

2016

Discouraging discourse: Mommy War rhetoric in the digital age

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Discouraging discourse: Mommy war rhetoric in the digital age

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication

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Ames, Iowa

2016

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mom and my daughter. Without my mom, I would not be a daughter and without my daughter, I would not be a mom.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Maggie LaWare, and my committee members, Denise Vrchota and Susan Stewart, for their guidance and support throughout the course of this research. Their patience, knowledge, and encouragement made finishing this project possible.

In addition, I would also like to thank my friends, colleagues, the department faculty and staff for making my time at Iowa State University a wonderful experience. The friendships I made during my graduate studies at Iowa State are invaluable. Thank you to both of my Marys (Mary Speckhard and Mary Stoecklein), Justin Atwell, Nate Pillman, Abby Stonner, Annie Preston, Rachel McKenny, Kylie Jacobson, Ashley Mauer, and Rachel Murdock. I appreciate the priceless advice and wisdom I've gotten from all of you. I would also like to thank Amy Slagell, Ben Crosby, Christopher Anderson, and Denise Acavedo for their professional guidance and support. My time at Iowa State was a wonderful one and I am countlessly thankful for the amazing friends I made along the way.

My acknowledgements would be incomplete without thanking my husband, Jesse, for his continual support through writing, revising, and cursing throughout the process. Thank you to my daughter, Evelyn, for eating grilled cheeses and peanut butter sandwiches for dinner on many nights when Mommy was busy writing.

And of course, none of this would be possible without the Lord. Thank you for gifting me with a clever mind, a heart for research, and a way with words.

ABSTRACT

While Mommy War rhetoric provides the foundation for a discourse in the mothering community, its explosive power is best examined in a medium where women, often times new moms, feel safe expressing their concerns, desires, and needs: the mommy blog. In many senses, the mommy blog is perfect venue for the mother to build community among like-minded people while gathering the advice, support, and resources necessary to conquer the arduous task of mothering. However, the community that mothers expect to find in the mommy blog is often replaced with hostile or uncivil discourse between bloggers and their readers. Specifically, this thesis will address how and why this happens by examining how Aristotle's canons of invention and style influence each other and the ways a blogger and her audience interact with each other by closely examining the mommy blogs Dooce, a single author blog written to an audience that does not allow anonymous comments, and Café Mom at The Stir, a multiple-author blogger site composed for an audience that does allow anonymous comments.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The Mommy Wars. The Mommy Myth. New Don't Blame Mother. Feminist Mothering. The Politics of Motherhood. While these books are only a small sampling of the literature and scholarship being produced by, for, and about contemporary mothers, the diversity in literature being written clearly highlights an important but unmet need. Motherhood, even without conflicting opinions and advice, is a tricky endeavor. It is hard. It is messy. It is time-consuming. Because the village has become increasingly globalized, the choices concerning motherhood have also become diversified. In an era of global communications, both new and experienced mothers are bombarded with parenting information stemming from internet "experts" that propose very clear ideas of the right and wrong ways to parent. The dichotomies are seemingly endless for motherhood and each choice, it seems, is attached to emotionally charged values, judgments, and criticisms from other women. Should she be a free-range parent? Should she be a helicopter parent? Should she work full-time? Should she stay at home? Should she compromise and work part-time? Should she stick with the traditions of her mother? Should she negotiate her own territory as a new mom?

Despite the wealth of information available to both new and more seasoned mothers, these are not easy questions to answer. In addition to all the print media available to mothers, there is almost an innumerable number of websites, forums, and blogs dedicated to the act of mothering. In fact, the excessive amount of parental guidance available online is so vast that it can easily become overwhelming to parents at all experience levels. With so many voices

espousing such a variety of opinions, judgments, and facts, is it any wonder that the modern mother feels overburdened and overloaded with information?

Mothering, especially mothering young children, is daunting. More importantly, mothering holds a high potential to isolate women. A study by clinical psychologist Ruth Paris and social work professor Nicole Dubus confirm what generations of new mothers already know: motherhood is an act of sacrifice. For many moms, that sacrifice is named social interaction. Paris and Dubus' study finds that new mothers consistently experience social isolation and a personal disconnectedness (79). This sentiment is echoed not only in other academic studies, but also among mothers themselves. The flood of online content from articles and blogs on parenting websites and forums prove that the lonely mom trope is more than just an academic interest. Mothers, real moms responsible for raising real, live, breathing, children, are feeling lonely, isolated, and depressed. A sampling of parenting blogs spanning almost ten years reveal titles such as "Mom is the Loneliest Number," "Motherhood Can Be a Lonely Place," "Lonely Mommy: How Motherhood Took a Toll on my Friendships," and "Motherhood is Lonely and I Miss My Friends." Even if there was not academic evidence to support it, the anecdotal evidence is there: Motherhood and the transformative act of becoming a parent changes relationships in a fundamentally important way.

It's undeniable that having and maintaining a community as a parent is important. However, finding and maintaining that community can be a difficult task to complete among the day-to-day duties of diaper changing, toddler wrangling, and homework helping. Rather than give up on community in the season of motherhood, modern moms do what moms have always done best: they rally, they improvise, and they innovate. In this spirit of building community through convenience and necessity, the mommy blog was born.

At its core, the concept of the mommy blog is fairly simple. The mommy blog is way for moms to communicate personal experiences, especially those concerning their children and parental insights, with an online audience. For most mommy bloggers, the blog serves a way to solicit feedback from readers and build a group of like-minded readers that will eventually become friends. The majority of mommy bloggers regard themselves as busy women; whether working at home or out of the home, these moms are not writing to simply write. Instead, as Aimee Morrison notes in her article “Autobiography in Real Time: A Genre Analysis of Personal Mommy Blogging,” moms are writing purposively to create deliberative social engagement (52). The mommy blog not only serves as means to facilitate social engagement, but also as a “creative and interpersonal practice that mitigates the assorted ills (physical isolation, role confusion, lack of realistic role models, etc.) and that celebrates the particular joys of contemporary mothering, especially in the earliest years of parenting”(Morrison).

