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Mommy Blogs and Rhetoric: Reading Experiences That
Shape Maternal Identities

Brighton Prueger Capua

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

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ABSTRACT

Mommy Blogs and Rhetoric: Reading Experiences That Shape Maternal Identities

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The transition to motherhood is difficult and jarring for many women. Not only does this transition demand life-altering changes to a woman's life, but especially in more recent times, this transition offers nothing but uncertainty. As the role and understanding of women continues to change, what motherhood means becomes increasingly difficult to define; additionally, the traditional narratives of stay-at-home mothers who are always happy to do housework and nurture their children no longer apply for many 21st-century women, leaving new mothers feeling uncertain about who they are and who they want to become. Since the turn of the century, mothers have turned to the blogosphere to document and share the events of their everyday lives, making the blogosphere a space for mothers to share the highs and lows of modern family life with their family, friends, and other mothers. The scholarship published on mommy blogs suggests that for the writers of these blogs, the act of blogging provides writers with the opportunity to literally revise the events that occur in their lives on their blogs, which allows them to actively shape and create their maternal identities. In turn, their blogs are read, complicated, and validated by a community of other readers, which implicitly suggests that readers are being affected in some way by their reading experiences. Although the relationship between the blog and the blog writer has been given adequate attention in the scholarship on mommy blogs, the relationship between the blog and the blog reader has not been fully explored. Consequently, my research attempts to explain how a reader's perception of her maternal identity is influenced by her reading experiences. By applying Kenneth Burke's theory of literary form to the public texts of mommy blogs, I suggest that readers are affected in equally profound ways as the bloggers themselves. Looking at reader responses through Burke's theory of form demonstrates that the act of reading a mommy blog allows readers to experience life as someone else lives it, which often reveals a gap between the reader's real experiences and her vicarious experience reading. This space prompts a shift in attitude in readers; however, these shifts vary from reader to reader. Some readers may feel inspired, while others feel envious or inadequate by the same blog, which suggests that either way, a reader's perception of her maternal identity has changed. And although these shifts depend in part on the experience offered by the blog, their response reflects their own experiences of motherhood and expectations for how motherhood should be represented, making mommy blogs ultimately a place where readers actively shape their maternal identities as well.

Keywords: mommy blogs, identification, Kenneth Burke

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Mommy Blogs and Rhetoric: Reading Experiences That Shape Maternal Identities
“Shame Spirals” or Sources of Inspiration and Community?

In an article published on Salon.com entitled “Why I Can’t Stop Reading Mormon Housewife Blogs,” Emily Matchar attempts to answer her own inquiry: “I’m a young feminist atheist who can’t bake a cupcake. Why am I addicted to the shiny, happy, lives of these women?” Ultimately, she concludes that even for a feminist atheist, the uniquely beautiful pictures these LDS women paint of marriage and family life is what keeps her returning night after night to their “mommy blogs.” Mommy blogs, according to Matchar, are blogs written by women who focus their content primarily on the personal details of their family lives. Of Mormon bloggers specifically, she describes them as being “a bit more cheerful and wholesome than most,” which she explains, “helps women like me envision a life in which marriage and motherhood could potentially be something other than a miserable, soul-destroying trap.” Matchar’s discussion – followed by nearly 500 comments praising and blaming Mormon mommy blogs – reveals a surprisingly broad cultural fascination with motherhood as it is portrayed by mommy bloggers, particularly *Mormon* mommy bloggers.

Recent research on the development of the space women occupy within the blogosphere confirms that cultural preoccupation with modern motherhood. According to research conducted by eMarketer in 2010, “In total, there are 3.9 million women with children under 18 who write blogs, covering a wide variety of subjects, including parenting, couponing, travel, automobiles, and technology. While they share one thing in common – children – they are a diverse group” (Williamson 1). Furthermore, as Jennifer Mendelsohn cites in a *New York Times* article about mommy blogs, “According to a 2009 study by BlogHer, iVillage, and Compass Partners, 23 million women read, write, or comment on blogs weekly.” Evidenced by this research, the

potential for women to influence and be influenced by social media, specifically by personal blogs, is ever growing.

Beyond representing a cultural preoccupation with modern motherhood as it is represented by mommy bloggers, these numbers suggest that there is a great need for a sense of community among twenty-first century mothers. “Mommy blogging,” a term that has been coined to describe these bloggers – and a term that many bloggers use to describe themselves as well – is as Aimee Morrison describes, “purposive and deliberate social engagement, a creative as well as interpersonal practice that mitigates the assorted ills (physical isolation, role confusion, lack of realistic role models, etc.) and celebrates the particular joys of contemporary mothering, especially in the earliest years of parenting” (“Autobiography”). Because of the many complex changes women have undergone through the last century – more women working outside the home and the cultural trivializing of motherhood, for example – many women who choose to be mothers, either part-time or full-time, often feel isolated from and marginalized by the larger culture. Blogging, a practice that includes reading as well as writing blogs, has thus been understood as a way for mothers to form and feel part of a community of their own.

Presumably, these blogs can have great effect on readers and their perceptions of motherhood and their own maternal identities. While the majority of mommy blogs only reach family and friends, some have heavy traffic and large readerships. Presumably, again, the blogs with the largest readerships have the most pervasive rhetorical effect. The space Mormon mothers occupy within this group of widely-read bloggers has recently become a topic of interest across the blogosphere; “The Bloggernacle,” a term used to describe the Mormon portion of the blogosphere, was partially inspired by the growing presence of well-known Mormon mothers in the blogosphere. I read Mormon mommy blogs as a particular case of that broader genre of

“popular” mommy blogs. Although Mormon mommy bloggers generally write about the same kinds of topics as other mommy bloggers, members of the blogosphere often cite Mormon bloggers as being intensely optimistic and inspirational, which suggests they may have a magnified effect on their readers.

