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## Mom Blogs: Portrayals of Contemporary Mothering Standards, Styles, and Secrets

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Mom Blogs: Portrayals of Contemporary  
Mothering Standards, Styles,  
and Secrets

Angela Nuttall Ward

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

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## ABSTRACT

### Mom Blogs: Portrayals of Contemporary Mothering Standards, Styles, and Secrets

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Internet use is a routine element of daily life in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century for many middle-class Americans. Today, millions of middle-class American mothers read and write online weblogs detailing motherhood and domestic life and mom blogs, formerly known as “mommy blogs,” facilitate substantial economic activity. Participants collectively invest millions of hours in these blogs, sharing information and experiences, and offering each other validation and support. The present qualitative study of American mom blogs uses traditional grounded theory methods as well as *Netnography* techniques to investigate the thematic content found in the publicly posted text of 25 different mom blogs during 2011. Aspects of Goffman’s theory of Dramaturgy and Chayko’s theory of portable communities provide an interpretive framework for my findings. These findings suggest that mom blogs give participating mothers the power of voice which they use to publish highly controlled, yet powerful messages that communicate the values and role definitions of early 21<sup>st</sup> century motherhood to a growing online community. Messages tend to portray standards, styles, and secrets of contemporary, middle-class American motherhood.

Keywords: blogging, mom blogs, mothering, mothers and technology, female internet use, contemporary American mothering

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## **Mom Blogs: Portrayals of Contemporary Mothering Standards, Styles, and Secrets**

After seeing a poster advertising a mom blogger's upcoming appearance at the local university campus, I arranged my schedule so I could attend. On the appointed evening, I arrived 30 minutes early to get a seat towards the front of the hall, but was astonished to see the room was already three-quarters of the way full. As the time for the speech drew near, more and more women, including many sets of mothers and daughters, packed the large ballroom. I heard ushers talking of overcrowding and opening overflow rooms. Over 3,000 people (more than triple what was expected), mostly female, anxiously crowded in that evening to hear the blogger speak in person (Mormonwomen, 2010). I wondered about this relationship so many had developed with this woman due to her blog. A local magazine reported that her blog currently attracts about 30 million readers each month (Lawson, 2012). What does she publish that attracts such a following? Isn't blogging just a pastime, a diversion, a hobby? What is behind the popularity of the mom blog?

In the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, middleclass American mothers have taken advantage of a convenient online form of communication known as the 'blog', short for web log, as a way to share their own written and visual texts with potentially hundreds of thousands of readers and a global audience. Through the use of this new medium, millions of mothers have discussed, supported and also challenged a multitude of topics related to traditional middleclass American mothering within this online community (Lopez, 2009). What happens when the timeless role of motherhood meets cutting-edge technology that provides uncensored, broad scale, convenient communication created by the mothers themselves?

The existing literature on mom blogs tends to focus on the phenomenon itself and its implications for women. Presently, there is a gap in the academic literature regarding the themes

present in the published text of American mom blogs. The present study seeks to fill that gap by using a grounded theory approach and an online ethnographic research technique, known as *Netnography*, to explore themes present in the text of contemporary middleclass American mom blogs (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Kozinets, 2010). Specifically, there are two objectives relevant to extending our understanding of mom blogs. First, I will identify, classify, and analyze the various messages within the blogs. Second, I will illustrate the diversity in mom blogs by comparing the professional, highly popular blogs directed at mass audiences with the more traditional, limited-audience blogs generated by more typical mothers. Finally, on the basis of my exploratory analysis, I will make some generalizations about the nature and functions of mom blogs which may guide future research.

### **Background**

This chapter will address middle-class American motherhood and contemporary computer-mediated communication before moving to the current dialogue among scholars on blogs and mom blogs in particular.

### **Middle-class American Mothering**

The mothering experience is both challenging and rewarding; filled with joy, triumph, disaster and disappointment (Lupton, 2000). Being a mother can be one of the most joyful and rewarding experiences of life, but it can be extremely demanding and complicated (Crittenden, 2010; Douglas, 2004; Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 1989). In fact, adhering to the socially defined ‘good mother’ standards can require major adjustments for women, and the nature of those adjustments varies with changes in societal values, fashions, and available knowledge.

In her mothering research, Tardy (2000) outlines the evolution of American attitudes and expectations regarding mothering over the past century. In the early 1900s mothering and

childcare were looked upon with joy and celebration and viewed as the pinnacle of a woman's life. During World War II women were needed to help with the war effort and were valued when employed outside the home. Following the war, child development experts suggested that women were needed at home for childrearing. With the availability of the birth control pill in the 1960s women had more control over choosing childbearing motherhood or pursuing a career. Many went through the next decades pursuing careers outside the home. In the 1990s the pendulum swung back to stressing the importance of the primary caregiver mother role, with the child focused 'intensive mother' expectations placed upon women (Hays, 1996). Many young middle-class American mothers plunged into the fast-paced child-focused "soccer mom" role. The ultra-busy, mini-van driving, "Soccer Mom" devoted a tremendous amount of time to her children's needs and was known for her publicly visible involvement in her children's activities (Swanson, 2009). At the turn of the century, many mothers were incorporating computer-mediated communication into the performance of the mother role.

In the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many young mothers used the Internet for several hours a day participating primarily in blogs and social networking sites, resulting in women learning new information and experiencing feelings of connectedness (McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes, 2011). Many mothers are anxious to learn about the mothering practices of their peers (DeVault, 1991). The Internet is a new and helpful resource for such information. Background literature addressing mothers seeking helpful information online, and their interest and enjoyment of such, is relevant to address at this point.

The tremendous life transition into the role of mother requires most women to construct a new identity. During this transitional crisis, a woman seeks to redefine herself, and must answer

the question, who am I now? Her daily activities and responsibilities change, she may be left out of her prior childless social circles, and feel that life is passing her by.

Taking on the mother role can be challenging. Some women even experience a period of mourning for their pre-mother life (Lupton, 2000). The transition to parenthood is among the most stressful life events individuals experience and can result in a sweeping personal change that creates an identity crisis (Johnston & Swanson, 2007; Lupton, 2000; McDaniel, et al., 2011). Many young parents are in need of instruction as to how to develop this new identity.

Much American media presents a romantic, idealized image of mothering while failing to acknowledge the difficulties faced by most mothers (Douglas, 2004). The hardship of mothering is often silenced (Tardy, 2000). In contemporary middle-class America, due to current demographic trends, women are often more isolated from kinship networks and less familiar than their counterparts of previous generations with practical information regarding child rearing and child bearing (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). The new mother needs to obtain mothering information, support, and acknowledgement, all of which are available via the new media.

The Internet can be helpful in coping with this life-changing experience (Hall & Irvine, 2009). The mothers' online participation allows them to be involved in a supportive mothering community, obtain information, find entertainment, and take time for self (Hall & Irvine, 2009; McDaniel, et al., 2011). Online information is not regulated by censorship, and participation in online communities allows one to conveniently express the self freely with others who have similar interests (Chayko, 2008).

Though a contemporary mother may be alone at home, her computer and other devices provide convenient access to vast opportunities for mother-learning and a whole community of mothers similar to herself. She can share her feelings and perspectives in a public forum and

have quick, easy access to new ideas, mentors and an audience that “understands” (Hall & Irvine, 2009).

### **Internet Resources Relevant to Mothering**

The Internet can conveniently reach wide audiences and foster interpersonal relationships. It has revolutionized human communication like nothing before, facilitating information dissemination, fostering collaboration and interaction between individuals without regard for geographic location (Leiner et al., 2009, p. 22). The Internet promotes development of relationships based on intimacy through written words (Henderson & Gilding, 2004). Online communications also provide an egalitarian stage where those involved can communicate without being judged by physical characteristics such as age, race, or gender, and where marginalized groups can unite and find strength (Poe, 2011).

Online resources are highly utilized by contemporary middle-class American mothers for information giving and receiving. Many young mothers who are isolated from other adults rely heavily on online access to mothering information, social support, and acknowledgement of the difficulties of mothering. Conversing with other mothers is a traditional and important way to get new ideas, and the Internet offers mothers a new way to ‘talk’. New mothering ideas are “important for each woman’s work,” and women often desire to “learn about the essentially private household practices of their peers,” (DeVault, 1991, p. 47). Mothers with internet access, despite being geographically or socially isolated, need neither be alone nor uninformed (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Madge & O’Connor, 2006; McDaniel, et al., 2011). Sharing mothering experiences online can build friendships and create emotional strength. In addition to internet resources such as email, chat rooms, and bulletin boards, the ‘blog’ has become a valuable tool in online mother interactions.

**Blogs and mom blogs.** Blogging is one modern way to fulfill the common human desire to express identity (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008). Blogging is particularly appealing to women, and women use it as a way to share personal experiences (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008). Young women in particular often blog as a way to learn about themselves and where they fit in society (Davis, 2010). It appears that blogging has become a significant part of daily life for young middle-class American mothers, many of whom spend about three hours per day engaged in online activities (McDaniel, et al., 2011). Blogging and social media use account for much of that time.

American new mothers began turning to blogging in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For a decade now these blogs have provided a place to share personal experiences and information, receive support and feedback from other parents, and learn through observation and vicarious experience (McDaniel, et al., 2011). Blogs also provide a convenient way for physically isolated new mothers to be exposed to current mothering trends (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Friedman, 2010). In previous generations this type of information was provided by circles of wise ‘other mothers’ (DeVault, 1991). In their absence, technology can step in as informant and sounding board. Additionally, blogs promote self-expression that allows the online community members to feel that they know each other while allowing each woman a way to document her experiences, keep in touch with others, and display her multifaceted identity (Chayko, 2008). Mom blogs can offer trendy, up-to-the minute lessons on mothering. Young mothers seeking information often have a desire to learn how to “become a mother without becoming HER mother” (Schiffrin, 1996, p. 171). Blogs can both immediately inform a mother, and allow her to inform others with up-to-date material.

Originally labeled the *mommy blog*, the mom blog is a specific type of blog. In the early years of the twenty-first century “the phenomena of ‘mommy blogging’ has exploded and in even shorter order, it has evolved beyond the somewhat disparaging ‘mommy’ moniker to just plain ‘mom’ bloggers.” (Uttley, 2011). Mom blogs are mostly autobiographical narratives written by mothers with children in the home, addressing domestic issues and expressing the ordinary side of motherhood. They tend to illustrate the author’s personality, passion, and point of view (Lopez, 2009). The most popular mom blogs are believed to generate 100,000 to 300,000 views *per day* and often receive thousands of comments (Belkin, 2011; Blakeley, 2009). *The New York Times* reported that one popular mom blogger was listed on the *Forbes* 2010 list of most influential women, coming in at number 26 on the list (Belkin, 2011).

Several sources estimate the number of women participating in mom blogging. It is clear that millions are involved. One writer observes that, “The ascent of the Mommy Blogger has been rapid, and her wild popularity, power and influence cannot be ignored,” (Gulbransen, 2012). According to recent marketing research, mom bloggers make up 14% of all American mothers. Another source, the website *Blogher.com*, “arguably the largest aggregating body for women bloggers,” states that 23 million women in the U.S. read or write a blog each week and their popularity is growing (BlogHer.com, 2009). Mom bloggers tend to be white, educated, middleclass women who are likely to be involved in the community with an average age of 37 and an average household income of \$84,000 (Scarborough, 2011). These active mothers share insights on their experiences through the blog medium.

Internet technology has provided millions of ordinary mothers with a way to write and instantly publish anything they want to in a place that is public and open to a potentially world-wide audience. Mom blogs, written by the mothers themselves, offer an autobiographical

glimpse into modern motherhood. The information published conveniently and often profusely by mom bloggers provides a written history of modern motherhood that is thorough and varied. Mom blogs can be read or written 24 hours a day, and consist of brief posts that can be read or written in small snippets of time. This flexibility is convenient for young mothers. On the blog the author is free to protest modern motherhood expectations if so desired. Nothing is off limits. She may display, without censorship, both conformity to mother expectations and rebellious mothering attitudes. Mom blogs show motherhood in a way that is both constructed and authentic, both “raw and sanitized,” enacting “both resistance and a submission to the dominant discourses of motherhood” (Friedman, 2010, pp. 197, 201).

### **Socially Defined Standards of Good Mothering**

The socially defined, possibly unrealistic, contemporary good middle-class American mother standard requires a mother to practice ‘intensive mothering’. This term refers to a mother having total focus on the child and visibly making every effort to give the child every possible advantage (Hays, 1996). Stereotypical good mothers adhere to traditional gender roles and “...resemble June Cleaver. White, married, middle- or upper-class women,” (Friedman, 2010, p. 203). Socially defined good mothers are expected to be very similar and uniform in their mothering practices (Tardy, 2000). A good mother is expected to be “physically at home with her children... spending physical and psychological “quality time” with them...” and not becoming distracted from her mothering responsibilities by other diversions (Dillaway & Pare, 2008, p. 441). A good mother is expected to be completely self-sacrificing in order to meet the wants and needs of her family. She is expected to appear busy, productive, and successful in keeping her children clean, stimulated and healthy at any cost (her own health or needs are

secondary). She is expected to be patient, calm and always in emotional control in order to shield her child from her negative emotions (Lupton, 2000; Tardy, 2000).

### **Styles of Mothering Activities**

Being a good middle-class American mother generally requires one to *appear* to be a good mother. Often “a mother’s standing in the community depends on how well she performs [motherhood]” (Crittenden, 2010). A good mother’s performance of appropriate activities and behaviors should adhere to the traditional, conservative, child focused and selfless standards. Many mothers perform the overbooked mother-character in order to depict and justify their dedication to these activities (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). A mother often feels that her time should be invested in taking good care of the children and family because her family’s well being is frequently tied to a mother’s sense of self-worth (Tardy, 2000). Many mothers achieve this by publicly displaying their children in clean, attractive clothing complete with trendy, designer labels (Collett, 2005). The stereotypical “good mother” should appear to find fulfillment in her mother responsibilities (Lupton, 2000). Participating in selfish leisure activities is deemed inappropriate. Many mothers feel they should “flaunt extensive child-involvement in public” and be seen putting in large amounts of time supporting their children and aiding their success in leisure pursuits (Swanson, 2009, pp. 349, 350). This heavily invested behavior is frequently practiced with an attitude of love, nurturing, patience, and maturity (Swanson, 2009). Often, public discourse regarding accounts of non-normative mothering activities and behaviors are minimized or viewed as deviant within social dialogue (Dillaway & Pare, 2008; Friedman, 2010).

### **Hidden Aspects of Mothering**

The majority of mothering work takes place out of public view. Much of a mother’s labor is ‘invisible,’ tiring, unpaid and often unappreciated (DeVault, 1991; Hochschild, 1989).

Discussions of intimate and taboo domestic issues are concealed and confined to the private sphere behind closed doors. Despite the often joyful, rewarding experiences of motherhood, many mothers suffer pain, difficulties, and hardships which can result in their feeling unhappiness, sorrow, resentment and anger (Friedman, 2010; Hall & Irvine, 2009; Hochschild, 1989; Tardy, 2000). Conversations about these issues tend to take place in private, with a woman's most trusted confidants.