While the mommy blog provides a rich source of academic study from a psychosocial perspective, its rhetorical implications are equally intriguing. The weblog in general “raises a number of rhetorical issues...in particular the interaction of the public and the private that the weblog seems to invite” (Miller and Shepard). For mommy blogs, the intersection of public and private is especially important. In the effort to build the community they are seeking, mothers publicize actions that have been traditionally very private, such as childrearing practices. The exposure of a semi-private practice to a public audience that cannot always be identified can lead to interesting rhetorical implications.

If the purpose of the mommy blog is to build and maintain a community of like-minded mothers to share advice, tips, and practical wisdom, then it would be surprising to know that mommy blogs do not always function as intended. Communications between bloggers and

readers can be fraught with misunderstandings, emotional and social judgments, and uncivil discourse in the forms of insults and name calling. It is easy (and at times, very tempting) to simply dismiss this rhetorical incivility as nothing more than women “being mean” while disagreeing about something as emotional as childrearing. To a certain extent, there is truth to that statement. However, a closer look at the rhetoric produced by both the bloggers and the commentors reveals that online communication in the mommy blogs is often hindered by both what is being said and how it is being said.

Rhetorically, this hindrance in communication is not unexpected. Rhetoric as an act of communication is a summation of its five canons: invention¹, arrangement², style³, memory⁴, and delivery⁵. To see even two of the canons interacting to produce a rhetorical result is not groundbreaking in any way. However, what is unusual is noticing how one rhetorical canon influences another.

While Aristotle’s five canons are each important in creating and analyzing rhetorical discourse, the medium of the rhetoric affects the canon chosen to analyze it with. Because the mommy blog is almost exclusively written rhetoric, memory and delivery in their traditional senses play little to no roles in the rhetoric produced by mommy bloggers. Although the genre is still emerging, the mommy blog has already developed a fairly rigid organizational structure: a personal story about the children to introduce the topic, an expository narrative to prove a point,

¹ Invention concerns finding something to say. It is quite literally inventing or finding a topic to discuss. Invention will be discussed thoroughly in the second chapter.

² Arrangement refers to the order of writing or speech. Its serves to structure and organize discourse into discernable parts such as introduction, body, and conclusion.

³ Style is the “decoration” of rhetoric, dealing mostly with how an argument is stated. It looks at individual word choices and rhetorical devices. Style will be discussed thoroughly in the second chapter.

⁴Memory in its simplest sense deals with mnemonic aids to help an orator memorize a speech. However, Aristotle alludes to memory as a link to invention by having a “treasury” of topics available to invent and discuss.

⁵ Delivery focuses on how something is said rather than what is said. With speeches, delivery can be loosely tied in with style.

and a conclusion that delivers a moralizing point about the effectiveness of her childrearing. It sounds formulaic and largely, it is. Because of both the structure of the emerging genre and the rhetorical and social expectations placed on the act of mothering, the rhetoric of the mommy blog is deeply affected by the more “feminized” rhetorical canon of style.

With these canons of memory, delivery, and arrangement effectively eliminated as a means to analyze the mommy blog, invention and style emerge as the important rhetorical structures. Aristotle, in his efforts to classify rhetorical topics into easy to understand groupings, created lists of common topics or *topoi* in Greek. Aristotle, as par the course for a person of his time in Greek, was a curious man and his list of topics is broad enough to be extraordinarily extensive. His list of *topoi* effectively classified the world into five broad categories: definition⁶, comparison⁷, relationship⁸, circumstance⁹, and testimony¹⁰. Each of these five topics carves a specialized niche in the understanding of the world and allows the rhetorician or philosopher multiple methods to classify and appropriately communicate every day topics.

However, what constitutes a common topic is really quite complex. Because there are multiple methods for disseminating the information that makes up our hugely complex world, finding and discussing *topoi* can be difficult for even a seasoned communicator. This is no different for the bloggers and readers of the typical mommy blog. For moms and the mommy

⁶ “Definition” is a means to describe a subject matter as it relates to itself. For example, “For many evangelical Christians, motherhood is a divine calling designed to bring a woman closer to God.”

⁷ “Comparison” is a method to examine a subject matter as it relates to other subjects by looking at the similarities, differences, and degrees of how the subjects relate. For instance, one of the more divisive mothering ideologies occurs between working and stay-at-home moms (SAHM) that has a tendency to look like this: “SAHM are better mothers than working moms because they can be solely focused on the needs of their children.”

⁸ “Relationship” examines the link between two or more subjects by analyzing cause and effect relationships, before and after relationships, and contraries and contradictions in relationships.

⁹ “Circumstance” looks closely at the way subjects interact based on mitigating circumstances. It looks at how a subject can be examined based on something else, such as the possibility or impossibility of a topic based on a previous example or a prediction of future events based on past experience.

¹⁰ “Testimonies” are largely grounded in research and serve to give authority to a topic by bringing in authoritative warrants from testimonials, case studies, maxims, and laws.

blogs they write on, the “common topics” they discuss are obviously children and family. This is to be expected; after all, an entire genre is built around the expectation that mothers are so invested in their children that they have no choice but to write about their offspring.

And write they do. Ty Kilsel, a regular contributor to *Forbes Online*, states that his research indicates there were 3.9 million active mommy bloggers as of 2011, with one large network alone topping 17,000 writers (“Does Anyone Take Mommy Bloggers Seriously?”). The need for mothers to blog is present and women are clearly taking advantage of the technology and resources to online community building a reality. However, in the middle of all this prolific writing by and for moms, there emerges communication problems and rhetorical issues in the forms of miscommunications from sarcasm and poor word choices and outright hostility intended to underscore bold opinions that instead only serve to alienate moms trying to cultivate online friendships.

While many of the so-called Negative Nancys that troll¹¹ blogs looking to pick a fight are easily identified by bloggers and just as easily dismissed by the readers, issues arise when trusted members of the cherished community make comments that insensitive at best and downright hateful at worst. While the social problems motivating this type of negative discourse are discouraging and worthy of its own academic conversation, a discussion of the rhetoric involved deserves its own academic space.