These effects upon readers include positive feelings of empathy and inspiration as well as negative feelings of envy and inadequacy. Although not every reader experiences the negative feelings, numerous blog posts, articles, and comments addressing them suggest that many do. A quick Google search using the terms “mommy blogs and inadequacy” reveals that negative reactions to mommy blogs are not uncommon. One of the first links titled “Feelings of Inadequacy,” is a blog post by a mother who expresses her choice to quit reading blogs that are “full of beautiful pictures of perfectly groomed children, all in hand-made-by-mom frilly dresses, with links to their chalk-full [sic] virtual store of handmade goodies for you to buy” (Creemore). Another link brings readers to a short post followed by nearly 400 comments called “The Mommy Blogging Shame Spiral,” which asks, “Do mommy bloggers create a pressure-filled environment in which other mothers feel forced to be perfect?” (Lancelle from Paris). Following Matchar’s article, several bloggers responded with posts about their experience reading Mormon mommy blogs specifically. One blogger responds: “The result of finding blogs like this is that I become equal parts inspired and depressed. Inspired to try to become more witty/stylish/adorable/funny/talented like these women. Depressed because I feel that I *so* do not measure up” (Harding). Although there are many readers who share positive experiences they have reading these blogs, these negative experiences imply that the experience of reading these blogs has a profound effect on the reader’s sense of self.

Scholarship on mommy blogs is a relatively new area of research; however, scholars have tended to focus their research on one of three areas: the blogger, the blog genre, or the blog reader. Focusing on the role of the blogger, Lynn M. Webb and Brittany S. Lee identify public performance as the rhetorical strategy bloggers use to interpret, revise, and assign meaning to the occurrences in their daily lives, “creating their own motherhood identity” (248). These scholars suggest that blogging provides the writer the opportunity to shape her own identity, and at the same time, influence the public’s perception of motherhood. The genre of the mommy blog has been discussed in similar terms; the convergence of the private and public spheres has become one of the defining aspects of this blog genre. For example, in their article about the genre of the personal blog, Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd assert that this “peculiar intersection of the public and private,” defines the primary rhetorical functions of this genre as “self-expression and community development.” As the blogger narrates her personal experiences to a public audience, the blog becomes a place for community where readers are invited to comment and share their experiences with the blogger and other readers. Recognizing that the nature of the mommy blog is inherently communal, many scholars have discussed the potential blogs have to influence their readers as well. However, the research in this area is so far limited. Considering the many public expressions by members of the mommy blogosphere of feelings of inadequacy, envy, and discontent, this influence needs to be understood in order to better understand the rhetorical work mommy blogs perform. This is the gap that I wish to fill.

While blog readers have not yet been given enough attention in the scholarship surrounding mommy blogs, Lena Karlsson has taken significant steps towards this end in her article “Desperately Seeking Sameness.” Here, she uses empirical research to identify reading motives, concluding that readers generally look for “sameness” with a blogger. Karlsson’s

research demonstrates that many readers come to blogs looking for someone they can relate with and continue to read when they experience a personal connection with the blogger. She suggests that the act of reading then becomes emotionally charged as “readers speak of the pleasures of finding themselves in another person” (151). However, Matchar’s confession that she is an atheist who is addicted to reading Mormon mommy blogs cannot fully be explained by Karlsson’s research, as her motivation to read and keep reading does not stem from a desire for “sameness.” Matchar’s experience alone suggests a gap in the way we understand the reader’s experience. Not only does her experience reflect a different experience than those Karlsson describes, but her confession that her experience reading has altered her perception of motherhood as “something other than a miserable, soul-destroying trap” demonstrates that a reader’s attitudes may shift as she reads and finds common ground with the blogger. While I agree that blog readers find enjoyment and continue reading blogs where they feel as though they identify with the blogger, my own observations suggest that this identification does not necessarily stem from “sameness.” My research thus builds on Karlsson’s by explaining how this sense of identification develops during the experience of reading, and moreover, how this experience shapes and influences a reader’s self-concept.

My own reading of mommy blogs, Mormon mommy blogs, and the conversations sparked by Matchar’s article specifically has left me wondering about this process of identification. This literature on mommy blogging has provided me with partial answers. As many scholars have described, mommy blogs represent a unique intersection between the private and public sphere. This intersection is what allows these blogs to build community through the expression of self. And as both Morrison (“Suffused”) and Karlsson observe, mommy blogs are “suffused with feeling and affect” (Karlsson 139), suggesting that the more the blogger shares of herself, the

closer readers feel to the blogger, which seems to suggest that a need for community is being fulfilled. However, I was still left with an important question. Rhetorically, what happens in the reader's experience that leads her to feel connected to the blogger? And how does this perceived relationship influence the reader's perception of her own identity? Although current scholarship on mommy blogs suggests that this intersection is what creates and strengthens these communities, generally affecting women in positive ways, my own observations demonstrate that readers do not always experience mommy blogs in ways that lead them to feel a part of these communities, which can make some women feel jealous or inadequate as a result. In other words, how can we rhetorically explain the mommy blog's various effects on individual readers?

In this essay, I apply Kenneth Burke's theory of literary form to the public comments left on mommy blogs to see how readers are influenced as they read and experience mommy blogs. What Burke's theory of form suggests is that an encounter with form allows readers to vicariously experience life as someone else lives it, which prompts identification and consequently shifts in attitudes as readers make room for this vicarious experience in their present identity. Of course, no reader comes to a blog as a blank slate; and so although different readers may inhabit the same experience reading a blog, the effects vary from reader to reader, leaving the transformative power ultimately in the readers' hands. Because the transition into motherhood is difficult for many, and because mommy blogs prompt relationships and communities between real women, the transformative potential is heightened. Looking at the language blog readers use through the lens of rhetorical form helps us understand not only *what* readers come to blogs for and what they experience, but also *how* a reader's identity is influenced and shaped by her reading experience. My research suggests that more than satisfying a need for community among mothers, mommy blogs are a place where readers'

maternal identities are shaped.