When mothers remove themselves from their mothering obligations, stepping out of the presence of their children or the public, they often relax and share intimate information with other mothers, much of which might be deemed inappropriate in other contexts (Tardy, 2000). Further, much of the talk of these hidden secrets tends to be composed of humorous stories of their mothering experiences. In these whispered, private conversations women exchange confidences that include complaints, confessions of mistakes, and embarrassing experiences. Many of these confessions are shared for the purpose of entertainment. These intimate secrets may contain details that would reveal the women as bad mothers. The Internet offers women a new location in which to meet others with similar values and lifestyles and publicly share such secrets (Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Tardy, 2000).

In this chapter I have reviewed the recent history of American mothering, the Internet as a resource, the value of online blogging, and the special role of mom blogs. Additionally, I addressed specific aspects of contemporary mothering including standards, styles, and mothering secrets. I will now address the methods used in this research, the procedures whereby I selected and immersed myself in the data and, following the logic of grounded theory, looked for emergent patterns in the findings which might clarify what was happening from the standpoint of the mothers participating.

## Methods

This research was conducted using a qualitative, inductive, grounded theory method to examine and interpret texts published in the posts of highly popular, “nationally ranked” American mom blogs as well as more common, ordinary “modest” mom blogs. Using this method was the best way to accomplish the purposes of my study which was to understand the perspectives of the mom bloggers as expressed through their published material. The focus of this study is to tell the story of the published text found on mom blogs, and of the contrasts between different types of blogs.

A grounded theory approach, as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008), was used in this study. Grounded theory strives to generate theoretical explanations for the findings, on the basis of relationships observed in the findings, as opposed to relationships posited in advance. I began by looking at the data, and only after achieving familiarity with the data was I prepared to search for suitable generalizations in the literature which might aid in understanding the findings.

I used *Netnography*, a specialized ethnographic research method adapted specifically for studying online communities and social behavior, for this study (Kozinets, 2002, 2010). I used the Netnographic guidelines specific to the study of blogs. This method has been successfully used in a variety of published research (Fuller, Jawecki, & Muehlbacher, 2007; Nimrod, 2011). The *Netnography* method assumes that online social experiences are similar to face-to-face interaction but have distinct differences. Online interactions take place in a neutral ‘place’ where participants have control over their portrayal. The researcher’s access to the population, the possible anonymity of participants, archived textual interactions and online ethics are some of the characteristics unique to online interactions. Online communities support the interaction of vast numbers of people, who are often diverse and anonymous (Chayko, 2008). To employ the

Netnographic method, one must use online tools to select a research site that is relevant, active, and data rich, then use digital means to take a relevant sample. My online data collection was followed by coding, analyzing, and interpreting the online data, while being cognizant of internet ethics and etiquette (Kozinets, 2010). A detailed account of these steps follows.

I began with research site selection. It is neither practical nor possible to sort through millions of blogs in order to identify those that are classified as mom blogs (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Therefore, after using an online search engine to identify where to obtain an appropriate sample, I chose to use the *Babble.com* list of “Top 50 Mommy Blogs of 2010.” *Babble.com* is a respected online magazine that was selected as one of the top 50 websites of 2010 by *Time* magazine (Time.com, 2010). *Babble.com*’s “Top 50 Mommy Blogs” were nominated by readers and voted on by a panel of parenting experts and experienced mom bloggers as being outstanding mom blogs (Babble.com, 2010). By selecting from *Babble.com*’s list of “Top 50 Mommy Blogs” this sample provides a wide variety of popular mom blogs that attract large numbers of readers and are likely to influence many women.

To qualify for inclusion in this study, nationally ranked blogs had to be on the *Babble.com* list of “Top 50 Mommy Blogs of 2010,” be written by self-identified American mothers, and have been actively posting during the first half of 2011. After a preliminary inspection of all “Top 50 Mommy Blogs,” a total of 45 blogs met these criteria. From this sample of 45 popular American mom blogs, I selected the top 15 ranked blogs. The selected blogs have been determined to be relevant, active, and data rich (Kozinets, 2010).

Next, with the aid of *Random.org*, an online service that generates random numbers, I randomly selected 10 posts per blog published between 1 January 2011, and 30 June, 2011. This 6 month period immediately followed the bestowal of the title of a “Top 50” blog. It was

intended that selecting posts from this brief period provided an accurate snapshot of these popular blogs during early 2011. Selecting posts in this manner resulted in a varied, unbiased representation of posts, covering holidays, school days, and two seasons.

In addition, ten non-nationally-ranked “modest” or amateur mom blogs were selected as a comparison sample. After conferring with a panel of other sociologists, I chose to select modest mom blogs that self-identified as originating from Muncie, Indiana, a city identified as “average” and “middle-America” (Bahr & Chadwick, 1985; Lynd and Lynd, 1929, 1937). For the purposes of this study, I believe these blogs serve as a good sample of ordinary mom blogs. I conducted multiple internet searches to locate 10 modest mom blogs that were listed as originating from the Muncie area, were authored by self-identified American mothers, that primarily addressed mothering and domestic issues, that posted actively within the first half of 2011, and that published a minimum of 10 blog posts in that time period. In order to obtain this “modest mom blog” comparison sample, searches of *Blogspot.com* and *Wordpress.com* blog sites were conducted. This research was difficult and time-consuming but after much work, these efforts resulted in the discovery of 10 modest mom blogs from Muncie, Indiana that met the selection criteria. Again, 10 posts per blog were randomly selected using numbers generated by *Random.org*. This resulted in a total of 249 relevant, active, data-rich mom blog posts collected for analysis (one post was a duplicate), that is, 150 nationally ranked and 99 modest mom blog posts. In this study, these posts will be combined at times as a total group of nationally ranked and modest mom blogs, and at other times will be compared.

Following the collection of the data, the data were organized and coded. All sampling, coding, and analysis was performed by the author. These activities utilized the grounded theory method outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008). I began by working through the data and

breaking it apart into blocks, a technique known as *open coding*. Very soon after, I began to conduct *axial coding*, or noticing how the open codes are related and form categories. Corbin and Strauss suggest that these two types of coding go hand in hand, and are most effective when used together. Following the completion of this portion of coding, I began the process of identifying a central, or “core” category. When looking through the categories formed through axial coding I noticed one category or theme that seemed to explain a large amount of the data. The majority of the data was found to be related to a mother’s carefully crafted presentation of her immediate experiences with motherhood as she negotiated adherence to social standards and the inevitable mistakes of her daily experiences in the mother role. Following identification of this core category, I began the next step in this procedure which was to integrate this category with theoretical explanations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This integration resulted in the findings I will present in this paper.

In addition, demographic information about the author was noted. Basic information included marital status, number of children, age-group of children, race, and geographic location (such as region of the U.S.). Such information is often openly available on the blog under the tab labeled “About.” A summary of this information follows in Table 1.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

### **Characteristics of the Sample**

Several characteristics of the sample bloggers were noted. Mom blogs in this sample originated from various regions of the U.S. The modest mom blogs were intentionally selected from the Midwest. The nationally ranked blogs originated primarily from the East Coast, with almost half of the sample of nationally ranked blogs stating that as their region of residence. The

next largest region was the West, followed by the South, and the Midwest. Within the sample time frame, one blogger moved and later published from a temporary home abroad.

The sample bloggers were all listed as married. Eighty-eight percent of the sample bloggers are Caucasian, with one black woman, and another two undetermined by the researcher.

In general, the nationally ranked bloggers differed in significant ways from the modest mom bloggers. Nationally ranked bloggers tended to have more years of mother experience, with the majority having an oldest child age five or older. They also had fewer children at the time of the sampling, with about 75% of them listing either 1 or 2 children. As a group, the nationally ranked blogs in the sample published about 17 posts per month. The modest mom bloggers generally had fewer years of mother experience, with their oldest child under the age of five. They all reported having at least 2 children, while 50% of them listed 3 or more children at the time of the sample. Sample modest mom bloggers published about 6 posts per month.

Eighty percent of the nationally ranked bloggers stated that they were educated professionals with post-secondary or graduate degrees and had successful careers in the workforce, outside of mothering. The majority of them were published authors. The authors of the “modest” mom blogs tended to be young, stay-at-home mothers. Only one modest mom blogger was listed as working full-time, and a couple stated they had flexible, part-time work. Overall, the modest mom blogs in the sample posted more family photos while the nationally ranked blogs posted more photos of the author herself or photos of other things such as travel destinations. The very popular nationally ranked bloggers are said to use their blog as a source of income, often earning large sums as a result (Belkin, 2011; Mendelsohn, 2010).

Within this paper these nationally ranked blog authors will also be known as professional bloggers. In contrast, modest mom bloggers in the sample, who appear to not receive monetary compensation of any kind for their blogging, will be referred to as amateur bloggers.

This chapter has explained the techniques and procedures used in the present research. Analysis of these data resulted in several interesting, potentially useful findings discussed in the following chapters.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

This chapter considers theoretical perspectives relevant to the present research. My review of the literature revealed several themes related to contemporary theoretical writing on social media and human interaction. Mary Chayko's portable media theory and the work of Erving Goffman offer theoretical insights relevant to my findings (Chayko, 2008; Goffman, 1959, 1961).

It is important to stress that, in line with grounded theory protocol, I collected the data, conducted preliminary coding and organization, and looked for patterns before deciding which existing concepts and theoretical perspectives applied to my project. Placing the "Theoretical Perspectives" chapter here does not suggest that I began with these perspectives, but rather that because I use them in discussing the findings it is convenient to introduce them here.

A discussion of online interaction begins with an acknowledgment that social media are widely used in contemporary America (Chayko, 2008; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Friedman, 2010). Their use has enabled the sharing of information and establishment of online communities, such as the online mother community, and given individuals the opportunity to participate in extreme impression management activities (Lopez, 2009). The current research

illustrates this function of social media: mom blogs have become a tool to fill the isolated mothers' need for information, support, and acknowledgement.

Chayko's theory is important in understanding the context where these interactions take place. By accessing what Chayko calls *portable communities*, meaning online communities electronically accessible from anywhere, mothers are able to make connections that allow them to experience *cognitive resonance* with others as they explore their new identity as a mother. Cognitive resonance draws from Durkheim and refers to members of a group mentally looking to shared symbols and rituals within the specific community, resulting in their feeling mentally united and connected. This mental connection exists independent of physical proximity. Members of an online community who share this resonance through looking to common symbols and participating in similar rituals (in this case, motherhood) feel mentally and emotionally united (Chayko, 2008). As a result of their commonalities, they experience feelings of like-mindedness and understanding. Members of these online communities are able to gather and connect mentally, or cognitively, without having physical co-presence. This is especially valuable to marginalized groups such as mothers who can now enjoy easy access to similar others and experience feelings of solidarity and validation without having to physically leave their homes (Lopez, 2009). Blogs, as a form of social media, allow millions to participate conveniently in meaningful, customized social interaction (Chayko, 2008).

In the past, human interaction took place primarily in face-to-face settings with all parties present. Digitized spaces, such as cell phones and the Internet, now provide a "place" where face-to-face interaction can occur without the requirement of physical co-presence. Through computer-mediated communication one can advertise oneself to the world at anytime from anywhere. One can interact with friends around the corner or around the world (Jenkins, 2010).

Chayko calls these types of relationships *sociomental connections*; connections which are absolutely real yet lack physical co-presence. Sharing feelings, developing understanding, and establishing intimate connections are not physical exchanges, they are mental connections.

These connections are virtually boundless. Due to technological advancements in digital communication, modern social interaction is no longer limited by physical space or time (Chayko, 2008; Jenkins, 2010; Ling, 2010). Audio and visual digital communication takes place at high velocity and can result in real-time conversations. Online communication takes place in a highly detailed way, either on a synchronous or asynchronous schedule. The back-and-forth of conversations occur at each participant's convenience and without the loss of detail whether immediate or delayed. Online dialogues can be archived and accessed at any later time.

The computer-mediated interactions comprising portable communities differ from co-present face-to-face interactions. Some research finds that people are more likely to be dishonest when not physically co-present, and that interpersonal trust develops more slowly through computer-mediated communication than in physical co-presence (Roseth, Saltarelli, & Glass, 2011; Wilson, Straus, & McEvily, 2006; Zimbler & Feldman, 2011). Conversely, Chayko finds that the online community actually reduces one's inhibitions, resulting in increased honesty and personal revelations (Chayko, 2008). The online environment often encourages one to extend one's personal identity. The resulting online identity is most often a 'fixed-up' version of the truth rather than a completely false identity. Online interaction consists of the subject presenting a self, often in a surprisingly honest fashion, conversing with others, and participating in dialogue (Poe, 2011, p. 235).

In addition to Chayko's portable community theory, the interpersonal dynamics of portable communities can be understood through Erving Goffman's social theory. Goffman's

theory of Dramaturgy takes a theatrical viewpoint when examining and interpreting human behavior (Goffman, 1959, 1961). His conceptualization of audience, roles, front stage, backstage, and props can be readily applied in explaining the dynamics of online communities. I have focused on a few specific aspects of Goffman's theory in this case, namely his work on impression management, role distancing, and front stage/backstage behavior.

Humans are social actors who craft an impression of the self to show others. *Impression management* is used to successfully stage a character. It involves "accentuating certain facts and concealing others," (Goffman, 1959, p. 65). Such accentuation and concealment should not be viewed as negative. It is common for people to strive to show their best face in public.

Through impression management, one controls the information available to the audience and keeps mistakes, gaffes, and blunders out of view. This is especially important when performing for audiences one doesn't know well. People want to conceal their flaws and appear perfect or model when they know they are being evaluated (Goffman, 1959). Impression management allows one to appear ideal. Unflattering information can be concealed or omitted. Digital communication provides an ideal stage where one can advertise oneself to the world with a carefully crafted, specific identity (Jacobsen, 2010, pp. 263 - 264). Mom blogs provide a way for mothers to present a customized representation of themselves to an audience of their peers in ways never before possible (Friedman, 2010).

Impression management techniques used on the new media stage can be better understood by recognizing Chayko's theoretical similarity to Goffman. Chayko, expanding upon Goffman, highlights the portable community's ability to take advantage of opportunities to practice impression management. A blogger can play up specific, ideal personal behavior and characteristics, and omit others. Chayko extends Goffman's ideas on front and backstage

performances by explaining how portable communities open the passage door and expose more of the backstage (which often contains unflattering information) while simultaneously tightening their control over what is actually exposed, and when.

Online, mothers can use impression management techniques to portray and show off their interpretation of “good mother” standards; they report their personal performance of common mothering skills, rituals, and experiences. Feelings of discouragement resulting from the difficulties of motherhood can be validated by audience members who have had similar experiences. Online discussion of similar experiences normalizes the hardships of the role (Chayko, 2008; Hall & Irvine, 2009). A mom blogger’s potential audience may be composed of millions of readers and is conveniently accessible within the walls of her own home, anytime day or night. Brief posts make it convenient for mom blog readers and writers to participate in small segments of time. This is particularly advantageous for busy mothers. Bloggers have total authority over what is published and are free to embellish or omit information to create a desired portrayal of events (Friedman, 2010).