While much of the problem of rhetorical incivility in mommy blogs stems from a combination of hot button topics and poor word choices, there are also cultural issues to consider. Parenting in the United States is very different than much of the rest of the world. This

¹¹ To “troll” an internet site, forum, or blog is intentionally leave inflammatory racist, homophobic, misogynist, or otherwise hateful remarks in the comments section. Usually, the commentator (often referred to by other commentators as a “troll”) is quickly reprimanded by the community or the troll’s comments are deleted by the blog administrator.

is especially true for mothering. Intensive mothering, the cultural attitude that parenting should be the ultimate fulfillment for women, that mothers are inherently better parents than fathers, and that mothers should always prioritize the needs of their children, is considered by sociologists to be the dominant discourse of motherhood (Liss et al 621). Because intensive parenting is so well entrenched as in the culture psyche as how mothers “should” be, it is only logical that mothers who appear to deviate from the social norm of “good” parenting are brought before to the community to be punished. This appears true in real life, but is even more evident in the mommy blog where there is less face-to-face accountability.

As the mommy blog continues to explode in popularity, examining its genre structure and form will continue to remain important; however, what still remains largely unexamined is a close look at the rhetorical moves that are exchanged between the mommy blogger and her followers. This thesis will address the following questions: First, is there the incivility occurring in the blogging community? Second, is this incivility specific to the mommy blog or to a community of mothers seeking kinship in an online community? Third, what are the rhetorical implications of the discourse produced in these types of interactions? Fourth, what is the value in examining these incivilities? As a result of the research questions, this thesis will analyze how the socially constructed expectations of the blog genre and motherhood in the United States help provide or reinforce the framework for Mommy War rhetoric by using textual and genre analysis.

Specifically, this thesis will address the four prevalent research questions by examining how Aristotle’s canons of invention and style influence each other and the ways a blogger and her audience interact with each other by closely examining the mommy blogs Dooce, a single author blog written to an audience that does not allow anonymous comments, and Café Mom at The

Stir, a multiple-author blogger site composed for an audience that does allow anonymous comments.

Chapter Two examines the historical context of blogging to provide an analytical framework for the genre expectations of blogging. Chapter Three looks at personal blogs as a sub-genre of the blogging. Specifically, Chapter Three seeks to address the Mommy Blog as a niched, but very popular, personal blog and how the Mommy Blog utilizes the blogging genre constructs to help mothers form online communities. Chapter Four introduces how the sociological construct “intensive parenting” influences Mommy War rhetoric. Additionally, Chapter Four uses intensive parenting as framework to analyze the common topics of invention at Café Mom at the Stir and Dooce. While Chapter Four focuses on the topics themselves, Chapter Five examines how common topics of parenting are discussed at Café Mom at the Stir and Dooce. Chapter Five continues to use intensive parenting as a method to discuss the rhetorical exchanges between bloggers and commentators.

CHAPTER 2

GENRE CONSTRUCTS OF THE BLOG

Although blogging, the act of creating an internet-based communication with modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence, is rapidly becoming one of the most popular and widely used online genres (Herring, Scheidt, et al 2005 143), its scope as genre are becoming more narrowly defined in the increasingly niched market of online communications. While the present state of the blog is fractured in a number of sub-genres, its history as a communication tool has not always been so complex. As the internet and new media communications began exploding in the early 1990s, the blog genre became one of the first to garner attention for its ability to create a public discourse space with the elements of immediacy and recency that only a medium like the internet could provide.

Blogging: A Broad Historical Context

As Herring, Scheidt, et al assert

Blogging as an online activity has been increasing exponentially since mid-1999, enabled by the release of the first free blogging software (Pitas, Blogger, and Groksoup; Blood, 2000), and fueled by reports from the mainstream media of the grassroots power of blogs as alternative news sources, especially in the aftermath of 9/11/2001 and during the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq (147).

The explosive growth of the blog can be explained by two simultaneous happenings. First, the personal computer in the home became fixtures instead of luxuries. Second, blogging software became more user friendly (Herring, Scheidt, et al 148). As a result, publically available blogs more than doubled in number by 2003 (Herring, Scheidt, et al 2005 149).

The earliest blogs, including one briefly run by the person credited with inventing the internet, Sir Timothy Berners-Lee, in 1991, responded to these needs of delivering political news and traditional newsworthy stories in a quicker manner than newspapers or magazines and even more importantly, quicker than television. In its infancy, blogs were earmarked not as the digital genre they serve as today, but as a sub-genre of newscasting. The primary purposes of the earliest incarnations of the blog were not personal confessionals as they are so often used for today; rather, blogs served as way to disseminate important news stories to a largely untargeted population. Unlike television with its clearly defined demographics, early blogs represented a microcosm of the internet in the general by simply trying to represent itself. Because beginning blogs were still in an undefined rhetorical space, blog writers didn't necessarily have a target audience in mind. Put simply, the human ego had space to blossom and any audience became better than no audience.

As Herring, Scheidt, et al (2005) state, "As with other internet communication protocols that have blossomed into seemingly sudden, intense popularity (e.g. e-mail; the WWW; peer-to-peer file transfer), blogs are being hailed as fundamentally different from what came before, and as possessing a socially transformative, democratizing potential" (160). Weblogs have the potential to serve a variety of functions dependent on writers and the audiences they serve. They can serve as alternative sources of news and public opinion for journalists, as educational and training centers for teachers and business people, or as "vehicles for self-expression and self-empowerment" for private individuals (Herring, Scheidt, et al 2005 161). Because of the multiple functionalities a blog can potentially possess, "blogging makes people more thoughtful and articulate observers of the world around them" (Blood 3). These effects are widespread and easily observable based on the sheer numbers of current publically accessible blogs.

While the earliest incarnations of the weblog were used mainly as a way to quickly disseminate news, the other potential uses for blogs as noted by Herring, Scheidt, et al in 2005 were not neglected for long. As individualized consumer applications for the internet grew in numbers and became more user friendly, it seems only logical that one of the internet's original brain children, the weblog, would continue to grow and evolve with the development of the web at large. Long gone are the days of blog-as-newscasting. While these blogs do still survive and thrive online, they have largely given way a still-burgeoning blogging genre: the confessional (Lomborg 2009).