A Rhetoric of Mommy Blogs

What goes on in mommy blogs in general and Mormon mommy blogs in particular, involves shaping the relationship between communal and individual identity, which is something rhetorical critics have focused on throughout the last century. In 1930, John Dewey argued in his essay “The Lost Individual,” for a redefinition of the word “individual”: instead of imagining the individual as an isolated being, identifying himself by things only relative to himself, Dewey said the individual should be imagined as a social being who identifies himself (or her) with things that are claimed by many. Kenneth Burke also wrote about identity as a social construct: “Even when considered close-up, the identity of the ‘self’ or ‘person’ becomes part of a collective texture involving language, property, family, reputation, social roles, and so on – elements not reducible to the individual” (“Rhetorical” 265). More recently, Wayne Booth wrote about this idea similarly when he stated, “the isolated individual self simply does not, cannot exist. Not to be a *social* self is to lose one’s humanity. As Aristotle insisted, we are ‘political animals’ precisely in the sense that we become human only in a polis” (*Company* 238). This suggests that both positive and negative communal experiences have a profound effect upon individual identity development. Thus, more than satisfying a widespread need for young mothers to feel like they are not alone in their experience, mommy blogs provide each reader with the opportunity to develop, refine, and understand her own sense of identity as she vicariously experiences the identities expressed in these blogs.

In order to understand how that happens, we must understand how mommy blogs influence their readers. Kenneth Burke’s theory of literary form helps explain this influence. Burke first developed this concept in *Counter-Statement* in order to explain how art in general, and stories in particular, affect those who encounter them. He began on the principle that each writer, literary

or otherwise, is “engaged in the producing of effects upon his readers” (190). What begins for the writer as an interest in expressing his own emotion becomes “a mechanism for arousing emotion in others” (55). His theory of form explains how that experience of arousal is driven by a sequencing of events in the text that leads readers to have expectations about what comes next, and then to feel satisfied when that expectation is met, or even surprised or disturbed when what comes next turns out different from what they expected. Consequently, despite genre or purpose, Burke suggests that writing affects readers according to the principles of literary form. A close reading of several of Burke’s explanations of this concept of literary form in the context of his rhetoric of identification demonstrates that the two are inseparable: an encounter with form leads to an experience of identification.

I use the term “experience” here because Burke described form as a “way of experiencing” (143). This explains, for example, how stories influence readers. Burke’s definition of form describes the experience of reading a story: “Form...is an arousing and fulfillment of desires. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence” (124). It is this cause and effect structure of arousal and fulfillment or its failure, of creation of appetite and its satisfaction or frustration, that pushes a plot forward and lets readers experience an identity other than their own – in his technical terms, “[providing] a terminology of thoughts, actions, emotions, attitudes for codifying a pattern of experience” (154). In this way, stories allow readers to experience life as someone else lives it. This happens as stories lead readers to have certain expectations about what happens next. Whether their expectations are met, unmet, or complicated in some way, readers have to confront what actually does happen and interpret for themselves what the space between their expectation and reality implies for them. For readers of mommy blogs, their

expectation for how a blog should read is linked to their own experiences and perceptions of motherhood. When a blog carries a reader through an experience that differs from these expectations, she must confront and interpret what this space between her real experiences and her vicarious experiences means. Consequently, readers reconsider – intentionally or not – how they should think, act, and feel not only towards the experience it narrates, but also towards those similar types of experiences that occur in their reality.

This idea can be understood more clearly in “Art – and the First Rough Draft of Living,” an essay Burke wrote later in his career in 1964. Here, Burke discusses how “our sense of reality is shaped largely not by our own immediate sensory experience, but by what others tell us, in theologies, philosophies, textbooks, stories, poems, dramas, news, gossip, and the like” (158), which relates to his conception of a socially configured identity. Burke defines identity as the “complex of attitudes...that constitutes the *individual’s* sense of orientation” (*Permanence* 309). This orientation, however, is “not *individual*” (*Attitudes* 263); rather, it depends on the individual’s identifications beyond himself, which are constantly in flux as individuals have new experiences. Identity, then, is organic and changes as individuals have experiences that cause their attitudes to shift. Of the capacity an encounter with story has to shape and change identity in reaction to these attitude shifts, he says, “The great advantage I see in the arts is their ability to make us feel such shifts not merely from without but from within...It is easy to state the differences speculatively, schematically, in the language of criticism – but only the arts can saturate themselves with such changes of attitude imaginatively, personally” (“Art” 158). This difference between effect from “within” and from “without” brings us back to the idea of form as a way of experiencing; changes come from within as expectations and what follows from them change a reader’s perspective through the experience of confronting the space between their real

and vicarious experiences. As that happens, a reader learns to “anticipate [others’] attitudes toward him . . . [he] becomes aware of *himself* in terms of *them* (or generally, in terms of the ‘other’). And *his* attitudes, being shaped by their attitudes as reflected in him, modify his ways of action” (*Grammar* 237). In other words, as form carries a reader through a story, his or her attitudes change, and so he or she learns to identify with those situations that mimic the experience offered by the story.

This description of identification describes the development of identity using the language of form. An individual identifies with another individual when he or she learns to expect what another expects and consequently adjusts his or her attitudes and actions to accommodate those expectations. This happens in the process of reading a blog. As a reader vicariously experiences a blogger’s situation and compares this experience to her real experiences, she may reflect and modify her own attitudes to accommodate the attitudes expressed by the blogger. Of course, it can all work the opposite way as well; a reader may reject the vicarious experience and reinforce or alter her attitudes, creating a division between herself and the blogger. But either way, the encounter leads each reader to evaluate and revise the attitudes and perspectives that constitute whom they understand themselves to be.

New motherhood often prompts a type of identity crisis. Because of the many life-altering changes motherhood demands, many women feel disconnected from the self they recognized and understood prior to bringing a child into their lives. This identity crisis involves a struggle to recover a sense of self that connects to the past and accommodates the present and future, which now include the pressures, demands, and joys of motherhood. Through the vicarious experience of living in a story they are being told, readers of mommy blogs find themselves trying out different ways of enacting the role of “mother” in their real lives. As

Burke put it, “in these days of much uncertainty, when each of us individually can experiment but somewhat, by ranging through the field of arts in general, we can *personally* consider many more possibilities than we could otherwise” (“Art” 162). These blogs tell stories, and stories provide opportunities for readers to modify their attitudes and actions in response to the experience induced by form. The experiences of this or that desire and what follows from it enable readers to revisit who they have been and consider whom they need to become based on the space they encounter between their reality and their vicarious experiences reading.