Blogging provides a way to easily use impression management techniques to edit one’s own story (Chayko, 2008; Stern, 2004). Some mom bloggers censor their posts in order to better comply with the traditional cultural standards and expectations of motherhood (Friedman, 2010, p. 202). Recent work by Collett (2005) shows that through exposing carefully staged images of their children, “women are able to show themselves and others that they are good capable mothers who care about their children.” By highlighting these facts in front of an audience of supportive others who have had similar experiences, a mother can feel validation (Chayko, 2008; Madge & O’Connor, 2006). Appearances play an important part in constructing and maintaining who we are and who we want to be (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, a mother’s use of “impression

management is more than just performance” (Collett, 2005, p. 343). It is a tool needed for the construction of one’s identity.

Bloggers actively engage in impression management by publishing posts that draw attention to certain, selective personal information (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Confessing a mistake in a portable community of mothers often solicits support that contributes to normalizing this aspect of mothering (Hall & Irvine, 2009). In addition, “bloggers deliberately craft their narratives so that others can recognize their similarities and shared interests,” (Lopez, 2009, p. 744). Addressing these shared symbols and rituals of the mother experience can unify the portable community members and develop strong feelings of intimacy (Chayko, 2008; Madge & O’Connor, 2006). Many share highly personal experiences that may be unflattering.

Popular bloggers exhibit a high rate of self-revelation; making confessions, showing off skills or talents, or sharing the unflattering or the embarrassing (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). When an individual acts in a way to destroy a polite appearance she ‘creates a scene’. This ‘scene’ provides an audience with an unexpected behind-the-scenes view and witnesses often become ill at ease and embarrassed (Goffman, 1959, pp. 210 - 212). Mom bloggers frequently post irreverent, humorous material and use humor to make the audience more comfortable when exposed to inappropriate behavior or taboo subjects. Often popular bloggers speak intimately and offer a surprisingly candid look into their backstage region.

Goffman explains the significance of regions of human behavior known as front stage or backstage (Goffman, 1959). The front region, or front stage, is where the public performance is given to an audience. It has a fixed setting. One’s front stage manner is polite, and conforms to social norms. The backstage area is usually hidden, and is a private place where front stage

impressions can be knowingly contradicted. Props used to enhance the portrayal can be stored and put away. This backstage area is private; unseen by the audience. Here the performer can relax, step out of character, and drop his 'front.' People usually keep the hypothetical 'passage door' between stages closed to control backstage information and prevent the audience from seeing it. (For example: a customer is asked to leave an object for repair so it can be fixed in private, where the tear apart, flubs and mistakes in the process won't be seen. The customer will only see the repaired item, and the successful work of the repair-person.) Some things take place strictly backstage. Goffman points out that most of one's biological needs are taken care of backstage, in private (as are many mothering activities).

Goffman asserts that performance regions can be seen in the set-up of a house. In many homes there are dividing lines, such as bedrooms and bathrooms, for ensuring backstage privacy, and well-decorated front-stage rooms are where the guests are welcome (Goffman, 1959, pp. 113, 114, 121, 123). Similarly, the online blog format conveniently provides a dividing line between the author's front-stage character and performance and her back-stage world and behaviors. No one can see the author's backstage behavior without her permission. She can open or shut the backstage doors, and decide what to publish, and what stays hidden.

A performer will attempt to make performances consistent with the identity attributed to him (Goffman, 1961). However, individuals often feel heavy social judgment in relation to how well they perform their roles (Chriss, 1999). This can lead to weakening ties to and distancing from a particular role. Often a performer wishes to declare that a single role does not define the whole person.

When a mother distances herself from the mother role, she momentarily pushes away from that role and demonstrates that she is not only a mother; she is more. She wants her

audience to be aware that she is invested and involved in other roles too. Her entire identity does not hinge on the mother role alone. Role distancing helps with tension management that arises from imperfect performance of a role and resulting social judgment. Role distancing attempts to persuade an audience that even if one makes mistakes in one role, that doesn't mean one is not competent in another role (Goffman, 1961).

Role distancing in mom blogs is often accompanied by humor. People use humor in order to reduce social judgments. The actor suggests, "I don't take my mistakes very seriously and neither should you." Joking can be utilized as another way to show an audience that one's entire identity is not invested solely in the performance of one specific role (Goffman, 1961, pp. 104, 107).

Goffman's insights regarding role distancing, in addition to his views on performance regions and impression management are used in this research. As I began to analyze my data, it became evident that my findings both support and challenge Goffman's theory. On one hand, mom bloggers use impression management to show successes and highlight standard good mothering behavior. Much of mothering takes place backstage and it is often invisible work. The mom blog allows accounts of these activities to be placed on a front stage. Modest mom blogs are likely to post content that depicts the author's participation in traditional, good mothering. On the other hand, in the case of high-readership professional blogs, much backstage material is sensationalized and posted for the world to see, seemingly for its entertainment value. The mom bloggers frequently expose the backstage region on the front stage, often presenting an unflattering impression. These blogs often highlight mother behavior that could be considered unusual; posting about taboo subjects in public, showing one's mistakes, sharp complaints, or childish behavior. What is unique here is the context of the display. The audience consists of

‘strangers’ who happen to be like-minded others. This audience can be thought of as something like a support-group. Backstage information is publicly posted to an audience who is likely familiar with this behavior.

Material composed of traditional, common motherhood symbols and rituals is dominant in mom blog texts. Modest mom blogs publish more about common, traditional mothering experiences than nationally ranked blogs do. Publicly portraying a multifaceted image of mothering may lead readers to develop feelings of validation and support and help to normalize the various, less-than-perfect aspects of the contemporary mothering experience.

In summary, Goffman and Chayko provide the theoretical framework within which my research is interpreted. Goffman’s dramaturgical approach, particularly his concepts of front and backstage performances, impression management techniques and role distancing were useful in my analysis. Also helpful were Chayko’s concepts of *portable communities*, *sociomental connections*, and *cognitive resonance* as they aid in understanding the context of these portrayals of motherhood.

### **Redefining Acceptable ‘Good Mother’ Standards and Symbols**

Following my analysis of the data, a core concept emerged. This researcher finds that the majority of the data in this sample was composed of highly controlled messages of the ordinary mother’s immediate experiences ‘in the trenches’ of day-to-day motherhood both complying with and differing from ideal contemporary standards and expectations. These messages may potentially shape the values and role definitions of a growing community of online mothers. My findings suggest that a major portion of published mom blog text tends to be composed of three aspects of the core concept including, 1) discussing common standards of contemporary motherhood while reexamining and redefining acceptable mothering standards and symbols, 2)

displaying the variation among individual styles of performing contemporary mothering rituals including women's attitudes and behaviors, and finally 3) exposing mothers' confessions of often unseen, even secret, sentiments and experiences. This chapter will address the first finding regarding the prominence of mom bloggers' portrayals of adherence to and diversion from traditional, symbolic good mother standards.

### **Redefining the Mother Role**

The first theme discovered in the posted mom blog material addressed traditional standards of motherhood (which can be seen as symbols of good mothering role expectations) and material suggesting a movement towards redefinition of the acceptable standards of contemporary good mothering. The mom blog provides a productive location for this discussion to take place. According to Chayko (2008), within the portable online community one can participate in acts of self discovery. Mothers who have assembled at these specific mother-related blogs can explore contemporary aspects, standards, symbols, and definitions of the good mother role. This online mother community provides a safe place where participants may reveal that which is not widely accepted. The online audience, which is largely composed of members united by their shared experiences, is often supportive and intimacy is created among members of the portable community through the disclosure of feelings (Chayko, 2008; Hall & Irvine, 2009; Madge & O'Connor, 2006).

My analysis revealed that much of the text on these mom blogs illustrated the bloggers' traditional mothering behaviors and their efforts to meet the symbolic good mother standards. Blogs in the sample published a variety of stories and images recounting the bloggers' participation in traditional mothering experiences such as loving, nurturing, and caring for children, dealing with meals, laundry, and other homemaking work. The nationally ranked, high

readership blogs, posted considerable text depicting the authors' performance of youthful, edgy, irreverent, non-traditional mothering. These bloggers often portrayed themselves in a way that did not conform to traditional mothering standards. These images portrayed a redefined standard of good mothering that may potentially influence *sociomentally connected* audience members to reflect on their own common mothering experiences and expectations (Chayko, 2008).

Consistent with other research, I suggest that exposure to this new, unconventional mother standard could lead to increased national dialogue among the online community members and a possible reworking of the modern definition of good mother (Lopez, 2009) .

Mom blog posts containing this 'redefinition' theme were divided into three topics which challenged the assumption that acceptable standards of good mothering expect a mother to always act 1) traditional, proper, and virtuous, 2) selfless and self-sacrificing, and 3) mature, matronly; being a good example for children. To the degree that behavior and attitudes modeled in these posts were seen as acceptable, traditional standards of good mothering were challenged and redefined by material frequently posted on these blogs.

**Redefined: The proper and virtuous mother.** First, much of the mom blog material in the sample portrayed the contemporary middle-class mom bloggers as both adhering to and challenging the assumption that a good mother must always be proper, chaste, and virtuous. On one hand, the majority of modest mom blog text reflected the image of a traditional, proper mother. Amateur, modest mom blogs published material depicting the good mother as one who lives a moral, reserved life and does not use vulgar or profane language. On the other hand, many professional, nationally ranked mom blogs posted material depicting mothers that challenged this proper mother definition.

A significant portion of the modest mom blog posts illustrated a portrayal of traditional good mother standards by recounting events that showed the mother acting in a courteous and thoughtful manner. Many modest mom blog posts included photos showing the children as happy, clean, healthy, and well dressed. Photos showed children participating in fun activities such as birthday celebrations, playing with toys, or playing at a park. These photo *props* indicated that the mother was successful in taking good care of the children. They suggested that the mother behaved as expected; with dignity and in traditional ways. Her activities can be seen as a symbol of good mothering to audience-member-mothers who may feel they have performed similar traditional mothering tasks. Other modest mom blog posts that depicted traditional, upstanding mothering behaviors read as follows:

After the flurry of the holiday season and traveling, I assumed I would have more time. But I forgot that oh so long to-do list of all the things I pushed back because of the holidays. Oops. So I took a few weeks to figure out pictures and videos, updating and moving my [internet craft] shop, knitting little boys their much-needed balaclavas, starting a new Parent and Child group and many more other things (Ones I must have blocked out!)

Today was very full but satisfying. I was able to forget we were moving and focus on the moment. Despite having a sick fevery [sic] boy, I got to get on my bike... Later, I ran errands, which normally are less than joyful. And some were not all that fun – give up a little blood, off to discuss ‘issues’ at the sweeper store where I got my new vacuum, return an item elsewhere... to put the icing on the cake of a day, my food processor and immersion blender arrived early. Whipped cream for our fruit dinner... made for a very

satisfying end to the day. And a little boy's delight in the packaging was just fantastic.

(mmb17)

Another modest mom blog posted the following text:

I should be taking a nap as I write this, but I have too much on my mind to go to sleep...J is refusing to go take a nap, because in a very whiny voice he keeps insisting, "I'm not tired." I want to whine right along with him and say, "I am very tired!" ... last night was an example of a typical night. E was crying and yelling at 9:40pm but this time she was crying in her sleep. Around 10:30, I jumped out of bed when someone yelled "Mommy!" I opened my eyes to find J standing with his face right next to mine! When I asked him what was wrong he said very sadly, "I can't sleep." He was running a fever, so I gave him some ibuprofen. He had scared me so much that it took forever for me to go back to sleep. Then [the baby] woke up around 4:30am she nursed and went right back to sleep. No big deal right? Wrong! When I tried to go back to sleep [I] couldn't. I got up, poured myself a cup of juice, got on my computer...

There are boxes of kids' clothing stacked in my living room because my kids are all growing. Thankfully J is passing some things on to E. I just remembered I need to buy J some new jeans because he is outgrowing [his] old ones. [The baby] is now wearing the same size that E was wearing last fall. It feels like I just boxed those clothes up and I'm getting them out again!

I know very well that I am not a perfect Mom, but I am trying to be a better Mom and I really think that is what counts. That and the fact that I love my four little people, my husband, and my God more than anything else in the whole wild world. (mmb18)

These excerpts highlight mothers living up to ‘proper mother’ standards by performing traditional mothering activities. The posts detail the love and effort a good mother invests in caring for her family. The traditional, proper, socially acceptable mother behaviors of caring for home and family were seen frequently throughout the posts of the modest mom blogs. Readers who have participated in similar daily events can relate and may view these activities to be symbols of good mothering. Though posts did not portray perfection, they illustrated the mother as moral, polite, and home and family focused. The posts depicted good mothers as those who willingly sacrifice to care for the children and do so with maturity and optimism. Enduring sleepless nights, comforting children, and working hard to keep the household running are considered part of the traditional mother role. Many women find happiness and satisfaction in this demanding work. Published accounts of mothers busily managing home and family responsibilities with love and concern exemplify traditional, virtuous, intensive mothering behaviors. Another example of a traditional, proper good mother is contained in the following post, which reads:

My darling husband is one that loves to push himself. Last week he learned that he does have limitations. After working a full day he needed to go back to work at 9pm. [Work] lasted longer than he was expecting and headed home at 2:30 am. He got about halfway home when he dozed off. He drifted off the road... the car rolled one time...He called me at 3:30 am from an ambulance to come and get him at the scene. Through a miracle he only got a few small cuts. I am extremely grateful that he was OK. My little boys would be lost without their daddy. (mmb22)

In this excerpt, the blogger was recounting a frightening incident. In this account she speaks politely, and is well-mannered, though expressing both fearful concern and gratitude. She

depicts herself as a proper, loving adult. She expresses feelings of love and affection her “darling husband”, as well as acknowledging the children’s love for him. In the post, she shared the story of this stressful event without profane language. She recounted this alarming experience calmly and maturely. Though she could have chosen to relate the story to her audience with elaborate, dramatic detail or profanity, she did not.

The online mothering community can offer women social support (Madge & O'Connor, 2006). By posting the above story, the mom blogger seems to trust that others will relate and offer words of support (Chayko, 2008). In her post, she portrayed herself as adhering to acceptable social standards by being a mature, loving woman.

According to Goffman’s theory of impression management, the individual controls the information available to her audience. Favorable details are deliberately highlighted, and information harmful to one’s desired portrayal of a role is hidden. The above accounts depict the mothers as adhering to traditional good mother standards. Reading mothers who also aspire to these standards may relate and feel validated. Many of the sample mom blogs highlighted adherence to common, traditionally acceptable mothering standards. However, some mom blogs used impression management techniques to intentionally post the *unfavorable* and *unflattering*, often using vulgar language. Many posts depicted the mother as one who rejected the traditional good mother standards and deliberately used profane language and a rough tone.

Several posts from the professional, nationally ranked mom blogs contained material that portrayed contemporary good mothers as frank and crass. A post that seems to redefine good mother standards by highlighting a mother’s less than proper or virtuous tone reads: “If the babies are cooperative with their genitals, we’ll get to find out their sex(es). In the meantime, I am [expletive] my unitard in anticipation/excitement” (nr08).