Blogging: The Private is Public

As internet access and usage has become more pervasive and the so-called "digital natives" of Generation Me have begun exploiting their personal narratives online through personal websites and social media, studies suggest that the number of weblogs is well beyond one-hundred million and their readerships exceed even those figures (Lomborg 2009). While scholarship on personal blogging as a genre independent from other, more established media studies is still making academic headway (Lomborg), the sheer volume of personal blogs being produced and maintained suggest that this scholarship is both necessary and eminent. Current research indicates that the scholarship on the personal blog can be roughly divided into two distinct sub-genres: the blog as a personal confessional, best meant to act as a pseudo-private diary or the blog as a performance piece, deliberately designed to take the personal public and create a community of like-minded individuals while exploring common social interests or hobbies (Lomborg). Its conceptualization as a genre is determined by both communicative functionalities and its social uses.

The explosion in popularity of personal blogs can stem from a number of issues. Christina Harview sets out to answer that very question by pondering “Did the blog ‘spark’ at just the right time to set ablaze an internet revolution, or were we humans always susceptible to be drawn in by social concept such as the blog?” (2). Although Harview follows a complex trail through the history of personal blogs, she ultimately confirms Lomborg’s assertion that blogging is a social act (Harview 3 and Lomborg). As we struggle to create and maintain a social identity that pleases everyone, Harview argues that blogging, and by extension creating an anonymous online identity, blurs a blogger’s social identity with truths and fictions (3). The genre of the personal blog gives these writers a rhetorical space to create, manipulate, or report truths to maintain a sense of identity. And as Harview points out, blogging, even personal confessional blogging, is still a largely anonymous medium (4). People can and do lie or misrepresent themselves online, especially with the perceived anonymity of they feel the internet provides. Whatever type of identity is decided upon is almost beside the point. Ultimately, personal blogs allow their writers a rhetorical space to expose emotions to a hopefully sympathetic and like-minded audience to fulfill the basic human needs for empathy, compassion, and understanding. Creating an online identity and forming relationships with other bloggers can help the blogger feel as though they are part of a social community with a fully-realized social existence without ever having to leave the couch.

Although the “why” of the personal blog is quickly becoming a hot topic to examine by those interested in new media studies, its functions and scopes as a genre are still developing as an academic interest. Because of the suddenness and recency of the emergence of the genre, blogs, especially the explosive population of personal weblogs that have cropped up since 2003, offer those who study them a unique opportunity to examine and study a genre as it unfolds

(Miller and Shepard). Defining the weblog as a generic genre presents little problem. There is a strong agreement that any online content that combines links with personal commentary, updates frequently, and is ordered in reverse chronological order can be considered a blog (Miller and Shepard). Almost all blog templates are designed to accommodate this method of content design to reinforce the design aspects of the genre.

While most personal blogs do adhere to the design that helps mark the genre, they begin to deviate from their ancestral newscasting brethren with content and intent (Miller and Shepard). The personal blog has traditionally been classified into one of three categories: 1) personal journals that read like private diaries, 2) “notebooks” that contain longer and more focused essays designed to stimulate community discourse, and 3) “filters”, a type of blog dedicated to collecting interesting links to content elsewhere on the internet (Blood 22). As the diary-esque blogs become more prominent marks on the personal blog landscape, notebook-type blogs are quickly disappearing into the background. Lomborg argues that with the diary blogs representing a growing portion of the personal blogs available online and the disappearance of the notebook, there is a subtle but important shift in the typology of personal blogs (Lomborg). Instead of citing the traditional generic functions of type, Lomborg offers to erase the lines of form totally (Lomborg). The personal weblog now becomes “mixed,” including filters, K-logs (a collection of author’s notes on any given topic), and perhaps most importantly, personal journals. Some of the best examples of the contemporary mixed personal weblog are blogs found on tumblr.com. As a blogging platform, tumblr.com offers its users the opportunity to create and maintain personal weblogs that can easily link to other blogs and interesting online content by using filters to locate and store URLs. For instance, the popular [tumblr](http://tumblr.com) account [Brush Reality Aside](http://brushreality.com) employs a mixed content approach to personal blogging. Alongside personal

diary-like entries are collections of links that lead her readers off her personal Tumblr account to whatever Brush Reality Aside has filtered for her readers as being “interesting” or “worthwhile.”

This type of evolution is hardly unexpected in medium that is in a constant flux.

Although defining the form of the personal weblog is tricky due to its nebulous nature, its core function remains fundamentally unchanged: to blog about what affects bloggers personally on an individual basis. As a result, the aforementioned categories of blog begin to act more like sub-genres of the larger weblog genre. Classification of content and the functionalities and intent of both the blog and blogger replace the broader categories such as “personal journal,” “notebook,” and “filter.” Rather than defining the personal blog genre by form, blogging scholars have begun examining weblogs by content. As Miller and Shepard note:

Almost across the board, bloggers seem to agree that content is the most important feature of a blog (Rodzvilla, 2002; *The Weblog Review*, 2003). The Weblog Review, a blog reviewing site, evaluates three features on a 5-point scale: design, consistency, and content, with the lion's share of the rating's weight, 80-90%, dedicated to the blog's content. Although it is difficult to generalize about the content of blogs because they are so varied, there have been several attempts to classify blogs according to their content. The Weblog Review classifies blogs by grouping them into fourteen content-focused categories: adult, anime, camgirl, computer, entertainment, humor, movies, music, news/links, personal, photography, Spanish/Portuguese, teen, and video games.

Similarly, Wikipedia provides a classification based on content, including personal, political, directory, and format-based types of blogs (Wikipedia 2003). Another classification is offered by Jill Walker. In her contribution to appear in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, she

notes that blogs can vary in their media content, with most blogs primarily textual but others classified into “subgenres” such as photoblogs, videoblogs, and audioblogs (Miller and Shepard).

While it is clear that the blog has undergone a series of evolutions, one crucial fact remains the same: The blog as a genre has remained a social construction and has been consistent with its social expectations. Carolyn Miller argues that genre cannot be separated from social construction. In fact, Miller defines genre as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (159). Charles Bazerman expresses a similar idea in his often-cited definition of genre as a social construct:

Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar (qtd. in *Genre in Rhetorical and Sociological Traditions* 59).