So Matchar’s confession that Mormon mommy blogs help her imagine motherhood as something other than a “soul-destroying trap” is her response to the rhetorical form of mommy blogs. Her response reveals how reading these blogs has changed her attitude toward motherhood; although she identifies herself as being nothing like the women she reads about, she has become in some way similar to them. Through her article, Matchar narrates her own vicarious experience through reading, which she terms “oddly uplifting.” She writes, for example, “These women seem relaxed and untouched by cynicism. They throw elaborate astronaut-themed birthday parties for their kids and go on Sunday family drives to see the fall leaves change and get mani-pedis with their friends...It is possible to be happy, they seem to whisper. We love our homes. We love our husbands.” Having shared experiences with Mormon women through their blogs, Matchar is able to revisit her own experience of motherhood and see it from a different perspective. Who she was has confronted who the bloggers project themselves to be, and in the space between her real and vicarious experience, she modified her own attitudes about motherhood, allowing herself to shape a more satisfying sense of herself as a possible mother. Similarly, readers who experience negative feelings such as envy or inadequacy after reading these blogs are also responding to the rhetorical form of mommy blogs;

however, they interpret the space they perceive between their reality and vicarious experience as an inadequacy.

Mommy Blogs and Literary Non-Fiction

Burke's emphasis in his theory of form is experience. As he suggests, identity is the compilation of attitudes, which shift as we experience new things; identity, then, is closely linked to experience and our response to those experiences. What his theory of form suggests is that the identification that stories prompt is with the experience orchestrated by the writer's sequencing of events, rather than the author or characters present in the work. This can be explained more concretely by an interesting assertion Aristotle makes in *Poetics* about the primacy of plot over character in tragedies: "there could not be tragedy without action, but there could be one without character" (12), or put differently, "Tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life" (11). At first, this may seem counterintuitive. When we read or hear a story, the characters committing the actions of the plot seem to be an absolutely necessary element to the story. As we travel through the various twists and turns of a plot, we begin to feel as if we know the plot's characters; we rejoice in their successes, lament in their failures, and we feel as though we identify with the characters because we have shared their experience. However, Aristotle seems to be suggesting that there is a distinction between the character's identity and the character's actions, and that we identify with the character's actions as we vicariously experience those actions ourselves. This coincides with Burke's theory that it is the experience a story offers that has the potential to alter a reader's sense of self, which implies that it is a reader's encounter with the blogger's experiences rather than the blogger herself that prompts self-reflection, comparison, and ultimately shifts in attitude in the reader.

Sarah Bakewell complements this understanding of form in her discussion of literary nonfiction that describes the genre of the personal essay as an aesthetic form capable of

producing identification with the author – the “character” of the personal essay. Although she does not use Burke’s or Aristotle’s language, the connection with their ideas of identification is implicit. Bakewell introduces Michel de Montaigne as a writer whose “exploratory, free-floating pieces” lead people to a shared experience of self, creating a bridge between inherently separate individuals (3). Interestingly, Bakewell connects the genre of the personal essay to the blog: “Even as bloggers and networkers delve into their private experience, they communicate with their fellow humans in a shared festival of self” (1). The key word in this passage is experience. Although Bakewell’s discussion implies that literary non-fiction produces identification between reader and “character,” it is only through the writer’s sharing of her personal experience that this perception is created. In order for readers to feel as though they identify with a writer herself, the readers must identify with the private experiences expressed by the writer. In her emphasis of the personal essay as a genre that is more interested in expressing personal emotion than recording plot, she shares several reactions to Montaigne’s essays, all of which imply a perceived identification with Montaigne himself:

A sixteenth-century admirer, Tabourot des Accords, said that anyone reading the *Essays* felt as if they themselves had written it. Over two hundred and fifty years later, the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson said the same thing in almost the same phrase. “It seemed to me as if I had myself written the book, in some former life.” “So much have I made him my own,” wrote the twentieth-century novelist André Gide, “that it seems he is my very self.” And Stefan Zweig, an Austrian writer on the verge of suicide after being forced into exile during the Second World War, found in Montaigne his only real friend: “Here is a ‘you’ in which my ‘I’ is reflected; here is where all distance is abolished.” (6-7)

All of these authors express a feeling of oneness with Montaigne after reading his essays.

Different from reading fiction, readers perceive the “character” of the personal essay – the author – to be authentic because the experience offered by its form is rooted in the author’s reality.

Although the character that emerges from the text during a reader’s reading experience is necessarily separate from the actual writer, it is the reader’s perception that the character authentically represents the writer that allows the reader’s identification with experience to evolve to identification with character. For many readers, this distinction is nonexistent.

Readers perceive the character *as* the writer; in this sense, the “character” is real. And although these quotes express a feeling of identification with Montaigne himself, they don’t express that in finding themselves in someone else’s story, their understanding of their own self-concept has been changed or clarified. Nevertheless, Bakewell’s description that writing about private matters of the self “[creates] a mirror” (3) in which other people come to recognize themselves implies that finding yourself in someone else’s experience provides an opportunity to negotiate, modify, and clarify notions of the self.

Burke’s and Bakewell’s discussions suggest a useful dichotomy: literary fiction prompts identification between readers and “action,” or experience, while literary nonfiction leads readers to feel as though they identify with “character,” or identity following their experience of identification with “action.” Importantly, both Burke and Bakewell suggest that identification with either “action” or “character” can bring about profound changes within an individual.

Assuming that blogs, like the personal essay, prompt a kind of identification with experience that leads readers to feel as though they identify with the blogger as well, how is the transformative effect different from those reading situations that only prompt identification with experience? In their description of mommy blogs as a genre that bridges the private and public spheres, research

on mommy blogs suggests that this aspect of the blog genre increases the blog's capacity to influence and shape a reader's identity (Morrison; Web and Lee; Miller and Shepherd; DiPrince). Mommy bloggers often write about what was previously considered intensely private acts: breastfeeding, miscarriages, quiet mornings with children, romantic evenings with husbands, divorce, and infertility, for example. Prior to the internet, without access to major venues of publication, the average mother could only share these experiences with close friends, family, and people she meets in real life. Now, millions of women participate in the public sharing of these experiences. It is this unique intersection of the private and public where mommy blogs meet that enables identification with "character" following identification with experience.