This mother was excited to learn about the gender of her twin babies. This is an event likely experienced by millions of contemporary mothers. By her choice of words she portrayed herself as one who doesn't always speak in a traditionally proper, virtuous-mother manner. She shows her audience a new type of good mother who loves her children but speaks with a little coarse language and some vulgar style. As a good mother, the blogger was happy about learning more about her unborn children, but she deliberately posted her comments with a non-traditional mother style. Her representation challenges the traditional virtuous, good mother standard. Showing this to the online community of mothers may influence a redefinition of contemporary good mothering standards.

Professional, nationally ranked blogs often posted material that challenged the standard of the always-proper and virtuous good mother. This demonstrates how the mom blog can be used as a platform to show affinity for what may not be widely accepted. Online communities provide a place for non-traditional issues to be presented and discussed (Chayko, 2008). The sample mom blogs included material that portrayed women living by the traditional intensive-mother standard of deep love and selfless care for family. However, that type of material occurred infrequently on the nationally ranked blogs. More often, nationally ranked mom blogs posted material that portrayed the contemporary mother-author as a new, different type of good mother; slightly coarse, a little improper, and not shy about using somewhat vulgar language. The bloggers appeared to be comfortable portraying themselves as adhering to a different or non-traditional standard. One nationally ranked mom blogger wrote:

I was worried [the man in the raven suit would] peck out my liver. Or sacrifice me on his altar, or at the very least give me bird lice. *Little girl nooooo don't gooooooooooooo!* *Your mom 'll be combing that [expletive] out for months!* Oh, and that burning thing there

in the foreground? It's a torch. Made of a roll of toilet paper. That's been soaked in biodiesel. The costumes are generally fantastic, unless you're me, whose creative zenith thus far has been a gray sweatsuit for [my child] supplemented by a long felt tail: "You're a mouse. Or a rat. Or possibly a lemur. Let's hang you from this branch and see." [Post is accompanied by several photos.] (nr05)

This humorous post illustrates this contemporary mother's unique personality. She posted material that illustrated her comical fear of being attacked by a man in a bird suit while also confessing her lack of traditional intensive-mother-skilled-homemaker costume making skills. She tossed in some profane language and also joked about her child's ambiguous, home-made animal costume. This carefully crafted, lighthearted look at mothering does not portray the author as one diligently adhering to the traditional good mother expectations. The blogger appears to trust that her audience may have had similar experiences and can relate to her honest revelation of lacking perfect domestic skills. If any readers have had similar experiences with imperfect attempts at costume-making, they are likely to feel a connection with this mother. By disclosing her imperfect actions and feelings, the blogger contributed to feelings of unity among mothers in this online community (Chayko, 2008). She can illustrate that a good mother doesn't have to be a proper, perfect homemaker, thus moving away from the traditional standard. Her joking about lacking homemaking skills serves as a tool for role distancing and suggests to the reader that her identity is not limited to her performance of the mother role. In addition, her humorous take on mothering can also offer enjoyable entertainment to her readers.

Many of the nationally ranked blogs posted material that contained profuse amounts of humor and were frequently laced with profanity and vulgarity. This material was specifically chosen to be published by the blogger. They often posted material that humorously addressed

issues that might be deemed inappropriate for a proper, virtuous mother, such as drugs and alcohol. Two examples illustrate texts portraying this redefined 'edgy mother' image. The first reads: "We have never driven anywhere with [our baby] in the car for more than thirty minutes. MAYBE THIRTY-FIVE IF WE'VE SMOKED SOME WEED," (nr04). Another reads: "Guess what? Guess what guess what! I AM FEELING SLIGHTLY KIND OF A LITTLE BETTER. The turnabout came from the proper combination of drugsdrugsdrugs [sic]. I have been experiencing something that can only be described as "HOLY [expletive] EXHAUSTION," (nr15).

These excerpts again illustrate published content that portrayed mothers speaking differently than what one would expect from a virtuous, intensive mother. Joking about marijuana use, talking of drugs, and using a little profanity do not adhere to the traditional, proper, good mother definition. These mothers portrayed themselves as good mothers who were a little rough around the edges. The bloggers posted material in an open and honest way and readers may be able to relate. The mom blog allows women to share backstage, unflattering information. By doing so, the blogger can provide readers with a sense that their own similar, untraditional mothering characteristics are actually normal (Tardy, 2000, p. 455). However, much of the online, backstage content is shared for laughs and is not intended to relay factual information (Tardy, 2000).

These professional, nationally ranked mom bloggers chose to post material with an edge. They choose to depict characteristics that one would not expect from a well-mannered, traditional intensive-mother. Instead of using impression management techniques to highlight conformity, they used them to highlight the unusual, showing that variation from the standard is actually normal. They published content that depicted good mothers as non-traditional, slightly

coarse women who make irreverent observations, and sometimes enjoy talking about the self rather than the children. Nationally ranked bloggers publish frequently and often discuss topics outside of mothering and domestic life. Much of this content portrayed contemporary mothers as youthful and well informed. Instead of sharing stories of conservative, traditional mother experiences, the blogger posted material that portrayed her as distinctly individual, confident, trendy, and current. She published material that showed she hadn't forfeited her youthful (perhaps immature) personality just because she became a mother. There are likely many daily events where the blogger behaved in a more conservative, traditional, nurturing, intensive-mother manner, but on her blog, she published material that showed readers she's not a boring, proper, meek, old-fashioned mother. By publishing this type of text, the blogger suggests that animated, irreverent women can be good, loving mothers. She adheres to a new standard. Those with similar mothering experiences can view this as a shared symbol of contemporary mothering (Chayko, 2008).

Humor was a prominent element of much of the material posted on the sample mom blogs. Bloggers showed a good sense of humor to be an important characteristic of contemporary, trendy mother. Often the humor incorporated profanity and seemed to challenge the proper, virtuous mother standard. The bloggers frequently posted comical material related to common mothering events. By sharing this type of material bloggers enable readers to feel that they can relate as they laugh together at comically imperfect mother behavior (Chayko, 2008).

The humor can serve as stress relief for reading mothers who may be facing similar experiences.

One humorous post reads:

A few months ago I got an email from a company focused on 'protecting my child from identity theft', but I told them I wasn't interested because I don't know anyone who

would intentionally choose to be my child. My 6 year old is awesome, but she lives in a one-bedroom bedroom and she's not allowed to go outside without a grown-up. Plus, she can't reach the booze cabinet... Then they said that they were talking about people stealing my daughter's identity for credit purposes, and they explained that I had confused them with Invasion of the Body Snatchers, which was an awesome movie, but apparently not a documentary. The idea still seemed ridiculous though, because [she] is terrible with money and I assume her credit score is awful. Last week I needed money to buy corn dogs so I traded her two quarters for the five dollar bill she'd gotten from the tooth-fairy, and when she asked me if that was a good deal I told her it totally was because "quarters are heavier than a five dollar bill" and she totally bought it. (PS the corndogs were for her. Stop judging me.) (nr10)

The contemporary mother portrayed in the nationally ranked blogs possesses a great sense of humor and an untraditional outlook. The blogger above ends her post confessing that she tricked her child, but did so for the child's benefit, so she shouldn't be judged. Aspects of her story seem very familiar to the average American, such as the issue of "identity theft." Many readers can relate and laugh. Blogging provides a venue for mothers with a sharp sense of humor to help themselves and their readers to laugh at themselves, their mothering attitudes, and their mothering experiences. Reading audiences are likely to enjoy this humor, and relate. By posting humorous mothering material, the blogger adds a new dimension to the definition of good mothers. They portray good mothers as optimistically imperfect, quick witted, and bright, willing to deviate a bit from the strictly virtuous mother standard.

**Redefined: The selfless, meek, and self-sacrificing mother.** The second way mom blogs influence a redefinition of the acceptable standards of good mothering is by publishing

material that challenges the idea that a good mother must always be self-sacrificing and meek. Much of the material published on the sample mom blogs presented mom bloggers as valuing their individual worth by being autonomous, opinionated, young women who are not shy about standing up for themselves. Putting a mother's wants or needs above those of the child would traditionally be considered the cardinal sin of mothering (Douglas, 2004).

Nationally ranked bloggers often posted text that portrayed them as modern mothers with strong opinions and bold self-confidence. Bloggers often depicted themselves as being frank, assertive, and unwilling to back down to critics. The following post demonstrates a confident mom blogger posting an account of her standing up to critics, declaring her right to blog:

So there you have it. [This critic] has determined which successes are acceptable for mothers, and which qualify as actual achievements. Here's the thing, oh mom-blog-hating denizens of the internet: writers write because we are writers. That's who we are. And you know what? My story is no more or less valid than any other mother's here on the web. If you have found your bliss through a blogging platform, you have the right to be here. Anyone who says otherwise is, frankly an [expletive]. (nr13)

Not only did this mother post an excerpt standing up for a mother's right to blog, but she also snapped back at critics and used strong language. She posted material that portrayed a strong, confident woman. In this post she defended the millions of mothers who find happiness in blogging. She boldly states that mothers have the right to engage in any activity they find worthwhile. This posted material shows the author as a strong woman. Strong mothers are good for children (Crittenden, 2010, p. 119).

Similar to other online communities, mom blog community members can recognize shared experiences and look to them as symbols of the contemporary mother experience,

potentially enhancing the readers' own feelings of validation and unity (Chayko, 2008). The bloggers' posted material may influence a new standard that suggests that good mothers need not be meek or reserved. Modern good mothers can be vocal, blunt, and bold.

The professional, nationally ranked mom blogs also tended to redefine acceptable mothering by posting material that challenged the need for self-sacrifice and illustrated a woman's right to maintain her personal, independent-woman behavior, clothing, or autonomous style. She need not sacrifice her own wants or needs anymore. One blogger posted an account of her attendance at an extremely popular vocal artist's concert and the youthful, unconventional maternity outfit she wore. She posts:

Before that moment, I'd only really remembered that yes, I was indeed waddling around a Lady Gaga concert while pregnant when I saw everybody else's outfits and costumes. ... I went with a black lacy minidress... bright purple tights, and a pair of over-the-knee black boots that I affectionately refer to as my Hooker Pirate Boots. Oh, and glow-in-the-dark Silly Bandz [thin rubber bracelets] and a glittery purple headband that dug into my skull after an hour but [expletive], I kept that sucker on all night like it was my own Alexander McQueen Lobster Shoe. I WILL SUFFER FOR MY HALF-ASSED FASHION.

I think attending a Lady Gaga concert should definitely be on every woman's list of Top Five Things To Do While Six Months Pregnant, because I had an absolute [expletive] blast, and would do it again in a heartbeat. (nr15)

This post depicts a mother attending to her own wants. She is portrayed as behaving in an independent, youthful way and not missing out, sacrificing her own wants. She attended an energetic concert and wore flashy concert attire. She told readers she didn't dress or behave like

one might expect from a traditional, matronly self-sacrificing mother trying to model conservative modesty and virtue. She participated in the lively concert experience dressed like a youthful, independent, effervescent woman because she wanted to. This type of material shows the readers that in contrast to the traditional self-sacrificing intensive mother expectation, a mother's own likes and wants should matter as much as those of the other family members (Friedman, 2010). If a 6 month pregnant woman wants to dress trendy and attend a big concert, she absolutely may. This post illustrates the blogger's role-distancing by showing that her identity is composed of much more than her mother role. Readers who have a sociomental relationship in the portable community with the blogger can enjoy the story and images of her experience, and live somewhat vicariously through these accounts (Chayko, 2008). They are exposed to the idea that their own wants deserve to be met. The blogger portrayed a mothering standard that encourages a mother to enjoy and value herself as an individual, and not only as a caretaker. Reading mothers can look to this portrayal of contemporary mothering and feel validated in their own similar outlooks. This material may encourage readers to recognize that they have a right to behave this way too, if desired. This type of post suggests that the conservative good-mother definition may be in need of expansion, and mothers who recognize their individual worth and attend to their own wants and needs can still be good mothers.

According to the traditional, self-sacrificing, child-focused definition a good intensive-mother would shun immature, self-indulgent, non-child-centered behavior. A traditional good mother is defined as one who is always present and forgoes personal activities that may take her away from the child (Dillaway & Pare, 2008). The above nationally ranked blog post presents an account of the blogger's activities as a contemporary, non-traditional good mother who does what she wants and retains her own sense of individual identity. She focuses on her own desires

sometimes. Her published post characterized the mom blogger as one not limited or restrained by her mother status. Role distancing allows her to illustrate that she is more than ‘just a mother.’ The above experience was described on the blog with some profanity; exposing readers to her somewhat non-traditional mother personality. Impression management techniques were used in this posted material to intentionally highlight her non-traditional mothering style. This type of content suggests to the reader that this is common, acceptable contemporary American mothering behavior. “If I can do it, you can too. No need to stay home, or miss out just because you are a mother!” Considering the high readership of the nationally ranked blogs, readers are noticing and seem to enjoy the saucy, occasionally self-focused, non-traditional mother definition.

**Redefined: the mature, role-model mother.** The mom blogs I analyzed promoted a redefinition of acceptable good mother standards by posting material that challenged a mother’s need to be a mature, good role model for her children. The traditional good mother is defined as one who ensures the child’s “proper” development (Dillaway & Pare, 2008). She should be a good example of conventional, socially acceptable behavior. Many nationally ranked mom blogs challenged this by publishing text that portrayed the mother as rude, childish and unrestrained instead of modeling mature behavior. By the blogger’s posting depictions of immature mothering, her readers may identify and relate. Recognizing their similarities, they may feel cognitive resonance (Chayko, 2008). Audience members who have had similar experiences may feel validated and feel that these types of behaviors are normal in contemporary mothering (Hall & Irvine, 2009).

Several nationally ranked blogs posted material that portrayed the mom blogger as immature and rude. This again challenged the traditional good mother definition of mother as a

proper, good role model for the children (Dillaway & Pare, 2008). The mom bloggers often posted text that portrayed them as engaging in irreverent, rowdy behavior when the children were not present. By using impression management techniques and carefully selecting these particular stories, bloggers promote a new definition of contemporary motherhood. The following post related the carefully crafted, published story of the mom blogger out with her girlfriends and her behaving in a rude, childish way. This excerpt is representative of material published by several nationally ranked bloggers who confessed their uniqueness, their sometimes rough, non-motherly behavior, and use of vulgar and profane language. A mom blogger posted:

[The] Sushi was fantastic, especially when the server walked up and said, "The manager says you have a blog? It's called douche.com?" I'm recounting this specifically because I really want to brighten the day of some of my haters. Oh, how original they think they are when referring to me that way. S and C were about to correct her, but I was like YES. That is EXACTLY what my blog is. *VAGINA ALL THE TIME*.

We were almost finished with dinner ... I have a bit of an issue when it comes to seeing movies in theaters. Okay, a huge issue, and I'm really sensitive about it, and this is me being vulnerable and serious: The world will end if I miss the previews. We were pushing it on time ... and I started to get jittery. Everyone was like, dude, what is up? And I was like, DUDE, *THE PREVIEWS*. H finally piped up and said, "OH NO. You're one of *those*."

Several minutes passed and no one was showing any indication of urgency, so I had to do what I had to do. I slapped my palm in the middle of the table and then belched a good third of the alphabet. Loudly. Oh hell yes, IT HAD COME TO BURPING.