If genre serves as “both an index to cultural patterns and tools for exploring achievements” (Miller 163), it seems only fitting to contextualize blogs in general as a genre developed and maintained by social community. In many senses, the genre expectations of blogs fit Miller’s definition of genres as a social construction. If the goal of most blogs is to relay news or share content, it makes sense that bloggers would need to have a keen sense of what they are writing about and who they are writing for. The genre helps define the audience and this is especially true in the case of blogs.

While the genre expectations of blogging in general are certainly shaped by the social constructions of audience, these social constructions become even more pronounced in personal

blogs. Chapter Three will examine how personal blogging rose in popularity, how genre and audience expectations help frame the personal blog sub-genre and how the mommy blog is perfectly situated to build community among its members.

CHAPTER 3

THE MOMMY BLOG

As a sub-category of the larger blogging genre, personal blogging is quickly becoming niched as well. For almost every hobby, interest, or passing fancy, there is a Blogger, Wordpress, or Tumblr account to provide a public rhetorical space through words, pictures, and videos. Aimee Morrison suggests that genres and their subsequent divisions develop as a means to meet a social exigency and that these communication practices must meet a “pressing and non-unique need” (“Suffused by Feeling” 42). The “mommy blog” is one of the most needed types of personal blogs designed to meet social needs of a particularly vulnerable population. A 2008 study conducted by Sirfry concludes that out of 133 million existing blogs, 36% of the blogs written and maintained by women publish regular content about parenting (Lonsdale). By sheer numbers alone, the proof is there that the mommy blog is a need that is not only being filled, but being filled in a large capacity.

Scholars studying the online discourse of the women producing these mommy blogs suggest that the need for these women to write and express themselves is tri-fold. First, women are living in an ultra-competitive culture. Women, especially first-time moms, feel a tremendous sense of pressure to compete and win in motherhood. Leslie Morgan Steiner, in an afterward in the book of essays *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families*, remarks that the competitive culture among women is not unique to motherhood. For many women, the desire to pit one mother against another is an extension of low self-esteem (Steiner 329). Second, women are becoming increasingly busy in an effort to keep up with other moms, thereby isolating themselves. Third, they are trying to create and foster the sense of community and belonging that used to occur naturally when women stayed at home

and maintained closer relationships with family, friends, and neighbors. Blogging, and its resulting sense of community, produce belonging.

The longing for community among mothers is immense. While the competitiveness that Steiner speaks of is present in contemporary mothering, the ancient need to belong in a group is still very much present. However, these two conflicting ideas are producing a rash of literature showing that moms, despite trying to “out mom” each other, are still desiring the chance to connect with other mothers in a meaningful social way. Collectively, the Mommy Wars, a colloquialism referencing the ongoing “war” about different mothering strategies, is the result of a social collection of facts, opinions, and judgments disseminated through media (Steiner 330). The writing and mass production of the mommy blogs produced in the midst of the Mommy Wars results in women, mostly mothers, attempting to find their voice in a supportive community.

Defining the mommy blog is a tricky endeavor at best simply because the numbers of blogs written by mothers is extensive. As Morrison notes, “The momosphere is vast, its reach and population impossible to determine with certainty, and—in addition to the overwhelming number of blogs and posts—there is tremendous variation in the kinds of internet texts about parenting being produced” (“Suffused by Feeling” 43). She, like Miller and Shepard, agrees that mommy blogs follow the traditional genre-specific styling of the larger blogosphere—posts in reverse chronological order, updates frequently, and combines links with personal commentary (“Suffused by Feeling” 53 and Miller and Shepard).

Unlike other personal blogs, such as those based on hobbies or leisure, mommy blogs offer unique glimpse into the individual lives of mothers and the families they are charged to lead and love. As Morrison points out, most mommy blogs utilize similar content: sweet stories

about the children, stories of maternal shortcomings, philosophies of contemporary motherhood, and community building through the solicitation of advice in parenting dilemmas (“Suffused by Feeling 51). Although the content and structure of many of these blogs may appear very similar, there are significant differences among these texts based on intended audience.

Although blogging, especially mommy blogging, often reflects a unique relationship between the private and the public, there is little doubt that the act of blogging itself requires an “active audience” (Powell 45). As Rebecca Powell, a writer and mother, writes:

The blogger posts; the readers comment. It is reader-response theory in real time.

Meanings are contested, supported and complicated all within the frame of a screen and within minutes. Mommy bloggers write about a specific interaction with their child and within seconds readers respond, defend, support, and disagree (49).

Blogs designed to promote community, much like mommy blogs written by mothers who are isolated, lonely, frustrated, and trying to create a community they are currently missing, both create and cultivate a dialogue between writer and reader by openly inviting response to creator content with the “comments” section. The 22.6 million blogs in the United States alone are read by over 94.1 million readers (Technorati qtd in Powell 48). While the 22.6 million blogs are staggering figures by themselves, the number of readers and potential responders is huge. And for some mommy blogs, this “potential” is more than just that. It is other readers, usually other mothers, responding in droves. The personal blog turned mommy blog helped women shed their veils of privacy and moms are inviting other moms into their living room for coffee and camaraderie via a weblog.

Although many mommy blogs are considered publicly accessible, the varying degrees of privacy make audience analysis a tricky endeavor. Morrison sets up a sliding scale for audience

accessibility as controlled by the blogger. On her continuum, Morrison sets password-protected personal web pages designed to share photos and stories with family as a 1, and commercial magazine style web sites with multiple blog “columns” in addition to other content as a 10 (“Suffused by Feeling” 49). These are extremes. Most personal blogs, especially most mommy blogs, fall into a range of 3-5¹², with all being publically accessible (“Suffused by Feeling” 49). The amount of public accessibility directly affects the why of the bloggers’ intent for creating a blog. The way the privacy settings are controlled by the bloggers given insight into the intent of the blog. Morrison notes that the social exigencies that prompted the creation of the blog at all also influences audience (“Suffused by Feeling” 51). She writes:

Some mommy blogs are written for such a broad audience (with daily readers numbering in the thousands, though this is obviously rare) that they resemble syndicated newspaper columns in significant ways... Other mommy blogs are confessional personal accounts posted raw on the screen with the aim of catharsis, with layers of protection including pseudonyms and password protection designed to severely limit the blog’s circulation. Yet other mommy blogs, by contrast, are conceived of as simple and effective newsletters for far-flung family members, recording milestones and sharing photographs among a known set of acquaintances (“Suffused by Feeling” 53).