This perceived identification with a "real" person is rhetorically significant for several reasons. First, it fulfills the need young mothers have to feel like they are not alone in their predicament; assuming that many of these mothers are experiencing an identity crisis, recognizing that the stories bloggers tell are based in reality and told by real mothers satisfies their need for companionship and understanding. Second, based on the understanding that stories allow readers to experiment with their own identities, the very tangible kind of experience that a mommy blog describes is real in a way that those provided by fiction are not. A woman can read a fictional account of a mother's experiences and develop important insights about who she is and who she wants to become based on her sharing of that experience. However, when she reads what she perceives to be an account of a real mother's experiences, experiences that occurred just yesterday or the day before that, it is easier to imagine herself in that person's place and the transformative effect is stronger as she believes that her vicarious experience is someone else's immediate reality. Finally, unlike the genre of the personal essay, and for that matter, other forms of literature and art, the life of a blog is organic. It changes as the author expresses

new understanding derived from her changing experience. In this way, the effect of a blog on a reader is an ongoing process. The reader can experience the cause and effect waves of desire and fulfillment (or frustration) again and again, and continue reflecting on, modifying, and clarifying her perception of herself in either positive or negative ways.

Another aspect that distinguishes the personal essay from the mommy blog is the interactive component of commenting that allows for community formation through the sharing, validating, and challenging of personal thoughts and experiences. As Gregory Clark writes in relation to the experiences people have visiting a national park, “the rhetoricality of [an] experience is intensified when it is shared. When people share the same encounter, when what they experience together prompts in them the same attitudes, they come away sharing an identity,” bound together “in ideology, in aspiration, in circumstance, and finally, in space” (38). By “space,” Clark means the geographical kind. When mommy bloggers share the intimate details and happenings of their daily lives on their blogs – leading readers through a vicarious experience of their own – they are leading readers to share a way of experiencing their own domestic “space,” that, while unique, is a version of the same situation they all share. Mommy blogs work rhetorically by bringing people together to inhabit similar attitudes through the way of experiencing a similar space.

Of course, while mommy blogs can create and sustain communities, not every reader has experiences that lead them to identify with this community. As James P. Zappen emphasizes, “identification as a means of inducing cooperation is inherently limited since any identification necessarily also entails a division: ‘Every ‘us’ requires a ‘them’” (280). In other words, any move towards a community is a move away from another one; and a move away from this or that community also entails an assertion of one’s identity. Both positive and negative experiences

within a community can leave a mark on how a person understands his or her personal identity. In this way, whether a mommy blog leads readers to experience their lives, actual or imagined, as mothers in such a way that they perceive themselves as members of that community or not, the experience prompted by reading influences their understanding of their identity. So, similar to the personal essay, the identification a reader experiences with the “character” of the blog – the blogger – heightens the potential her encounter with rhetorical form has to transform her identity; the presence of a community also heightens this potential.

Readers in Action

This theory is illustrated in the varying responses readers have to mommy blogs expressed in both comments and blog posts. My analysis focuses on several reader responses to the blogs Matchar cites in her article about her Mormon mommy blog “addiction,” because her article and the conversations sparked by her article, demonstrate that these blogs have large and diverse readerships, which make these specific blogging communities a strong cultural sample for the variety of reading experiences had across the mommy blogosphere in general. Although my selection of blogs to analyze was narrowed by the blogs cited by Matchar and the conversations sparked by her article, with 100-200 comments per post, my sample-size for specific reader responses to analyze was still large. I selected blog posts partially at random, focusing my selections on current posts where the blogger narrated an experience. I also tried to showcase the spectrum of experiences bloggers write about. I then chose comments in which the language most explicitly narrated the reader’s experience, and I narrowed this further by choosing comments that offered personal information in attempts to represent the diversity of these blogs’ readerships.

In these varying responses to mommy blogs, readers often express feeling changed in some way. These expressions are responses to the rhetorical form of mommy blogs and are

intensified by aspects of the mommy blog genre, such as the identification readers experience with the blogger and with the community of other readers as well. What my analysis will demonstrate is that the vicarious experience the rhetorical form of mommy blogs offers often reveals a gap between a reader's expectation for what should happen on a blog and the reality of what actually occurs. I suggest that this gap reflects the space between how a reader perceives her real experience as a mother and her vicarious experience as a mother reading. Depending on the blog and the reader, the space between her real and vicarious experience might be perceived as big or small; and either way, how she interprets what that space means is what leads her to either identify with the blogger and her narrated experiences or to markedly separate from the blogger and blogging community.

Several comments left on a post written by Courtney Kendrick from *C. Jane Kendrick*, one of the Mormon mommy blogs specifically cited by Matchar, demonstrate how encounters with form lead readers to experience identification with a blogger and her experiences. Published January 1, 2013, Kendrick describes her experience miscarrying her unborn child only a few days before. Intimately shared, her post was intimately received with nearly 200 comments expressing condolences, similar experiences, and gratitude for Kendrick's openness and honesty in sharing this moment with her readers. One reader relates to Kendrick's post, explaining how Kendrick's experience helps her attach meaning to her own: "I am sitting at my computer, just sobbing. I also have a heart shaped uterus, and I've never been able to put into words all the fears that come with having one. I will be reading this post often. In a weird way, your experience is helping me grieve with my own" (Amber Whitely). As Burke describes, form provides "simplicity and order to an otherwise unclarified complexity" (*Counter* 154). In other words, the experience of being carried through a story offers readers interpretations for how they

should think and act because stories provide the continuity and coherence that reality often lacks. The act of reading Kendrick's narrated experience allowed this reader to confront and experience her own fears about having a heart-shaped uterus without having to actually go through a miscarriage herself, which reveals a gap between her real and vicarious experience. However, it is in this space where she is able to negotiate and clarify what it might mean to be a woman and a mother with an irregular uterus. When this reader explains how until she read Kendrick's post, she was never been able to "put into words all the fears" that come with having a heart-shaped uterus, she is responding to the rhetorical form of Kendrick's post by shifting her attitudes to accommodate her vicarious experience, leading her to identify with this experience.