I knew that THIS, this giant squawking burst of air would show them just how much I meant business. Apparently, though, it also scared the living [expletive] out of the woman sitting at the table next to us. ... It got them moving, all right. They didn't want to be seen too close to the belching woman who blogs about vaginas.

As we got up to leave I approached the woman sitting at the other table and apologized. "I'm sorry about that burp," I said. "You see, we're going to be late to a movie and there is the slightest chance that we might miss the previews and then we'd all die. I had to get my [expletive] ON THEIR GAME". (nr04)

By publishing this particular story, complete with detailed accounts of rude behavior and profanity, the author portrayed herself as one who crossed the traditional good mother boundary and confidently behaved in childish, irreverent way by burping, swearing, and being impatient and rude. She posted an account that showed her defying the traditional good-role-model standard. She posted material that specifically illustrated a different facet of her identity. Perhaps readers have behaved immaturely at one time or another and can relate. Seeing similar others in the portable community can give members feelings of validation (Chayko, 2008). This mom blogger elected to publish a variety of material portraying her non-role-model mother identity. This same blogger had several posts in which she depicted herself as a responsible loving mother. She showed readers that she was both a mother and a unique, confident, somewhat immature individual. By using the blog as a role-distancing tool she showed that she has more than a single identity. Her blog posts contained material that suggested that she didn't automatically become an excellent role model just because she became a mother. She is not always a good example for impressionable children. Her blog allows her to practice impression management and role distancing; posting text that highlights specific characteristics that show

she is both a mother and ‘more than just a mother’. Additionally, she did not keep this less-than-perfect side of her personality backstage, out of the audience’s view, but actually brought it front-stage. She made an effort to post information that showed her readers that this behavior exists alongside her mother role. This material promotes a new, non-traditional definition of the contemporary good mother. It suggests that good mothers aren’t always good role models.

The intentional posting of obscene photos or text that openly discusses illegal drugs, or disrespectful youthful behavior shows an unexpected, but honest, non-matronly, non-role model side of the mother text-creator. Much of the blog content contained profanity. According to Goffman, this type of writing breaks the traditional front-stage behavior where one puts on one’s best performance for the audience, keeping unflattering information backstage, away from the audience. These mom bloggers ‘pulled the curtain back’ and shared with the audience the sometimes harsh, unflattering, or juvenile backstage behavior of women who are mothers. They don’t always behave as a traditional model of good behavior. The intended audience has intentionally sought out this blog and is generally composed of readers who relate to the author (Chayko, 2008). The blogger is not writing these posts with the intent that her children will be the audience. The removal of the children’s presence facilitates women’s sharing of backstage information (Tardy, 2000). The material exposing backstage is being carefully shown to others who likely have had a very similar experience.

In reference to Goffman’s insights regarding impression management, each mom blogger has intentionally selected, shared, and highlighted her posted material. Mom bloggers carefully craft what is posted. The above post intentionally gave off an impression of the blogger as being immature and rough, and not a traditional, conservative, well-behaved role model. This material may influence a redefinition of acceptable mothering standards by showing other mothers that

it's OK to be yourself. In the past, a loving, intensive mother would have kept such accounts, if they existed, backstage and under wraps due to the fact that a good mother mustn't act this way. This type of post challenges traditional intensive-mother standards. Online in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new, edgy individual mother is played before a wide audience, exposing, and possibly even exaggerating the unconventional behavior of contemporary mothers and demonstrating it as compatible with being a good mother. Displaying this information is easy online. Being out of the physical presence of others lowers one's inhibitions and makes one more likely to share unflattering information (Chayko, 2008). The popular mom bloggers seem comfortable sharing certain unflattering, backstage information to the online community audience.

This chapter has addressed several ways that mom blogs influence the redefinition of acceptable standards of good mothering. My findings suggest that material published on mom blogs tends to challenge the belief that good mothers must be 1) virtuous, 2) meek and selfless, and 3) good role models. This redefinition of acceptable mothering standards seems to push boundaries out from a strictly traditional intensive mother standard to one that encourages new levels of openness, inclusion and tolerance of less traditional mothering behaviors and attitudes. Mothers who have had similar experiences can look to these accounts as symbols of contemporary mothering. However, there appear to be limits. Blog posts in the sample did not include any accounts of deviant behavior such as abuse, neglect, or criminal activity. Professional, nationally ranked blog posts tended to post material that portrayed good mothers as being somewhat traditional while *also* being self-centered, immature, irreverent, and slightly improper role models. The amateur, modest mom blogs had a tendency to publish material that portrayed the author as a more traditional, intensive mother; a virtuous, meek, selfless, good role model.

Material portraying these new mothering definitions was played out within the portable community for an audience of like-minded others. Dissimilar others, such as children, were not the intended audience. In fact, mothers make an effort to remove children from this type of conversation (Tardy, 2000, p. 459). The unique forum provided by the mom blog allows a mother to depict accounts of her resistance to the traditional expectations and ‘let her hair down’ to her audience if she desires. She can easily engage in role-distancing. Her audience has sought her out specifically and is not composed of miscellaneous bystanders. Out of the millions and millions of internet blogs available, readers have intentionally come to read a particular mom blog. This particular portable community is composed of members who feel cognitive resonance, that they are similar to each other, and the blog author feels comfortable to openly share carefully selected backstage information (Chayko, 2008). The sample mom blogs published material that suggested a redefined contemporary good mothering standard.

### **Illustrating a Variety of Mothering Styles and Activities**

The second theme present in the content of the sample mom blog posts was that of variety of style in contemporary mothering activities and rituals. Material published on the mom blogs in the sample tended to portray great variation in the enactment of the mothering role. The mother voices ended to illustrate multiple choices of acceptable contemporary mothering activities available to new mothers, ranging from performing traditional mothering rituals such as homemaking, to new self-focused, dynamic activities and attitudes. Thus it is modeled to readers that there is more than one way to be a good contemporary mother. New mothers turning to mom blogs in search of information needed in developing their mother identity can learn of a variety of acceptable mothering activities and their accompanying attitudes and behaviors as presented in this online community.

Both impression management techniques and role-distancing were used on the mom blogs in order to show the various styles of mothering enacted by contemporary mothers. Mom blog posts tended to portray contemporary mothers as active, involved women who are ambitious and successful and find motherhood fascinating. These posts suggest to the readers that they too can select from unconventional mothering activities in addition to her traditional mother and homemaker work. Published posts suggested that contemporary good mother activities range from the intensive, at home, child-focused behaviors to exciting, adventurous behaviors and leisure activities, and everything in-between. Posts on the sample mom blogs detailed several of the authors' activities and experiences, such as trips to Europe and the Caribbean, meeting with celebrities, and lunching with influential women. As well, there were posts detailing the bloggers' more traditional time spent at home, playing with the children, enjoying family celebrations and participating in homemaking activities.

There appear to be different motives behind the different content published on the two types of blogs in this sample. Similar to the home-movie, modest mom blogs in this sample were neither financially compensated nor read by large numbers of people. Amateur mom blogs appear to be written as a memoir. However, many of the nationally ranked blogs, like Hollywood blockbuster movies, are written by professionals, who deliberately seek to attract a large audience. Many nationally ranked blogs and serve as a source of family income (Belkin, 2011; Mendelsohn, 2010). Nationally ranked bloggers in the sample published, on average, about three times more posts per month than modest mom blogs, and often address issues outside of motherhood. The more readers who are attracted to the blog, the greater the rewards for the author. Therefore, posting interesting, attention grabbing content is advantageous.

These types adventurous mothering posts show readers that a good mother can find enjoyment in at-home mothering, but she doesn't always need to be confined to the home, focused only on the children. A contemporary good mother can participate in exciting activities by herself, away from home and family (Dillaway & Pare, 2008). The contemporary new mother can maintain her own independent identity and activities, and just add mothering into the mix. She need not abandon self-development or hobbies and surrender entirely to the child-focused mother role. The contemporary good mom is entitled to personal time and participation in rewarding employment and leisure activities.

This chapter will address three main points regarding the variety of mothering activities portrayed in the text published on the sample mom blogs. Various mothering styles are seen in 1) accounts of mothers participating in new self-focused mothering activities (depicted most often in the popular, nationally ranked blogs), 2) the differences between new mothering and traditional mothering attitudes when discussing a common issue, and finally, 3) the traditional mother activities depicted on the mom blog posts.

### **Mothers Participating in Self-Focused Activities**

The nationally ranked blog posts illustrated the blogger's participation in activities that were somewhat self-focused rather than traditionally self-sacrificing. Blogs showed the bloggers as women who participated in exciting and extreme lifestyles, and maintained a sense of the individual self outside of the mother role. The blog format allows opportunities for role-distancing. The unique properties of the online mom blog can enable a mother to illustrate this expanded, dynamic mother identity in front of an audience. Some nationally ranked blog texts discussed the mother's participation in activities such as travelling to exotic places or meeting powerful people. These posts showed that these mothers were independent and continued to live

an exciting, enjoyable life in addition to mothering. This material suggests that the bloggers are neither ‘just enduring life’ and disappearing into care giving and domestic monotony, nor becoming exclusively child-focused homemakers (Dillaway & Pare, 2008). These mom bloggers portrayed the contemporary mother as one who doesn’t follow traditional socially-constructed expectations but rather models her unique personal experiences to others (Friedman, 2010). By highlighting these activities through online impression management, they created a distinct image of their mothering style.

Nationally ranked blogs often portrayed mothering as being full of excitement and adventure. Notice the interesting adventures presented in the following excerpts: “Bonjour, Friends! This is G, writing my very first post from France,” (nr11). Another blog posted the following: “I arrived [in Trinidad] late Saturday night... early Sunday morning... we started our journey along the windy road, through dense rainforest, up over the hill and back down to the coast , on our way to... our day at the beach,” (nr07). Another post reads as follows:

I had the honor of talking with Katie Couric and Ansley Merryman... about some of today’s hot parenting topics...live on Katie’s’ CBS news webshow.” and “this week ...I’m going to be sitting side by side with captain-esses of industry who are going to share their accomplishments and encourage us to take risks, initiate change, and forge new paths. (nr13)

These examples illustrate accounts of how each mom blogger used impression management techniques to show the reader that mothering is an adventure. The blogger was not on the sidelines of life as a result of her mother status. She was not drawing attention to the days she spent at home. She highlighted exciting activities and omitted tales of less interesting tasks. She posted material that showed her as a caring mother who also pursued interesting, satisfying

personal activities. These unusually interesting events published on the blog likely did not happen frequently, but the text-creator made sure she let the readers know when they did. These mothers still participated in the daily work of meeting the needs of home and family, but those experiences were not published at length on the blog. Nationally ranked mom bloggers posted more often and seemed to have more opportunities than the modest mom blogs to address issues outside of motherhood. The popular, active-mother blogger is seen as dynamic, engaged, happy and moving forward in life without hindrance due to motherhood. By filling her posts with these accounts she shows readers that there is more to contemporary motherhood than the traditionally required, often tedious activities of home and childcare. Being exposed to these posts can be invigorating and satisfying to readers, many of whom may be confined at home with small children.

The portable community of mom blogging allows a mother to practice *role distancing* through simply posting information she has selected to attract attention to her experiences outside of mothering. On the mom blog, she can easily illustrate that she is more than a one-dimensional character. She is more than “just a mother.” The mom blog serves as a place to control and distribute information that can create, express, and extend the mother’s identity. Members of the portable community watch others and may take away what resonates with them and incorporate it into their own identity. By posting about experiences that others find familiar, bloggers may influence readers to feel that they are mentally in the presence of understanding others (Chayko, 2008). Thus, mom bloggers may influence reading mothers to feel more comfortable nurturing their own developing, autonomous non-mother identity. By posting material that exposes other facets of the bloggers life, using impression management techniques to highlight her self-development and personal accomplishments, the mom blogger paints a

picture of herself as a woman with a strong individual identity outside of the mother role. This type of material portrays the contemporary good mother as one who can value the self, develop the self, and maintain an individual identity.

### **Comparing Attitudes Among the Different Mothering Styles**

Common mothering issues were depicted differently depending on the type of mom blog. When discussing common mothering issues, nationally ranked blog posts tended to portray them as extraordinary. They often used impression management techniques to highlight interesting details and drama, and tended to relate spiced-up tales of common mothering activities.

Conversely, modest mom blog posts tended to post material that depicted ordinary rituals of motherhood as just that: ordinary. Modest mom blogs frequently published stories from the viewpoint of a mature, nurturing mother. Their posts shared basic facts and personal feelings that members of the reading audience may find familiar (Chayko, 2008). Many published accounts were told with an understated, traditional self-sacrificing good mother voice. These common mothering activities are the nuts and bolts of the mom bloggers daily routine, and were recounted with passion but limited fanfare. Therefore, common mothering experiences were portrayed differently depending on the blog type, with nationally ranked blogs posting stories that seemed to dramatize experiences and modest mom blogs posting material that seemed to portray experiences as routine.

This pattern can be illustrated with posts that recount experiences related to the common motherhood ritual of potty training. Potty training is a common, universal experience of mothering and can be looked to by many readers as a unifying symbol of the mothering experience. Note how this common and basic subject was related in two different ways by the nationally ranked blog and the modest mom blog. First, from a nationally ranked mom blog:

I do have one parental moment of victory to report: E is finally, completely, oh-my-God-it's-for-real-this-time potty trained.

\*here is where I totally planned to include a picture of the Mighty E with a pair of Buzz Lightyear underpants on his head, but then thought better of it, AKA my husband was like, "DUDE HE'S OUR SON" so never mind\*

Despite an early, optimistic start at something like, 18 months old or whatever insane nonsense I'd been fed by fellow cloth diaper users about OH IT'LL BE SO EASY THEY ALL TRAIN EARLY IN CLOTH DIAPERS YOU WON'T HAVE TO DO A THING\*, E quickly changed his mind and steadfastly refused any and all suggestions/bribes/boot-camp-style approaches, to the point where if I offered big-boy pants to him in the morning, he would simply march over to the changing table, pull a diaper out of the drawer, lay it out neatly on the floor and then plop his bare butt on it, arms folded, like, I have made my choice, woman. Now snap this thing up so that I might take a crap in peace. (nr15)

In contrast, the amateur, modest mom blog account of the same basic mothering issue reads as follows:

J is still trying to get the hang of going potty. It has been a battle for sure. I am so weary of changing his diaper and having the “you need to go potty in the potty” discussion with him. Every time I ask him why he went potty in his pants he tells me, “Cause I was being bad.” He says it so sweetly that it is almost impossible to stay upset with him. You can send your dog away to be house-broken, why isn’t there some where to send toddlers? (mmb18)

Both the nationally ranked and the modest mom blogs posted text about the common experience of potty training a child. Both acknowledged the challenge of the project, and interjected a bit of humor, but one story was a little more detailed and irreverent than the other. The difference in these two potty-training excerpts gives insight into the mom blogs' presentation of a wide spectrum of mothering styles available; from traditionally selfless and conservative, to more self-focused, humorous and irreverent.