As mommy bloggers strive to create social communities online, public accessibility and the issue of intended audience becomes a larger issue. While most mommy blogs do have public accessibility, there is still an issue of audience to contend with. Blogs on the lower end of the accessibility scale strive to control content by maintaining a small, intimate audience. Mommy

¹² To meet a 3-5 privacy range for a personal mommy blog, the following requirements must be met: a) must be publically accessible, b) must be written by a single author, c) must be personally revealing.

blogs with an accessibility rating of 3 are publically accessible, but the expected audience is friends and family. As mommy blogs become more accessible to the general public through both a combination of relaxed privacy settings and the deliberative invitation to join the blogger's community, the ideal audience for the blog changes. It reshapes the sense of community by allowing not only the friends and family closest to the bloggers to read the blog and interact with the blogger, but also by granting strangers a glimpse into parenting ideologies.

Stirring It Up: Blogging from theStir on Cafe Mom

Cafe Mom, founded in 2006, is a social networking site dedicated to serving both women who are already mothers and those expecting to be. The site is entirely commercial, supported by advertisements and has been turning a profit since 2009 (Wikipedia). Within 12 months of its launch, Cafe Mom became one the most heavily viewed sites by women of childbearing age with 8 million unique visitors per month and over 140 million page views ("Mother's Little Helper").

After almost four years as a general social networking site for moms, Cafe Mom rebranded itself by adding a blogging feature. The Stir launched in 2010 as a platform for moms to write original content concerning celebrity gossip, current events, home decorating, and yes, parenting. The blog is multi-authored and rotates through a number of regular contributors. However, there is no set schedule for contributors to publish. Because of this, there is usually a flurry of blogging activity around newsworthy events such as the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings.

Each individual blogger is registered with CaféMom and a clickable byline produces a history of their previous contributions to The Stir. As expected for the genre, the blogger's individual contributions are listed in reverse chronological order and are searchable by a series of

clickable hastags, a grouping of key words that highlight important and relevant information about the content of the blog.

As to be expected with a commercial blog of this size, the audience is quite diverse. It's not just targeting moms ages 22-35. It's not just targeting moms of tweens. It's not just targeting Christian moms. It's targeting all moms. Unlike many other popular mommy blogs, The Stir does not require blog commentors to register for a user account. However, the majority of the commentors are registered users with visible profiles. A smaller percentage of the community are registered users without profiles visible to the entire community and an even smaller percentage comment as anonymous users. This suggests that Morrison and Harview are correct in their assumptions that mommy blogging is a medium designed to build community around mothers.

Duking it Out: Mommy Blogging at Dooce

Dooce.com, a mommy blog conceived, written, and maintained by mom of two Heather Armstrong, focuses on the everyday life of parenting. Before Dooce.com was ever considered a mommy blog, it was a blog about the banalities of everyday life. Since her marriage and the birth of her children, Armstrong has written extensively and often with a humorous, self-deprecating bend on a wide variety of topics relating to parenting her children.

With the exception of infrequent guest contributions from her husband, John, Armstrong is the sole contributor to the blog. Like almost any weblog with as extensive of a history as Dooce, Armstrong has created an index of topics to help readers better navigate archives and hashtags current entries to help better organize the blog. The left side of her main page is titled "Latest Posts" and is marked by a series of pictures and blog titles in reverse chronological order. Its snarky, outrageous humor suggests Armstrong's intended audience is moms who understand that motherhood does not look like anything a Hollywood studio could produce. Armstrong

writes openly and honestly about controversial topics in parenting. Early in the blog's history, this produced a lot of flaming from anonymous commentors and the resulting change in Dooce's commenting policy. All commentors must register with Dooce.com before leaving feedback for Armstrong.

Like the writers at The Stir, Armstrong is interested in building community with her readers as well. In 2009, Dooce.com introduced an interactive portion of the website that allows registered user to post questions and concerns. Called the Dooce Community, Armstrong writes:

For a few years we've been trying to come up with a way for the readers of this site to connect and interact with each other, to get to know each other better, for me to get to know you better, and for little bunnies to fart sunshine. The comments section has sort of worked in this capacity, but not very well and not to the extent that it should. So we have put together a new section of this website where we can all pool our knowledge and experiences and drunken mishaps into one highly accessible and fun place.

Community is obviously an important aspect of any personal blog, but especially so in mommy blogs. The bloggers are looking to share experiences to a like-minded group of people and hopefully receive feedback that is positive, encouraging, and uplifting. However, like real life communities, online groups do not always communicate in a way that inspires or uplifts. This project looks at the rhetorical relationship of commentors and bloggers on mommy blogs by examining the style of language designed to destroy community on two very different mommy blogs.

Chapter Four begins this conversation by defining the expectations of "good motherhood" as it relates to intensive parenting. It will discuss the ways that style and invention intersect within the mommy blog as writers grapple with the pressures and cultural expectations

of intensive parenting. The chapter turns to Aristotle to discuss the common and special topics that guide rhetorical invention and show how these topics structure the course of argumentative development within some of the heated exchanges mommy blogs. Further, the chapter begins to show the ways the rhetorical choices in mommy blogs can work to subvert rather than support community as stylistic choices reflect anger and a lack of interest in building relationships and understanding.

CHAPTER 4

“The Good Mom:” Intensive Parenting Topoi

As the definition for what “good” mothering becomes increasingly debated, so does the rhetorical discourse among those discussing it. While motherhood may have once been a fundamentally cooperative endeavor, digital mediums such as “mommy blogs” and parenting chat forums are undercutting cooperation in favor of competition and woman-on-woman shaming. The uncivil and mean-spirited discourse used in these blogs and forums is not only a direct reflection of the growing acceptance of rude rhetoric, but also of a growing social problem that breeds unhappy and discontented mothers.

While blogging as a genre and the subsequent study of its rhetorical discourse has grown substantially since its advent in the late 1990s. The “mommy blog” genre is a relatively recent addition to the genre. The blogging genre is famed for its fluidity, specifically the immediate interactivity between writer and audience. These communicative interactions can, and frequently do, happen almost instantly and with frequency. This interaction between writer and audience is especially evident in blogs written by, for, and about mothers. However, like other blogging genres, the mommy blog is not immune to the rhetorical incivility that plagues bloggers and their communities. By using invention and style as the lenses to examine the mommy blog genre allows the reader to see how to effectively create necessary change to promote more civil discourse in this rhetorical situation.