Another reader who narrates a similar experience to Kendrick also demonstrates how encounters with form lead to identification: "I thought I was relieved not to be pregnant anymore; now, thanks to you, I think I was relieved that this pregnancy was over because things were going wrong. I also thought I was depressed to be pregnant, now I know I was depressed because it was just not the right pregnancy" (AgnèsIamexicaine). Similar to the previous comment, this reader explains how reading Kendrick's narrated experience clarified her own experience miscarrying her unborn child. This, again, is a response to the rhetorical form of mommy blogs. Having vicariously experienced the aftermath of Kendrick's miscarriage, this reader's attitude towards her own miscarriage changed in response to the space she encountered between her real experience miscarrying a child and her vicarious experience reading Kendrick's, leading her to identify with this experience. Additionally, because this reader specifically cites Kendrick as the source of her personal revelation, her encounter with form seemed to have taken greater effect because she knows that her vicarious experience is someone else's present reality. When these readers explain how reading Kendrick's narrative helps clarify

their own experiences, they are responding to the rhetorical form of Kendrick's blog, identifying with Kendrick and her experiences and adopting this vicarious experience as part of their maternal identities.

Comments left on a post by Natalie Holbrook from *Nat The Fat Rat*, a Mormon blogger who was cited and interviewed in Matchar's article, also shows how an encounter with rhetorical form can lead to identification. In a post titled "One for the Record Books," Holbrook narrates her experience hearing her first and currently only son tell her for the first time, "I love you," or as she writes, "i yuh you, mommy." She describes how hearing those words for the first time made her "oh so happy and yet oh so melancholy all at the same time...my little boy is growing up so, so fast." This post was followed by 60 comments, most of which expressed being moved by her words, and many that expressed being moved to tears. Interestingly, several of these readers left comments expressing excitement for motherhood after reading this post. For example, one reader commented, "This is so sweet and totally made me tear up. Can't wait for the day that I have a little babe of my own who says that to me" (Stella Dobry). Although this reader does not have children and so has not experienced this for herself, Holbrook's post allowed her to vicariously experience this moment, which reveals a space between her real and vicarious experiences. As this reader writes, this space makes her excited to experience this moment in reality in the future, because she believes it will mimic what she experienced reading Holbrook's post. In this way, her encounter with rhetorical form led her to identify with this experience, which altered how she perceives motherhood and has now become part of how she perceives her future maternal identity.

This post also attracted comments from mothers who shared similar experiences that have occurred in their realities. Several readers express feeling similarly mixed emotions about their

own children growing up. For example, one reader who describes how she appreciates how Holbrook expresses feeling both “bitter and proud,” narrates how she has also both “[choked] on tears and terror” and felt in awe and excited watching her own twenty-three-month-old daughter grow up and learn about the world (Sarah Noel). For this reader, being carried through another’s experience prompted her to clarify her own by narrating it in the comment section in ways that reflect Holbrook’s post, which demonstrates that her encounter with rhetorical form led her to accommodate the inherent space that exists between her vicarious and real experience of this moment. Just as bloggers write to revise, clarify, and create their maternal identities, this reader’s reading experience led her to do the same. I suggest that for this reader and others like her who share similar experiences in reality, the act of reading mommy blogs illuminates the reader’s real experience in a new light and engraves that experience deeper into her maternal identity, because the experience offered by rhetorical form and the experience of identification that follows provides greater clarity and emphasis to those that occur in reality. In other words, for this reader, identifying with Holbrook’s experience made her value her own real experience more.

This experience of identification is the reason many women read mommy blogs. However, despite being carried by a particular blog’s rhetorical form through the same experience, the blog may lead one reader to experience a sense of identification and lead another to unsubscribe from the blog. What, then, determines whether or not a reader will experience identification? Recognizing that encounters with form lead to identification when the space that emerges between a reader’s real and vicarious experiences prompts readers to shift their attitudes to accommodate this experience into their maternal identities in ways that create common ground with the blogger and her experiences, terms for identification depend on how readers interpret

and respond to this space. When readers interpret these spaces as inadequacies, they are unable to experience identification, because they do not shift their attitudes in ways that create common ground with the blogger and her experiences. For these readers, they must perceive their experiences to be similar to those expressed by the blogger in order to experience identification, which hearkens to Karlsson's research in "Desperately Seeking Sameness;" implied by her title, identification implies similarity.

This type of reading experience is expressed by many blog readers. For example, only a couple weeks after *Salon* published Matchar's article, Jenna Anderson, a Mormon blogger from *That Wife Blog*, published a post in reaction to Matchar's article titled "On Being Shiny, Happy, Hip." Although Anderson was not among the bloggers cited by Matchar, she responds as a member of the Mormon mommy blogging community, addressing Matchar's assertion that Mormon mommy bloggers portray only the positive aspects of their lives. Here, she discusses her own experience reading other Mormon blogs. She describes how she has had to unsubscribe from several blogs that made her feel jealous and inadequate, explaining that the blogs she has decided to keep up with are written by bloggers whom she has developed "a relationship with over time." In this post, Anderson acknowledges the effect participating in this community can have on a reader's perception of self. Having experienced both negative and positive effects of reading mommy blogs herself, Anderson highlights friendship and the ability to relate with bloggers and other readers as her purpose in participating in this community. For Anderson, however, it seems that being able "to relate" with a blogger as a reader means that the space between who she perceives herself to be as a woman and a mother and who the blogger projects herself to be is small; in other words, she perceives herself to be similar to the blogger based on her vicarious experience reading. Her reading experiences in these types of situations result in

positive effects because she doesn't end up feeling, as she puts it, "woe is me, why aren't I as skinny/pretty/wealthy as they are?"