The nationally ranked blogger tended to write in extremes and relished her "moment of victory" with a bit of profane language, and a mention of posting a silly photo of her child before being stopped by her husband, who, incidentally, was humorously portrayed as referring to his wife as "dude." It seems this professional writer was trying to entertain the readers and illustrate her mothering experiences as common but exciting and entertaining. The text creator expressed frustration in the advice of others claiming that potty-training would be easy, followed by a dramatized and descriptive anecdote of the child's behavior and attitude. The story unfolded with an attitude of humor and irreverence. By her choice of words and story details, she portrayed mothering as a comical, unpredictable adventure. She implied that motherhood shouldn't be taken too seriously. This same nationally ranked blogger stated later in the same post, that this child is 'adorable' and she included a flattering photo of him looking sweetly into the camera. This mother portrayed mothering as an experience which involves both adoring and caring for children, but also laughing while participating in crazy, interesting events. She depicted a common, universal mothering event as being fun, dramatic, and entertaining.

The modest mom blog post portrayed a more traditional patient mother, who was less dramatic in her story recounting, and kept the private details private. She seemed to be recording a typical experience that was part of her daily life; a common event. She is not a professional,

paid writer and is not trying to attract and entertain an audience. By her use of impression management she portrayed herself as being mature, self-sacrificing, and soft hearted toward the child. She gently mentioned her weariness then moved on. She presented the posted information in a way that showed her as nurturing, child-focused, and compassionate, but frank when recounting this common mother experience. She didn't play up the experience as being an adventure. It was just another routine aspect of motherhood.

Potty training one's child is a universal issue that all mothers face. The modest mom, who is still pursuing the potty-training goal, treated it as a typical part of mothering; briefly, with humor, maturity, and compassion. This portrays the traditional, compassionate and long suffering, child-focused mother style. The professional, nationally ranked blogger, who has seen the potty-training mission accomplished, illustrated mothering as interesting, exciting, and funny. The blogger is depicted as a loving but irreverent, somewhat immature mother. The blogger discussed the issue using crude language and seemed to characterize the child as amusing, stubborn, and disrespectful (calling his mother "woman"). This blogger portrayed her mothering style as one with less tenderness and compassion, and more silliness and immaturity.

Another common issue addressed by both nationally ranked and modest mom blogs is young children's sleep and bedtime antics. A nationally ranked blogger posted the following:

[Our daughter] insists on sleeping on the couch in our room. [Our son] when he was two, he had a tonsillectomy that kicked his little ass. The recovery was brutal, so he slept in our room for a few weeks. A few weeks turned to a few months ... He's actually had the balls to refer to *me* as his roommate. E will sleep in his own room, but only if I'm there when he falls asleep and the minute he wakes up he runs- literally runs- to find me. It's bad. It's really, really bad. So, I'm turning to you, fellow "experts" in parenting:

What the hell do I do? [Accompanied by a photo of what appears to be three young children sleeping, sprawled across the middle of a bed, with the sleeping dad right at the edge of the mattress.] (nr12)

A modest mom blogger posted an account related to a similar topic. She addresses the issue with a slightly different style.

A just turned five and the other day I woke up to find the bedroom door open and the t.v. on. He was watching cartoons! At 4 in the morning! I told him to turn off the t.v. and go back to bed! He did without saying a word. A little while later when E woke up crying, J was not to be found in his bed! When I stepped into the hallway I found J sitting up but fast asleep on the couch. He and A had both been awake before 4a.m. Later when I asked A why he didn't tell me that J was awake too he calmly replied, "Because I didn't want to." (mmb18)

Both posts discuss a mother's exasperation with small children and their sleep behaviors. The nationally ranked uses some humor and profanity and reaches out to readers asking for their advice. She is trying to paint a picture that helps her readers to understand her frustration and growing impatience. Her situation is a long term problem and she seems to be getting to the end of her rope. The modest mom post recounts a humorous, one-time event in a more low-key fashion. She shares it with readers who will likely find it humorous but she doesn't write about it in a dramatic fashion. She seems to tell the story with patience and maturity.

The large number of readers drawn to the nationally ranked blogs suggests that the more exciting portrayal of mothering activities is more attractive to the audience. The less-nurturing, slightly immature and amusing mother voice is interesting. It portrays mothering as novel and entertaining, not mundane. As well, the contemporary mother maintains a sense of being

separate from the child. She doesn't completely abandon personal perspective, time or interests and melt into a solely child-focused being. Putting a humorous spin on the familiar may enhance readers' feelings of solidarity. Mothers that know about the tedious, common experiences of motherhood can enjoy the dramatization and humor of these mom blog portrayals. Reading and writing about such familiar topics meets the human need to be understood (Chayko, 2008).

### **Participating in Traditional Mother Activities**

Material containing accounts of traditional mothering rituals and activities was visible on the blogs. However, the posts relating traditional mothering activities were seen most frequently in the amateur modest mom blogs. Nationally ranked blogs did post accounts of bloggers participating in child and family-focused activities as well, though they occurred less frequently than the self-focused, active mother depictions. Nationally ranked mom blog excerpts addressing the author's traditional mothering behaviors included the following: "He took extensive notes and asked good questions, my favorite being "What's great about your kid?" It felt good to be able to reel off six or seven things without missing a beat," (nr05). Other nationally ranked traditional mothering posts read as follows:

I have been traveling this week, visiting colleges with my younger son, who is a high school junior. We've been through this process before at our house, and I know how tense things are in homes of seniors right now, as they wait for answers over the next few weeks that will decide where they spend the next four years. (nr01)

I've had a sick baby for the past 48 hours and I've been less concerned with sleeping than I've been with dabbing cold compresses on his back and forehead and making him suck on ice and calling him Pookie. (nr06)

These posts portray each blogger as a loving mother who is deeply invested in her child. She posts evidence of her love and concern for her child's wellbeing. These contemporary mothers still participate in traditional mothering activities including caring for sick children, helping a child prepare for college, and acting as an advocate for her child. The contemporary mother still values, loves and nurtures her child.

Blog excerpts detailing the traditional mothering activities of modest mom bloggers include the following:

[My daughter] and I stayed home from church a few weeks ago and worked on K's ABC scrapbook. We had a really great time and here it is about 4 weeks later and we are almost done with the whole book. (mmb21)

We did have so much fun though. This year we got to stay home for the first time ever! We made cookies on Christmas Eve, and spent most of Christmas just playing with all of the kid's new toys. Hope everyone had a very Merry Christmas, I can't wait until next year! The boys make it so much fun! C absolutely loved every bit of it... and was so sad that "his Christmas was gone" as he told his nursery teacher. SAD. (mmb22)

[Speaking to her child:] Wednesday, you still didn't feel good and ran a fever off and on all day, although after our hospital visit, I knew how much medicine to give you to make you feel better. You would wake up from a nap crying and 15 minutes after I gave you medicine, you would be smiling, babbling and playing again. Still I was so relieved when we woke up Thursday morning without any sign of fever. (mmb23)

These excerpts from the modest mom blogs are typical of the content found in the sample. The traditional, nurturing, compassionate, child-focused mother behavior was highlighted. The authors used impression management techniques to highlight examples of their good-mothering

accomplishments, and adherence to traditional middleclass American intensive-mother standards. These mothers reported spending time with their children, playing, celebrating, and working on projects. One mother reported efforts expended in caring for her sick baby and illustrated her skills in keeping her child comfortable. She noted her relief when her child felt better. Modest mom bloggers not seeking to entertain an audience seem to use the blog as a way to document evidence that they are successful, good mothers that live up to traditional expectations.

Mom blogs as a whole depicted a variety of mothering activities ranging from exciting to common, and from selfless to self-focused. Nationally ranked blogs portrayed mothers as participating in exciting mothering and self-focused leisure activities, whereas the modest mom blogs stuck pretty closely to the traditional mature, selfless, at-home mother and homemaker activity depictions only. The professional, nationally ranked blogs, like Hollywood blockbuster movies, appeared to be crafted to attract and entertain readers by illustrating interesting elements of mothering. The modest mom blogs, like home movies, appeared to record common events of everyday life for small audiences of friends and relatives. These posts portrayed the modest mom bloggers as behaving like traditional, loving, good moms.

The second theme found in materials published in this sample of mom blogs illustrated how blog post content suggested to the readers that good, contemporary middle-class American mothers can participate in a variety of mothering styles and activities and need not stick to the traditional, routine, child-focused activities alone in order to be considered 'good.' The new definition suggests that good mothers can be self-focused and slightly immature. They can participate in exciting leisure activities, find children and motherhood amusing, and still be a loving mother. Participation in traditional care of home and family continues to be portrayed as the most rewarding, worthwhile and enjoyable aspect of mothering.

## **Bringing the Hidden to Light**

The third and final theme to be discussed here is the mom blogs' tendency to publish material that brings the hidden aspects of mothering out of the private domestic sphere and into the public light. This serves as further evidence of how mom blogs offer a controlled look at the daily experiences of contemporary motherhood which can potentially influence contemporary American mothering narratives. The mom blog platform facilitates a mother's ability to expose a different, more honest picture of motherhood (Lopez, 2009). In this chapter I will examine how mom blogs post material that brings the hidden elements of motherhood into the light by their: 1) discussing taboo subjects in public, 2) making confessions and stating honest feelings, and 3) granting mothers a public stage on which to display and acknowledge invisible domestic work that takes place in private.

### **Discussing Taboo Subjects**

First, both the nationally ranked and the modest mom blogs published material which brought to light relevant, but often unseen mothering issues, including taboo topics. Issues from the private domestic sphere were discussed publicly. The professional, nationally ranked mom blogs posted material that addressed almost anything from family fights to coping with the death of a child, while amateur modest mom blog posts tended to be more reserved and were less likely to address taboo subjects. Nationally ranked bloggers frequently posted text that openly, and often humorously, discussed taboo subjects. As Chayko (2008) asserts, these bloggers demonstrated having a close, trusting relationship with their readers resulting from shared or common life experiences and portable community members are believed to have lower inhibitions due to the lack of physical proximity.

In the following excerpts one nationally ranked blogger used humor to discuss taboo subjects of her mid-morning drinking as well as a family-fight over shopping. In her accounts she laughs at her own inappropriate behavior, and uses humor, likely making the audience feel more comfortable with the subjects. The post discussing her drinking reads:

Bizarre notes I wrote to myself while getting mildly sloshed at a brunch designed to teach me about “civility and mobile etiquette”:

I could probably save a lot of time if I just made a t-shirt that says, “ I’m sorry for disappointing you.”

Me at our table: “ooh! Pistachios!”

Me, seconds later: “*Oh*. Those are *not* pistachios. Those are olive pits. No one eat those.”

Me, two drinks later: “Ooh! Pistachios!”

\*repeat\*

Things I learned: Pistachios aren’t supposed to be damp. [Post is accompanied by a photo of olives in a white ceramic bowl near a square ceramic dish filled with discarded olive pits.] (nr10)

The blogger went on with a list of funny, even outrageous notes recounting her ironically bad behavior while she was a little drunk at the ‘civility and etiquette’ brunch. She addressed a taboo issue; a mother’s morning drunkenness. Her comic revelations offered a humorous read for the audience. This material is almost like a humorous TV show, complete with crazy events and witty comments. The mom blogger exposed this somewhat embarrassing, taboo experience to the online community.

The next post from this blogger details a family fight. The post is entitled, “And that’s why you should learn to pick your battles.” It offers a humorous look at an argument between spouses. The author is again being open about her experience and sharing this taboo story to entertain the audience. An abbreviated version (using a pseudonym for the purposes of this research) reads:

This morning I had a fight with [my husband] Tim about towels. It was basically me telling Tim I needed to buy new bath towels and Tim insisting that I NOT buy towels...

[When I left for the store] Tim gave me a kiss goodbye and lovingly whispered, “You are not allowed to bring any more [expletive] towels in this house or I will strangle you.” And that was exactly what was still echoing in my head an hour later when [my friend] and I stopped our shopping carts and stared up in confused, silent awe at a display of *enormous* [5 foot tall] metal chickens.

[Friend]: you’d be crazy not to buy that.

Me: Tim’d be pissed... but on the plus side? It’s not towels...

We got to my house and quietly snuck the chicken up to my front door, rang the doorbell, and hid around the corner. Tim opened the door and looked at the chicken in stunned silence for about 3 seconds. Then he sighed, closed the door *and walked away*.

[Friend]: What the [expletive]? *That’s it? That’s the only reaction we get?*

Tim was surprisingly pissed that I’d “wasted money” on an enormous chicken, because apparently he couldn’t appreciate the hysterical value of a 5 foot chicken ringing the doorbell. Then I said, “Well at least it’s not *towels*” and apparently that was the

wrong thing to say because Tim stormed off. ... He yelled that he wanted it gone, but I couldn't move it myself, so instead I said okay and went to watch tv [sic]...

Still, I can't help but think that we wouldn't even be *having* this argument if [the chicken] was towels. Honestly, this whole chicken is really a lesson in picking your battles more carefully. [Post is accompanied by photos of the chicken, including one of the chicken at the front door complete with a profane caption.] (nr10)

This post in its entirety contains multiple humorous comments and is laced with profanity. It turns out that later, after this particular post was published, it was such an audience favorite that it became one of the standout posts of this blog. The blogger even sold merchandise, including t-shirts and Christmas ornaments, with a photo of the metal chicken accompanied by a line from the story. Despite the fact that the post was about a taboo subject- publicly recounting a family fight - readers became very fond of it.

This post tells the story of a family conflict; a topic that may be uncomfortable for the readers, and something that is usually kept backstage. The author's use of humor, and openness when sharing this account made it interesting for her reader as she published the story on the front stage of the blog. The common experience of an argument between spouses was brought to light, rather than remaining hidden backstage in the private domestic sphere. By the mom blogger's publishing this account, readers can offer support, and share feelings of empathy and unity.

These backstage, somewhat taboo subjects publicly published on mom blogs are often depicted in a comical manner. Taboo subjects are normally kept backstage. By parading this content onto the front stage, and giving a humorous performance, mom blogs challenge Goffman's theory of front and backstage. Bloggers open the partition, and display the backstage

for all to see (Goffman, 1959). This often provocative information attracts and entertains readers in the portable community, which in this case is composed of women who have likely had similar experiences. Seeing another's backstage activities allows one to learn that one's own backstage circumstances are common and not unusual.

Nationally ranked blogs in particular brought a wide variety of issues to light by posting backstage material on the front stage of the blog. Within my sample are posts that discussed several highly personal issues including depression, coping with the death of a child, cyber-bullying, caring for a child with disabilities, and struggling with the pain of infertility.

One blogger posted about her suffering from depression and her use of prescription medication to treat it. A brief excerpt reads:

I first took [a prescription drug for my depression] when I was 27. I had been in therapy for years. No amount of talking seemed to shrug of the consistently low mood I had fought for as long as I could remember... that was 15 years ago, and if I had been smart, I would have never messed with the prescription I was on... (nr02)

The author openly discussed a mental health issue and the use of prescription medication, an important topic, but one that can be uncomfortable to discuss, on the front stage of her blog. This blogger shed light on her personal experience, and readers may learn as a result. Topics that have been discussed only in whispers between friends, now can find a large audience of other mother-friends on mom blogs. This can provide helpful information to readers. Usually if one person is brave enough to post it, many readers will be eager to read it in order to learn more about uncomfortable topics and to validate their own backstage experiences. Discussing certain uncomfortable issues can be beneficial to members of the online community who may not feel comfortable addressing it elsewhere.