“That’s Not What I Said”: Topoi in the Mommy Blog

When looking the interaction of the blogger’s writings and the audience’s written comments, it is important to consider invention before any of the other canons are considered. As the name logically implies, invention is the first step to the composing part of any rhetoric

(Bizzell and Herzberg 4). Invention concerns itself with finding something to say. The writer or orator is quite literally inventing the information that will be presented to the audience.

Within this scope of finding or inventing something to say lays the Greek concept *topoi*. Literally translated, *topoi* means “topics of invention.” As a means of creating a more usable rhetoric, Aristotle uses *topoi* as a way to organize topics of invention. By doing so, he is able to create templates and a hierarchical listing of important topics that were worthy of rhetorical invention (Bizzell and Herzberg 170). Like most of his other ideas to systematize rhetorical analysis, Aristotle’s *topoi* are highly organized to create tightly defined categories. To better organize the orator, Aristotle creates two *loci communes* (Cline). Under the very broad scope of invention, Aristotle methodically divides his *topoi* into two categories: common topics and special topics (Bizzell and Herzberg 172).

Aristotle, not a man particularly known for his creativity, referred to the common topics as such because that’s exactly what they were: common. These topics tended to be very general indicating what types of information and ideas would be required within each *topoi*. Under Common Topics, he specifically classifies definition, division, comparison, relationship, circumstances, testimony, and notation as subtopics (Aristotle 184). He then classifies smaller Common Topics to create a hierarchy of rhetorical importance and systemically organize topics.

While Aristotle’s list of Common Topics is fairly exhaustive and helps the invention process by covering a number of topics, it specifically excludes what Aristotle refers to as Special Topics. Again, as the name might imply, the Special Topics covers topics that are special and specifically set apart from the Common Topics. For Aristotle, this means using Special Topics as means to examine the three branches of oratory in classical rhetoric: judicial, epideictic, and deliberative (Aristotle 191). As he does with Common Topics, Aristotle works to

systematize the topics of invention and classify them hierarchically (Bizzell and Herzberg 171). When inventing judicial *topoi*, for example, Aristotle concerns himself with matters of justice, examining both justices and injustices. Epideictic *topoi* has a similar classification schedule. Like its judicial cousin, epideictic *topoi* are classified as a binary, using ceremonial rhetoric to either celebrate the virtues of the noble people or lament the vices of the base people. While both the judicial and epideictic branches of oratory are explicated as juxtapositions, the deliberative branch is more nuanced and is necessarily burdened with a more complex set of *topoi*. While the deliberative oratory was originally concerned with what happens in the legislative body, it has since branched out to concern itself with any number of special topics that are concerned with the good, the unworthy, the advantageous, and the disadvantageous.

While Aristotle gives invention a useable framework for invention through *topoi*, the demands on the rhetorician's invention do not stop there. Because invention is fundamentally grounded in *logos*, the appeal to the mind, it is a logical conclusion that Aristotle's canon of invention be expanded by Cicero and Quintilian. Both Cicero and Quintilian argue that as a means of using invention as a means to persuade, a rhetorician must "draw on sources of knowledge that lie outside of the domain of rhetoric" (Bizzell and Herzberg 4). The intellectual demands on the rhetorician are demanding, but of highest value. Bizzell and Herzberg attest:

If, as some philosophers maintain, all knowledge is uncertain and constructed by argument, then rhetoric has all the more value because it studies the ways in which argument and persuasion create conviction, and because it creates the provisional agreements and shared values on which human community depends (5).

Clearly, within the mommy blog, the Common *topoi* such as testimony, definition and comparison are used frequently as discussion emerge around such issues as safety (what it means) and discipline (spanking compared to other means of discipline). We also see the special topics associated with deliberation and even epideictic, as conversations include moves to occasionally praise, but often to “blame” or call out what is perceived to be bad behavior, or bad mothering.

Because invention deals primarily with what an author or orator is trying to say rather than how he or she says it, trying to define invention without a clear definition of knowledge construction would be offering an incomplete definition. Aristotle offers a defense of rhetoric as a method to present knowledge by stating:

It is clear, then, that rhetoric is not bound up with a single definitive class of subjects, but is as universal as dialectic; it is clear, also, that it is useful. It is clear, further, that its function is not simply to succeed in persuading, but rather to discover the means of coming as near such success as the circumstances of each particular case allow...In rhetoric, however, the term “rhetorician” may describe either the speakers knowledge of the art or his moral purpose” (181).

Clearly, before the rhetor can persuade, she needs to be able to invent. However, the process of discovery and invention do not merely stop with the construction of knowledge and the creation of *topoi*. If there is the assumption that invention is the discovery of all available means of persuasion (Aristotle 179), the orator or the writer must process awareness of the entire rhetorical situation (Cline). While developing *topoi* is of fundamental importance to Aristotle’s invention canon, a secondary building block of inventing a rhetorical situation or space is developing exigency and determining the audience. Once the rhetor has discovered what need or

topic exists to create rhetoric, invention demands that she also discover the following: the needs, desires, and thoughts of the audience regarding the situation, the types of evidence that would be most likely to persuade the audience, what types of proofs would best sway the audience, and when the communication should occur as a matter of *kairos* (Cline).

Kairotic timing certainly plays an important factor in the determination of mommy blog topics. While anyone, regardless of gender, age, or parental status, could theoretically write a blog in a similar flavor as a mommy blog, most of the parenting weblogs are written by mothers in the midst of daily parenting. A study conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 54% of bloggers are under the age of 30 and that of the 133 million blogs being updated, over half were written by women (Lopez 2009). Unlike other traditional published mediums, blogging is unique because the blogger has full authorial control over content. This frees blogging to become not only a means of information exchange, but also a means of self-expression. Mothers, especially mothers of young children in a similar cultural setting, are experiencing similar events. While not every baby experiences teething in the same manner, every mother experiences a teething baby. Similarly, every mother experiences potty training a toddler. There are enough universal experiences in this very specific season of motherhood that provides a strong desire to seek and provide community in the comforting arms of other moms.