Anderson's discussion of her experience reading other women's blogs quickly garnered 130 comments from readers sharing their experiences reading mommy blogs. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the comments echoed Anderson's personal assertion that readers become loyal to the blogs they feel they can relate with because they perceive their experiences as similar to the blogger's. For example, one reader explains her reason for reading certain mommy blogs: "Relate is a good word (I've been using 'identify') – if I can relate in some good sized way, I'll keep reading. But I just can't read blogs where I don't relate with the person" (Katy). Similarly, another reader asserts: "I read blogs because they make sense to me, because I care about the content and the writer, and because I can relate...I read blogs of people that I like—not people that I want to be" (Kari). Another describes a blog that she has decided to unsubscribe from: "Even though this particular blog is wholesome and positive, it's JUST NOT GOOD FOR ME because I'm in a stage of life in which I'm aspiring to that life but it's not possible to achieve it!" (Lucy). Each of these comments expresses the effect of identification with the blogger as a dominating factor in their decision to keep reading a blog. However, identification for these readers implies a similar experience to what Anderson described. As the two latter readers mention, when a particular experience with a blog reveals a gap between who they perceive themselves to be and who they desire to be, they feel jealousy and inadequacy, preventing them from being able to feel as though they relate with the blogger. For these readers, the spaces between their real and vicarious experiences revealed by their encounters with rhetorical form must be relatively small in order to avoid feelings of envy and inadequacy.

Of course, this isn't the case for every reader. For example, even though Matchar perceived the space between her experiences and those expressed by Mormon mommy bloggers to be huge, she felt "oddly uplifted" and even inspired, leading her to develop attitudes about motherhood that reflected those expressed by the bloggers, which facilitated her to experience a sense of identification with them. Another comment left on Anderson's post illustrates this point:

What I look for in the blogs I read is substance. (Which I know is a subjective term that varies from person to person.) Something – either in the quality of the writing or the content – that touches me and makes me think. That's why I read your blog – for the insights you give me into the world of Mormonism and parenting and other issues. Of course, over the years, it's become much more – and now that I feel like I "know" you, I also enjoy the cute photos of T1 and the outfit posts. (Life of a Doctor's Wife)

As she describes, her experience reading allows her to see life from a perspective other than her own, which highlights a large space between her real and vicarious experience. Rather than feel inadequate or jealous as a result, however, she describes how her encounter with this space provided her with insights into "Mormonism and parenting and other issues." These insights, she explains, has "over the years," lead her to feel as though she "knows" Anderson, which, she emphasizes has made her reading experience "much more" than what the substance of the blog provided, implying that the relationship she feels with Anderson has become the more fulfilling aspect of her reading experience. I suggest that her sense of fulfillment stems from these spaces she encountered between her real and vicarious experiences reading Anderson's experiences,

because that space prompted her to change in ways that lead her to identify with Anderson and her experiences.

These varying responses to mommy blogs can be found on the same blog. Several comments left on and about Naomi Davis's *Rockstar Diaries*, for example, demonstrate the opposing reactions different readers can have to the same blog, and thus shows how an encounter with form can lead different readers to feelings of inspiration or inadequacy and to identification or separation. Of the blogs cited by Matchar, *Rockstar Diaries* best fits Matchar's description of Mormon mommy blogs as being "more cheerful and wholesome than most." Davis's blog typically focuses on the simple and positive moments in life – vacations, days spent at the park, and date nights with her husband, for example – and tends to avoid harder issues like infertility and miscarriage. Her focus on the happier things in life has varying effects upon her readers. It is not uncommon to find comments on her blog that thank her for her positive outlook and express feeling inspired to enjoy life more. For example, on a post published shortly after Kendrick's post about miscarriage, Davis writes about her family's weekend trip to Washington, D.C. that quickly received 127 comments. Several comments reveal a healthy desire to live life more like how Davis represents her life on her blog. For example one reader writes, "i really appreciate that you share your family adventures with everyone...it gives me a real different perspective on life and makes me want to try something new and different" (Alyssa), while another writes, "You really do have the cutest, most happy family I've seen. Husband and I are praying for babies and when God does bless us with babes, I hope we are as fun-loving as you" (Brittany). These comments are responses to *Rockstar Diaries*' rhetorical form. Having been carried through Davis's experiences eating breakfast at a local market, strolling through Capitol Hill, and meeting up with old friends, these readers express feeling inspired to change in ways

that reflect the experiences and optimistic attitudes expressed by Davis. Consequently, their response to the space between their real and vicarious experience leads them to identify with Davis and her experiences.

Interestingly, *Rockstar Diaries* is also one of the most frequently cited sources of envy and inadequacy. In Anderson's response to Matchar, she specifically cites *Rockstar Diaries* as one of the blogs she chose to unsubscribe from. Another comment left on that post confesses to the same thing: "I get jealous and wonder why I even read *Rockstar Diaries* in the first place" (PJ). Another blogger who responded to Matchar's article on her own blog, Angie Harding, also specifically cites *Rockstar Diaries* as a catalyst for self-deprecating thoughts and feelings, listing *Rockstar Diaries* among the blogs that make her feel like she needs to become "a fashionista, an expert decorator, a talented crafter, a great writer, an amazing cook, oh and probably a vegan marathon runner too." These expressions of envy and inadequacy are responses to form too. For example, for Harding, the experience prompted by rhetorical form of living vicariously through Davis's experiences exposes what she perceives to be an irreconcilable space between her identity as a mother and the one projected by Davis, which makes her feel like she is not who she is supposed to be as a woman or a mother. For whatever reason, readers that respond to Davis's blog expressing admiration and feelings of inspiration interpret the difference in their identities as a place for manageable and positive change while readers who express feeling envious and inadequate view that space as a shortcoming they are incapable of reconciling.