Taboo subjects were openly discussed in front of others online. Perhaps this is due to the physical absence of others. Again, the reduced inhibition present in the portable community allows women with common interests and experiences to come together, share, and support each other (Chayko, 2008). Several nationally ranked mom blog posts serve as examples of the wide range of previously taboo topics discussed online.

One blogger posted about her experience coping with the death of her child. This type of discussion can be considered taboo as many would feel uncomfortable with it in a face-to-face conversation. She related one of the painful decisions she faced which reads:

After [our baby daughter] died we had to make the hard decision about what to do with her remains. It's something [my husband and I] hadn't even really considered, and there we were having to make that decision for our baby. I wanted my baby with ME... I didn't want to think about the body that had grown inside me underground or turned to ash. Making this decision for our child when we were in the depths of shock and despair was agonizing. (nr14)

She posted this very intimate experience along with her candid, very private thoughts. The reader may almost feel she is intruding when reading such personal revelations. The post can potentially touch the hearts of mothers who have carried a baby and who might imagine this mother's pain. By sharing this tender thought, the blogger may receive support from other mom blog community members. The post may raise awareness of the suffering of others parents who have also lost a child.

Another blog post about coping with the loss of a child, this time from a modest mom blogger, related the following:

Yesterday we celebrated K's third birthday. We celebrated with chocolate malts (what I craved when I was pregnant with her) an orchid (I found one with three blossoms!) and a boat. We made a little boat out of sticks and covered it with wild flowers. Well, Golden Rod was all we could find.

Watching the boat slowly float away brought us back to the moment when we had to let go of one of our biggest loves, K, as she drifted out of our lives. It is an awful, deeply painful, and frightening experience. But it is fragrant [sic] with hope. [The post is accompanied by several photos of the family gathering flowers, constructing a raft of twigs, decorating it, then launching it in the stream, as well as a photo of the baby's gravestone with the orchids. (mmb19)]

This blogger used her blog as an outlet for recording her family's remembrance of the baby girl who passed away. It is a place for reading friends and family members to offer support.

Many other personal topics were published and discussed on the mom blogs. One mom blogger posted about the topic of cyber bullying; a potentially painful subject for parents whose children may be either victims or perpetrators. Her post reads:

It has been quite the experience to have a front row seat as the force of the Internet rolls over a child. "The permission that some people have to be mean to a child online is astounding" [one child's mother said]. The comment that hurt [the child's] feelings most said, "I hope you'll get an eating disorder so you'll be pretty." (nr01)

The uncomfortable, vicious statement that appears at the end of this excerpt may be difficult to read. Through publishing this account, the blogger can shine light on the topic of cyber bullying and readers can be exposed to the reality of the topic and the cruelty occurring. Her post can raise awareness of this serious problem.

Yet another nationally ranked blogger posted an account which addressed the taboo topic of her struggle with raising a child with learning disabilities and the accompanying feelings. She posted:

And yet there's something about signing [the paper], about taking the pen in hand and making that mechanical squiggle, saying, "Yes, please classify my child," that feels like standing over Pandora's Box, reading the packing list carefully, and then asking for a crowbar. Like we're setting something big and possibly dangerous in motion without knowing how it works. Simultaneously like we're doing absolutely the right thing for our child, and like we're selling him down the river. (nr05)

Here, the mother-author appeared to openly and honestly post her very personal feelings in a public forum. Her post portrayed her conflicting feelings of wanting to help her child, but fear that she may make a mistake. Her child's future was at stake. Millions of American mothers have likely faced similar painful experiences and decisions. Sharing these private thoughts on the front stage of mom blogs can provide mothers experiencing similar issues a way to support each other.

One nationally ranked blogger in the sample is known for her efforts to educate people about infertility and the struggles facing couples dealing with infertility. She is an avid proponent of this marginalized group. One of her blog posts included discussion of in-vitro fertilization and was accompanied by bizarre images of clowns. This post served as a type of 'gallows humor' regarding the topic. It reads:

Speaking of clowns and IVF, thanks to all of you who sent me a link to the news about, well, clowns and IVF: "Israeli researchers found the odds of success were greater among women who were entertained by a professional 'medical clown' right after they

had the embryos implanted in the womb.” [Post is accompanied by several unusual photos and images of clowns in relation to reproductive health issues.] (nr05)

The posted photos that accompanied this particular excerpt were somewhat outrageous and may seem shocking to some readers. Here, dark humor was used to openly discuss a painful issue that is frequently discussed in private. The opportunity to openly discuss this subject on a public stage comes as a result of the reduced inhibitions exhibited in online communities and may encourage other marginalized individuals to come forward and share (Chayko, 2008).

As the above posts illustrate, the mom blog provides a stage where these mothers can bring taboo subjects out of private darkness and discuss them in the public light. Topics that, in the past, were likely only shared backstage between very small circles of close friends can now be discussed out in the open with the portable community’s large circle of close friends. The mom blog allows intimate feelings to be discussed with trusted audience members. Members of a specific online community tend to have feelings of cognitive resonance, unity and understanding (Chayko, 2008). Elements of reduced online inhibition and an audience of other mothers who feel a cognitive resonance with the blogger provide an ideal place for these private intimate feelings as well as taboo subjects to be presented, resulting in feelings of validation and support for those involved.

### **Confessions and Honest Feelings**

Second, in addition to discussing taboo subjects, the mom blogs in the sample brought the hidden to light as they posted material addressing confessions and their personal but honest thoughts regarding mothering and its challenges. The sub-title of one of the mom blogs proclaims, “I don’t know what I’m doing either.” Several blog posts addressed the women’s struggles with their personal health and the resulting challenge of caring for a family while ill,

the difficulty of childrearing, and other topics common to mothering and the private domestic sphere.

On the mom blog, one topic the blogger would often bring to light was her struggle with her own physical health. Though it may not receive much public attention, sometimes mothers get sick or injured, yet must keep up with their mothering responsibilities. Several blogs revealed that often when the mother is injured, ill or otherwise out of commission the house goes to pot and the kids run wild. Mom blogs give women a place where they can openly admit and complain about health problems and honestly share their displeasure, as ugly as that might be. Impression management takes a break, and the mothers share information that exposes the backstage and reveals their frailties. The backstage, behind-the-scenes confessions take front stage and are brought to light. Sharing these confessions can increase feelings of intimacy between the members of this portable community (Chayko, 2008). The majority of mothers have struggled at one time or another with illness and pain. On the nationally ranked blogs these accounts of health problems were frequently accompanied by vulgarity and profanity. One blog post reads:

Because I am pretty sure this pregnancy JUST WON'T COUNT without at least *one* unwarranted, after hours trip to Labor & Delivery... I'd had a headache all day that was getting worse by the hour, and I was feeling increasingly woozy and tired and out-of-it. My body was a mess of weirdly unspecific aches and pains in my back and sides and shoulders and maybe my abdomen, and maybe my uterus... I was having these really ridiculously violent coughing fits... Wake me up in June, maybe [expletive] this, the end [This post is accompanied by a photo of the author performing an obscene gesture at the camera.] (nr15)

In the post, this woman is clearly very open with her displeasure about struggling with this illness. She is not taking it with tireless patience. She's angry. She doesn't sugar coat her frustration and discomfort. Almost certainly, her audience of mothers - the majority of whom have been pregnant - can relate to this challenge. The openness of the online blog format exposes the reading audience to the blogger's private suffering. This can bring widespread, public attention to feelings of anger and frustration that often results from the painful physical struggles women uniquely face, often without respite, while still responsible for home and family.

Further, confessions of coping with other challenges in the private, domestic sphere were posted on the blogs. How does a mother navigate caring for her children while she is ill and debilitated? This is another dilemma that has not been openly discussed on the front stage in the past. An ill mother's stop-gap measures of home and family care have often been kept secret. For example, many mothers don't feel comfortable admitting the many hours they allow their young children to watch TV. They fear that others will judge them as bad mothers. They'd rather not admit to letting the TV babysit while they cope with illness or perhaps just complete other important tasks. The following is a 'confession' from a mother who is ill with "a [expletive] SUPER-VIRUS FROM HELL" and is doing her best to supervise her kids alone while she is sick in bed. It reads:

Oh, and did I mention that it's N's spring break this week? Yeah. I did Inlist [sic] as many extra babysitting hours as I could finance, but still. It's been super edumacational [sic] and stimulating around here, with a lot of "Hey! You know what's fun? Watching [TV] in bed with Mommy! Yaaayyy!" (nr15)

In this post, the mother acknowledges that she is doing the best she can under the circumstances and humorously admits that sometimes, she lies in bed while her kids watch TV. She explains to

the reader that she tried to get adequate childcare, but reached her limit and had to find other solutions. Posting this online allows reading mothers to acknowledge that this issue may be common; even though she may not hear others openly speak of it outside the domestic sphere.

The above mom blogger ‘confessed’ that due to her illness, she just couldn’t be perfectly child-focused and self-sacrificing. She openly admitted to letting her child spend the week off of school watching TV, and even laughed about it. The published nationally ranked blog posts bring this issue right out in the open. This is likely due to participants feeling decreased inhibitions in the online community (Chayko, 2008). This type of mothering behavior does not live up to the ‘intensive’ or self-sacrificing expectation, and would, in the past, be kept secret by many mothers. In the online community, one’s seemingly futile efforts under difficult conditions need not be shameful and kept hidden. Other community members understand. When mothers share common life experiences with an online community they can access emotional support which helps to normalize these experiences (Hall & Irvine, 2009).

A post published on a modest mom blog addresses the same issue of letting children watch T.V. when the mother is ill. She confesses that she was doing the best she could under the circumstances, and relates it as follows:

For over a week the kids sat in from of the t.v. ALL. DAY. LONG. In my own defense if they ran around they were coughing their heads off. I was not in any frame of mind to parent them since I started getting sick after all of the kids started feeling better.  
(mmb18)

The mom blog platform provided both the above mothers a place to share a private issue. The community members who make up the audience are likely to understand and provide validation and emotional to these mothers. Their experiences are extremely common; most people get sick

from time to time. But the topic of struggling to mother while ill may not be discussed openly in public. The mom blog provides a place to do so .

In some instances the bloggers made no apology for their complaints about the difficulty of mothering as seen in the following example: “There are many days I feel I do not like my children. They make me angry, irritated and fed up,” (mmb17). The subject of this post was not embellished nor discussed with great detail. The author made her statement boldly, but did not elaborate, nor share any private details. She took her place on the online stage, confessed a bit of private, backstage information and left it at that. She had a stage on which to bring these feelings to light. For many, that is enough. Likely, most reading mothers can relate.

As seen in the above excerpt, amateur modest mom blogs posted complaints differently than did the professional nationally ranked blogs. When modest mom blogs revealed these private complaints in public, they often did so in a subdued, thoughtful way. Again, like home movies, they are not written by professionals, and are not intended to entertain large audiences. Modest mom blogs tended to keep these generally private issue posts brief and guarded. The above excerpt doesn’t turn into a drawn out rant. Modest blog posts seemed to address an issue from an individual perspective, expressing feelings about the struggle. Also, modest mom bloggers posted material that seemed to assume that the readers had not had similar unpleasant thoughts. Their posted material indicated that the modest mom bloggers were somewhat reluctant to go out on a limb and publicly confess.

Another topic confessed on the mom blog was guilt. In the following blog excerpt, the author discussed the struggle she was facing having to choose between pursuing her own goals and meeting the needs of her children. Mom blogs provided a place for mothers to publicly write

down thoughts, work these feelings out for themselves, and receive support from similar others (Chayko, 2008). A modest mom blog excerpt reads:

The battle I'm fighting through is that I've started a doctoral degree program and DAMN IT I want to finish! I've decided to pursue a mommy's helper to be here with me a few hours a week. Before you judge me consider that I think it stinks some too. I am making the choice to sacrifice a bit of my heartfelt desire to be all moms all the time in order to achieve this academic goal. (mmb25)

This modest mom blog text-creator and mother of two children under the age of five appeared to feel some obligation in explaining to the reader that she was conflicted between her intensive, child-focused mothering and her desire to complete an important unfinished goal for her own self-interest and development. She portrayed herself on the blog stage as a good mother faced with a difficult choice. She tries to assure her audience that she is similar to them, and that they share cognitive resonance (Chayko, 2008). She publicly confessed this backstage secret of hiring a helper. By all accounts, most Americans would feel that her goal is worthwhile, but as a traditional middleclass American mother, she expected judgments from the audience due to the cultural expectations of her being child-focused rather than behaving in a self-focused way. She portrayed herself as fearful that others wouldn't understand her dilemma. She anticipated judgment of her mothering, but seemed hopeful of receiving support.

That the above mother posted her confession online along with mentioning her guilt and sadness with the situation, specifically asking readers to reserve judgment, is evidence of her struggle with the public nature of the confession. A mother of two small children interested in completing a PhD could be viewed as one not in line with traditional mothering values. Her focus should be on child-rearing now and not on pursuing an advanced degree at this time. In a

physical environment, interacting with others she did not know or trust, she would likely keep quiet about hiring a mother's helper. In contrast, mom blogs give each individual a stage with a potential audience of women who share a sociomental relationship. This online community of members who likely share feelings of similarity and friendship, offers a safe place to publicly share intimate comments, and fills the human need to be understood (Chayko, 2008).

The excerpts mentioned above contain comments that, in the past, would have been discussed in private lest they be looked upon as weakness or selfishness. These topics would have, as Goffman stated, been discussed backstage, behind closed doors (Goffman, 1959). A good intensive mother would have never publicly said that she did not like her children. That type of comment would have taken place in whispers between friends within the domestic sphere.

By admitting these feelings in public, this common, realistic issue could now be openly addressed. Readers are then free to admit or relate to the times when they have been in a similar situation. It is likely that reading mothers experienced occasions when they were physically unable but needed to care for the children at any cost. Perhaps they have felt that openly complaining about the difficulties of mothering was unacceptable. As bloggers publicly post this backstage confession, readers can experience cognitive resonance with the online mom blog community members. The posted material shows readers that being sidelined or irritated is sometimes just part of life, and is normal and nothing to be ashamed of.

As a result of bloggers posting mothering confessions and taboo material, new mothers developing their own mother identity can see that sometimes good moms get annoyed or sick and they just do the best they can, even if it's not great. Despite its being held secret, the reality is that sometimes TV is used as a babysitter. Sometimes good mothers feel frustrated. Posting

this material suggests that mothers don't need to keep these issues quiet due to fear of harsh judgment.

