2	3	Totals
Posts Focused on Children	6	1	18	25
Posts Focused on Parents	10	2	22	34
Posts focused on Both	10	1	5	16

Appendix B Ethics Clearance



Western
Research

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Research Ethics

Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. Dan Jorgensen

Department & Institution: Social Science\Anthropology, Western University

NMREB File Number: 109340

Study Title: Mothers Who Blog: An Exploration of Online Community and the Parenting Blogosphere

NMREB Initial Approval Date: June 07, 2017

NMREB Expiry Date: June 07, 2018

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Western University Protocol		2017/05/31
Recruitment Items	Recruitment Letter for Facilitators	2017/05/29
Recruitment Items	Recruitment Message in Blog Comments	2017/05/31
Recruitment Items	Recruitment Email	2017/06/07
Recruitment Items	Telephone Script	2017/06/07
Letter of Information & Consent		2017/06/07
Instruments	Interview Questions	2017/05/08

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 0000941.


Ethics Officer, on behalf of Dr. Riley Hinson, NMREB Chair or delegated board member

EO: Erika Basile ___ Grace Kelly ___ Katelyn Harris Nicola Morphet ___ Karen Gopaul ___ Patricia Sargeant ___

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Appendix C Curriculum Vitae

Name: Rachael Simser

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: Carleton University
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2012-2016 B.A.

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2016-2018 M.A.

Honours and Awards: Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
Canadian Graduate Scholarship – Masters
2017-2018

Related Work Experience Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2016-2018