Evidenced by these examples, although every blog reader will be carried through an experience that allows her to see life as someone else lives it, the effect varies from reader to reader. One reader may feel inspired while another may feel jealous, annoyed, or inadequate by the same blog. Although Burke provides a rationale for how stories influence readers through

his description of form, nowhere is he explicit about the range of effects the same encounter with form can have on different readers. Wayne Booth provides some insight into this gap in Burke's description of form. Similar to Burke's theory of form, Booth's theories were originally intended to work specifically within the discipline of literary studies, the world of story. One of Booth's primary critical projects was to revive the ancient metaphor of books as friends. In defense of this metaphor, he claimed that "all stories, in short, claim to offer something to us that will add to our lives, and they are thus like the would-be friends we meet in real life" ("George Eliot" 8). Booth's purpose in reviving this metaphor was to provide a critical language for talking about these offers because as he put it, "stories have moral importance...because they make a difference to our *ethos* – who we are, how we behave to others, and what our culture becomes" ("Moral" 156). In describing this metaphor he distinguishes between types of friendships, suggesting that the friendships we should strive for with people and with stories are based in equality ("George Eliot" 7), which implicitly suggests that the quality of a reader's encounter with a story depends on both what a story offers a reader and what a reader offers a story. Booth explains how what we offer a text impacts our experience with a story when he says, "Just as in real life we are not bound to deal with people only on the terms they would dictate – our own qualities can either raise or lower the quality of any meeting, so in our meetings with literary companions" (25). This helps explain the various effects a single blog can have on different readers: encounters with form are dependent on the existing identity of its reader.

So according to Burke, blogs theoretically take each reader through the same experience by prompting the same desires and then satisfying, frustrating, or complicating those desires in the same way. Booth complements Burke's theory when he suggests that the same experience

can produce different effects in different readers because each reader will interpret her vicarious experience according to how she perceives her existing identity. As a reader compares her vicarious experience reading a blog with her real experiences, her attitudes may shift; how those attitudes shift is what varies from reader to reader as Booth explains, “One man's snobbish friendship is another man's saving remnant of the pure in heart” (“George Elliot” 24). This understanding of form places more responsibility on blog readers. Instead of imagining the reader as a passive recipient, subject to becoming whatever a blog leads her to become, this understanding of form demonstrates that the beliefs, experiences, and attitudes a reader brings to a blog carries equal weight in her response.

Conclusion

Most scholars who have written about mommy blogs specifically have focused on the effects blogging has on the blogger herself. Scholars such as Webb and Lee, Lopez, and DiPrince have discussed how a blogger's performance on her blog helps shape and define who she is as a mother. As Joan S. Tucker suggests, “Maternal blogging can be construed as a performance of the self, a practice through which the mother recreates the setting and substance of her life through well-crafted lines of text” (qtd. in Webb and Lee 265). Mommy blogging provides a way for mothers to emphasize, omit, and literally rewrite events that occur in her everyday life; these blogs are the carefully crafted identities of their writers. They express the reality the blogger wants to remember and embrace. As Webb and Lee emphasize, mommy blogs take performance to “another level by adding a public audience,” which provides bloggers with the opportunity to interact with others in ways that often validate the identity they are constructing (248). This community created by the blogger allows women to discuss and potentially redefine the meaning of motherhood (Lopez; DiPrince). As Lopez has noted, although mommy blogs are often understood as nothing more than a personal journal, mommy

blogging is a “radical act” that impacts how the blogger perceives her own identity.

What my research suggests is that the readers of mommy blogs are impacted in similar and equally profound ways. As the blogger herself develops her sense of identity through the ongoing process of performing it to others, her readers develop theirs by following that development. As a reader continues to follow a blogger and shares this experience with a community of other readers as well, her experience reading takes greater effect because she begins to feel as though she can relate with the community; because she has developed a relationship with them, she trusts her vicarious experiences more too.

The transition to motherhood is difficult and jarring for many women. Not only does this transition demand life-altering changes to a woman’s life, but especially in more recent times, this transition offers nothing but uncertainty. As the role and understanding of women continues to change, what motherhood means becomes increasingly difficult to define; additionally, the traditional narratives of stay-at-home mothers who are always happy to do housework and nurture their children no longer apply for many 21st-century women, leaving new mothers feeling uncertain about who they are and who they want to be. As psychologist Ruth F. Lax described in “Motherhood is Unending,” because in a sense, at the moment of conception pregnant women lose control of their bodies and their futures, “some women [become] quite anxious and others quite depressed. They remember themselves as active and decisive, and now are suddenly, to quote a patient, ‘a helpless, passive, bystander’” (4). Of course, while all women do not universally share this particular experience, as Lax writes, motherhood is a lifelong “state of being” (1), or as I would suggest, a state of *becoming*, that requires many types of transitions overtime that take time to adjust to.

For both the writer and the reader, mommy blogging seems to be an important way 21st-

century women negotiate and clarify what this state of becoming means for themselves. For the writers, the act of revising their everyday experiences in real life gives them more control in shaping their identity as a mother. Writers transform the uncertainties they face as they narrate their realities on their blogs. And although the experiences offered by the rhetorical form of mommy blogs influence a reader's perception of her maternal identity, these experiences can only influence a reader according to her existing identity, which leaves the transformative potential a blog has to shape the reader largely in the reader's hands. Consequently, instead of imagining readers as passive recipients of the rhetoric being performed on mommy blogs, my research suggests that readers are inherently active as it is their previous experiences and attitudes that influence their response to a particular blog. However, although readers are active, because many readers perceive themselves as lesser or inadequate because of their reading experiences, it seems that many readers do not manage these experiences in ways that are stabilizing or satisfying.

Even still, many readers seem to recognize how they are being affected and adjust their reading habits accordingly. When readers experience what they perceive to be positive effects, they continue to check for updates; when readers believe they are being influenced in ways that negatively affect their self-concepts, many unsubscribe, markedly leaving the community. However, even when a reader unsubscribes from a blog because her reading experiences there make her feel inadequate, the act of leaving the community does not remove the impact those vicarious experiences left on her identity. If readers are not aware of what is happening in their experience reading that causes them to feel better or worse about themselves, their identity shifts and consequent actions are a result of being acted upon, and their fragile identities as new mothers are still beyond cognizant control. Nevertheless, recognizing that because a reader's

response to a mommy blog is dependent on her existing identity, it is possible for readers to manage their reading experiences in ways that shape a more stable and satisfying sense of self as a mother. This suggests that when readers are not only active, but are also able to manage their responses to encounters with mommy blogs, mommy blogs are places where both writers and readers clarify and negotiate the uncertainties of motherhood in ways that avoid the anxiety and discouragement that accompanies feelings of envy and inadequacy.

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