### **Showcasing Invisible Labor on the Front Stage**

Third, the mom blog stage provides a platform on which to publicly show the invisible labor and experiences of mothering and to proclaim that mothering involves a lot of unseen work. Much of the domestic and care work of mothers is invisible and takes place in the private sphere (Dillaway & Pare, 2008; Hays, 1996). The work of meeting others' needs is often only noticed when it is not completed (DeVault, 1991). Mom blogs in this sample appeared to invite mothers onto the public stage, and allowed authors to highlight examples of their domestic work. Once again, as Goffman has stated, these mothers used impression management techniques to bring certain things to light (Goffman, 1959). Mom blogs offered mothers a turn on the front stage to show off some of the unseen, often unappreciated, ways they spent their time. Tales of a mother's accomplishments in the home have been kept backstage, due to her limited access to time on the public front stage in front of an interested audience. This portable community of mom blogs allowed this often marginalized group, mothers, a turn on the front stage. For example, two modest mom bloggers posted about their domestic accomplishments as follows:

So we've made a bit of progress with our desk space in the front room. So far we have this [photo]... Can't wait to have it all finished and be able to enjoy it. And you can be sure I will give an update with photos!" (mmb16)

[The author was building a toy for the children.] We spent most of the afternoon constructing and painting... [he] cut and built, I painted. By 3:00 we had an outdoor kitchenette. I cannot really call it a mud kitchen. So with sand, water, and vegetation, it is our outdoor kitchenette. Amazing what a little sand and water in pans can do. (mmb17)

Working on designing a desk space in the home, or building a toy for the children takes time and effort, but doesn't receive much public recognition. Posting about these activities on the mom blog provided these mothers with a way to publicly share their accomplishments with others and document their hard work. The portable community members possess cognitive resonance and can understand and celebrate these accomplishments (Chayko, 2008). The mom blogs in this sample shared accounts of these accomplishments with others who could relate and appreciate the experience. Modest mom blogs were more likely than the nationally ranked mom blogs to post material that highlighted their domestic accomplishments.

Often the bloggers proclaimed that mothering is just plain hard. They stated that the mothering work of caring for home and family is universal, and exhibit compassion for other mothers facing the same struggles. The portable mom blog community members seem to share cognitive resonance; feelings of similarity and intimacy. For example, one nationally ranked blog posted the following:

I want to say it's hard. I want to say that I'm tired. A lot. ... This is nothing you don't know my friends; we still send the thank you notes, manage the play dates, buy the birthday gifts, sign the permission slips, plan our own Mother's Day brunches, kiss the boo-boos, attend the PTA meetings, redecorate the kids' room, and fold the laundry, all the while reassuring our husbands and partners that they're valuable too. (nr13)

This published post brings to light a small portion of the invisible work mothers do on a daily basis. In this post the author states that she finds the many duties of mothering difficult.

Reading mothers are likely to understand. Posting material addressing issues common to a wide range of mothers can increase feelings of validation and unity among reading mothers (Chayko,

2008; Lopez, 2009). It can be helpful to see a public acknowledgement of the never-ending nature of mothering work.

Another modest mom blog contained several posts depicting the hard work of typical mothering rituals. Here are a few of them:

Here I sit, I can feel my eyelids drooping, and I am wondering when I will ever get a good night's sleep again. Every day there are multiple job hazards that I get to deal with. One new job hazard, since [my daughter] has not been feeling well, is that [of] volcanic eruptions requiring extra laundry...

I haven't found a good solution for getting the kids to help me pick up their toys. Now that [the baby] is mobile, [she] has been finding and chewing on pieces of cotton stuffing and paper. I had to sew and repair one injured moose who had lost his stuffing and one throw pillow with a large hole. I also ended up picking up the toys myself so that I could vacuum the living room, kitchen and the entry way...

I really wonder who reads these random things that I post. (mmb18)

This blogger used her blog as a tool to record and account for some of the many activities that take her time every day. Her post listed the effort invested in such tasks and illustrated how this work tends to result in her physical exhaustion. Much of a mother's tiring work is never seen by others outside the home. At the end of this blog excerpt, the blogger wonders if anyone will ever read about all of her unseen physical labor.

In addition to acknowledging the demanding duties of mothering, the mom blog serves as a way to publicly highlight successful mothering accomplishments. Many mom blog posts in the sample contained material that taught practical homemaking skills such as cooking, decorating, organizing, and crafting. Along with the written descriptions, the bloggers also posted photos of

their completed projects. The mom blog seemed to serve as a way for the blogger to publicly display evidence of her hard work, and provided an outlet to show it to others who might appreciate it. Some examples of posted material highlighting often invisible work include the following mom blog excerpts: A photo of the mother and her smiling children playing was posted along with a caption that reads: “[The children] playing horsey on Christmas Eve – in their new [pajamas] that [I] made them.” She also posts a photo of herself with her child and the caption reads: “Decorating our gingerbread house! – How could you not LOVE Christmas time?” (mmb22). Another blogger posted the following:

But it’s this kind of awesome, grown-up moment to recognize that we are – I am – responsible for the next generation. For their memories, their values, their silly holiday dinners. And that we can keep what works, toss what doesn’t, improvise the rest, and in the end, create something that’s all new and all ours. (nr13)

Much of the content posted on the mom blogs documented invisible mothering work. The blogs seemed to serve as an outlet that provided mothers with a way to publicly document their accomplishments and give others a chance to acknowledge their hard work. Bloggers revealed mothering attitudes implying that invisible domestic work can be worthwhile and satisfying, and others should take time to see and acknowledge it. Mothering work lacks opportunities to publicly highlight success. Posting accounts of this on the mom blog can serve this purpose. As a result of these open revelations, many readers who are isolated young mothers, struggling on their own, dealing with similar experiences and work, may experience feelings of validation. Participating in an online community of members who understand each other can be beneficial (Chayko, 2008). Publishing material on the mom blog may bring a mother feelings of

satisfaction by serving as a place to document unseen accomplishments before an understanding and appreciative audience.

In sum, material published on mom blogs in this sample served to create a public visibility of mothering that was limited before. They brought to light previously hidden aspects of mothering by publicly posting material discussing various topics including: 1) taboo subjects, 2) honest feelings, and 3) invisible domestic work and experiences. When posting this type of material, backstage, behind-the-scenes issues become part of a front stage public performance. These mom blogs often addressed issues that were, in the past, discussed in private. These hidden issues are now publicly confessed and embraced in this format. Bringing these issues to light can be liberating to the many mother readers in this portable community who have had very similar experiences (Chayko, 2008). The mom blog provides the bloggers with a way to freely, publicly say, “I work hard. I have talents. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed but I am doing significant and important work. I have something to say to the world. Those who judge me will not hurt me.” Millions of other mothers know the feeling, and seem to respond by saying, “Me too!”

### **Conclusion**

Mom blogs communicated highly controlled messages of the ordinary mother’s immediate experiences ‘in the trenches’ of motherhood to a growing community of online mothers. This research analyzed text posted on extremely popular, professional, nationally ranked blogs as well as text from lower readership, amateur modest mom blogs. This material posted on mom blogs may potentially influence the definition of acceptable standards of contemporary middleclass American mothering. Mom blogs provide a widely accessible medium for mothers to selectively portray their daily activities, victories, struggles, and range of

experiences. Chayko's theory of portable communities and aspects of Goffman's dramaturgical theory were helpful in describing the dynamics of this online mother community.

The data revealed three categories of messages related to the authors' accounts of daily mothering experiences. The posted messages contained material that complied with and differed from traditional, ideal motherhood standards and expectations, illustrated diverse ways of enacting good motherhood, and exposed previously hidden information from the private, domestic sphere. Published mom blog posts portrayed images that appeared to promote a redefinition of acceptable good mother standards of behavior. Published posts illustrated the mothers' participation in activities that supported the symbolic good mother standards, and provided evidence of participation in universal, common mothering activities including caring for the needs of her children as a self-sacrificing, domestic nurturer. However, these posts also portrayed images that seemed to present and promote a new definition of contemporary good mothers as being autonomous women who sometimes use vulgar and profane language, and participate in immature and irreverent behavior. The blogs portrayed these behaviors as acceptable for mothers and seemed to invite readers to reconsider both the traditional and the new mothering standards, and to ponder what acceptable contemporary American mothering is.

Next, mom blog posts were found to depict a variety of mothering styles. They served as a tool to show readers that there are a variety of ways to perform modern mothering rituals, and suggest that mothers need not stay at home and let life pass them by. Published materials portrayed bloggers as independent and suggested that contemporary mothers need not conform to a narrowly defined standard of endless, selfless care giving. The blogs posted content that portrayed contemporary mothering activities ranging from traditional child-focused, self-sacrificing intensive mothering, all the way to exciting, youthfully-independent, active self-

focused mothering (and everything in-between.) Posts illustrated how mothers applied, adapted, and modified modern 'intensive mother' expectations to fit personal circumstances, showed how they were able to keep the self as a priority and participated in independent, enjoyable leisure activities. Most published mom blog material confirmed the universal stereotype of a mother's love for and dedication to her children but they also seemed to advocate that mothers may choose from a range of contemporary good mothering styles, and still maintain active, unique, and exciting lives that are unhindered by the mother role. The mom blog format facilitated the practice of role-distancing by allowing bloggers to post text that showed that women are more than 'just moms.' They frequently recounted adventurous exploits in front of an audience of like-minded others.

Finally the mom blogs posted information that discussed secrets of the private, domestic mother experience. These mom blog posts brought the hidden to light by posting accounts revealing invisible mothering labor, taboo topics and other types of discussions that, in the past, have been kept behind closed doors in the domestic sphere. Bloggers posted content that challenged Goffman's theory, by 'pulling back the curtain' and giving a front-stage public performance that revealed previously hidden backstage information. Though exposure of this type of content may have caused the audience to feel uncomfortable, bloggers frequently used humor to make the topic more palatable. The invisible and often difficult work of mothering was highlighted. In turn, the reading audience members may receive validation for their own difficult, unseen but essential efforts caring and providing for home and family.

### **Theoretical Implications**

These research findings have led me to consider how revisions to the theories used by Goffman could be used in ways to profit future research. Goffman's theory of front stage and

back stage must be refined in order to incorporate changes to human interactions caused by technological advances. First, technology allows individuals to amplify their front stage performance and to minimize their back stage privacy. As seen in this research, blogs offer a way to make private things public by taking advantage of this medium that not only brings the hidden to light, but can potentially do so with great frequency and detail. Backstage information can be readily exposed on a blog through text, photographs, videos, and other images.

However, blogs do not just “pull back the curtain” and allow a full, unrestricted view of the backstage. Blog technology, as opposed to something like hidden security cameras, does not expose the backstage without one’s consent. The author fully controls what backstage information is released to her audience on her blog. The blog author maintains the ability to self-edit as a result of her control over time and space regarding what information she posts. Therefore, more of one’s carefully selected backstage life can be displayed on the front stage, but the author still maintains control over backstage information, which can be carefully guarded.

Furthermore, mom bloggers carefully control what types of backstage information to display. Backstage information comes forward only if it is deemed as something the audience members can relate to or empathize with. Backstage issues such as mothering complaints, mistakes, feelings of frustration and sadness related to gender roles, mothering or domestic issues were revealed in this research. The types of backstage issues brought forward were semi-private and were issues likely solicit support from other mothers.

On the other hand, issues deemed socially unacceptable, or vulnerable to harsh criticism were not revealed. For example, there were no posts in this sample suggesting the authors’ involvement in deviant behavior such as criminal activity, substance abuse or child abuse. There were almost no photos of the mother-author appearing unhappy, unkempt, or even overweight.

There were no photos of children with dirty faces, crying, fighting, or appearing in unsafe or unsanitary conditions. The blog format gives an author power to keep that type of information hidden.

As technology allows people to reshape the front and back stages, there are both costs and benefits involved. The costs of the smaller backstage may include a severe reduction in privacy for the author, and specifically vulnerable parties such as her children. Does this exposure put children at risk of physical or mental harm? In addition, do individuals really need to know so much about another's private circumstances? Being exposed to the private details of another's life may cause the reader to have unhealthy feelings of either superiority or inferiority. Benefits of this smaller backstage include the online community members' development of feelings of belonging to a community that possesses group cohesion and solidarity which can be very beneficial to populations that feel marginalized or isolated. As well, access to large amounts of practical information from one's peers helps one know 'how others do it'. Access to this trusted information can help one learn from, and perhaps avoid, others' mistakes.

### **Study Limitations**

This study explored the messages communicated by a specific, but limited demographic of mom bloggers, namely white middle-class mothers. As a result, messages communicated by this group are not generalizable. Also, this research focused on the messages mom bloggers convey to the audience and does not explore how the messages are actually received by audience members.

## **Future Research**

I recommend future research explore mom blogs in greater depth by studying a variety of related issues including the long term influence of mom blogs on participating individuals and the characteristics of published material found in economically or racially diverse mom blogs.

First, future research could explore inquiries related to the long-term influence of mom blogs. What is the impact of these blogs? Do mom blogs change measurable aspects of the socially accepted role definitions of a good middleclass American mother? Are there actual shifts in parenting attitudes and behaviors resulting from exposure to mom blogs? Do the mom blogs infringe on their child's privacy? If so, does this violation result in negative effects on the child's social development?

In addition, this work has addressed the content of mom blogs authored primarily by white middle-class mothers. Future research could explore the content and dynamics of online mothering communities composed of racially, economically, or ethnically diverse mother-groups.

Contemporary American mom blogs give millions of middleclass mothers the power to broadcast their individual mother voices and participate in the nationwide mothering discourse. This convenient, online national discussion is open to millions of ordinary mothers and is not exclusive to experts. Every woman with internet access has a platform to speak. Continued study of the use of online communication tools by American mothers can increase understanding of honest concerns, serious issues, and policies affecting this large segment of our society.

Finally, in reflecting on my experience that night in the crowded auditorium where thousands gathered to listen to a popular mom blogger, I now understand mom blogging a little more. Contemporary mom blogs are more than a just a diversion or a hobby. They give mothers the power of voice. They can offer mothers new ideas for the performance of their mother work,

and provide a way to learn about the mothering practices of their peers. Through a mom blog, a mother shares her voice and thousands of likeminded others who can relate to and feel validated by it. The mom blogger is not a modern-mothering expert due to advanced formal education, but as a result of real-life, in-the-trenches personal experience. The unique qualities of the mom blog give the author power to redefine contemporary motherhood standards and expectations, present mothering as varied and not singular, and bring the hidden and unacknowledged aspects of the middleclass American mother experience to light.

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Table 1  
 Characteristics of the Sample

	Blog I.D. #	Author's Race	Number of children	Mothering experience; oldest child is ...	Region of country
Nationally Ranked Mom blogs					
	1	White	2	5 years or older	East Coast
	2	White	1	5 years or older	East Coast
	3	White	1	5 years or older	East Coast
	4	White	2	5 years or older	The West
	5	White	2	5 years or older	East Coast
	6	White	4	5 years or older	Midwest
	7	Black	1	5 years or older	The South
	8	White	2	5 years or older	West Coast
	9	Unsure	2	5 years or older	North West
	10	White	1	5 years or older	The South
	11	White	6	5 years or older	The West
	12	White	3	5 years or older	East Coast
	13	White	2	5 years or older	East Coast
	14	White	2	Under age 5	West Coast
	15	White	3	5 years or older	East Coast
Amateur/modest mom blogs					
	16	White	2	Under age 5	Midwest
	17	White	2	Under age 5	Midwest
	18	White	4	5 years or older	Midwest
	19	White	3	Under age 5	Midwest
	20	Unsure	2	5 years or older	Midwest
	21	White	3	Under age 5	Midwest
	22	White	2	Under age 5	Midwest
	23	White	4	5 years or older	Midwest
	24	White	3	Under age 5	Midwest
	25	White	2	Under age 5	Midwest