As discussed by Aimee Morrison, Rebecca Kukla, and scores of other scholars dedicated to the examination of motherhood as a social science, the very act of mothering young children is itself an isolating event. Bloggers, especially the mommy bloggers dedicated to the everyday documentation of the homestead and of their children, largely agree. Michelle Zipp, a frequent blogger at theStir.com, paints the loneliness of her life with 3 year old twin boys like this:

Being a mom is an amazing thing. Truly, it is. I wouldn't change one thing ... except that time we all had the throw-ups. But even then as I was cleaning up my kids' puke, I realized I wasn't concerned about the staining or the smell, I was worried about my kids. That's love. But sometimes, despite all of the love, **motherhood is a lonely gig (emphasis original)**.

My twins are 3. They like to hang out with me, but not really. They want me to play with them, but then want me to leave the room. Sometimes I hear "Go away, Mommy!" I guess I'm not cool enough to *vrroomm* cars across the map on the floor, too. *Mommy! Can you help me click this in?* my daughter asks. Her unicorn's hair clip came off. I fix it. *Thank you, mommy. No you stay here,* she says as she walks away. So I watch them from a distance, but still close, and wonder what my childless friends are doing (Zipp).

This sentiment is echoed in almost every response to the blog post. One commentor remarks, "Yes. This could almost have been written by me" (Zipp). Statements similar to this litter the comment sections, underscoring the mommy blog as rhetorical space designed to bring mothers together in a common community. While this loneliness is a common thread among mothers who blog, the discourse being produced among the bloggers is coded in a different rhetoric. In their blogs, a number of mommy bloggers report being "stressed" and "overworked," both emotions which add to the overwhelming feeling of loneliness and isolation. As a matter of invention, mommy bloggers are manipulating the rhetorical situation of the blog to decrease isolation by creating a feminine community based on the common interest of child rearing.

Intensive parenting also adds to these negative feelings of stress and loneliness. For the first time ever, women are raising children with access to almost all the knowledge in the world through the internet. Modern mothers are no longer bound by advice from generations past. They are no longer restricted to raising their children the way they were raised or checking in with the pediatrician before offering baby the first bite of sweet potato. Because of the internet, modern mothers now have the ability to search for what's concerning them and click on a link for an answer. While this is certainly helpful to quickly obtain answers for cut and dried questions, many issues in parenting are not that clear cut. Therefore, a quick google search for a parenting concept will yield millions of results that may or may not be helpful. Many of the results Google yields will point a mother in the direction of a mommy blog.

The construct of intensive parenting underscores many of the mommy blogs and fuels a lot of the interaction between bloggers and commentators. The social view that "mother knows best" promoted by intensive parenting fuels a lot of the stress mothers feel. In fact, a study conducted at the University of Mary Washington in Fredricksburg, VA shows that women who endorse intensive parenting often struggle more with mental health (Rochman). Additionally, "moms who believe parenting is challenging and requires expert knowledge and skills were more stressed and more depressed than moms didn't think an arsenal of expertise was mandatory"(Rochman). It is in this intersection of intensive parenting ideologies and a more free-form kind of parenting that mothering styles clash. Ultimately, the difficult rhetoric produced by mommy bloggers and commentators is a result of conflicting discourses about motherhood. Even the most commonly accepted discourse, intensive parenting, is not going to allow all mothers to agree. And sets up opportunities for disagreements about definitions good

parenting and often comparisons and as indicated, blaming or calling out, in often disparaging ways, “bad mothering” choices.

This leads to a larger question. While blogging does much to give voice to the voiceless, it has not (and probably will not) resolve one of the largest rhetorical puzzles of all time: defining mothering and motherhood. The words “mothering” and “motherhood” have undergone a substantial revision in the popular discourses being produced by, for, and about mothers. Pejoratively, mothering still refers to the act of childbearing and raising children until adulthood. As a denotative definition, that is fundamentally correct. However, Mary Thompson, a feminist scholar and teacher who studies motherhood as it relates to the Third Wave, suggests that the connotative meaning to these terms may be far more important than previously realized (4).

In her introductory Women Studies class, Thompson used the text *Breeder: Real Life Stories from the New Generation of Mothers* to explicate the shift of third wave feminists from rebellious riot grrls into the role of motherhood (Thompson 1). While the text itself is a curious choice for an introductory class, what Thompson did with it is even more so. She asked her students to reflect in their journals on the characteristics of a “good” mother and then to use those terms to discuss the alternative (lesbian, single, working) mothers in *Breeder*. The intention of the exercise was to “have each student clarify his/her definition of motherhood and then gauge how the various authors matched or deviated from his/her definition” (Thompson 5). Overwhelmingly, the students connected with the mothers in the stories through very traditional understandings of motherhood (Thompson 5). The verbiage included words like “caregiver,” “nurturer,” “dutiful,” and “domestic” (Thompson 7). In terms of rhetorical analysis, these terms have little to no affiliation with the dictionary definition of motherhood. However, that almost an entire class of female college freshmen utilized these words as a connotative meaning to define

the mythos of the mom suggests that the maternal privilege of unconditional love to the point of self-sacrifice is very much alive and well in the eyes of a general public (Thompson 8). This rhetoric is echoed not only among children, but among mothers as well.

Motherhood, with its myriad of complicated choices and diversified voices, is fundamentally a female and feminist issue. Although Virginie Despentes doesn't give much grey space in her manifestoes to motherhood, she does devote a small part of *King Kong Theory* to it, stating:

...motherhood has become the essential female experience, valued above all others. Giving life where it's at. "Pro-maternity" propaganda has rarely been so extreme. There must be joking, the modern equivalent of the double constraint: "Have babies, it's wonderful, you'll feel more fulfilled and feminine than ever," but do it in a society in freefall in which paid work is a condition of social survival but is guaranteed to no one, and especially not to women... Without children you will never be fulfilled as a woman, but bringing up kids in decent conditions is almost impossible. It is essential that the women feel like failures—that they be made to feel as if they've made the wrong choice. (21).

Although angry and perhaps a bit cynical, Despentes nevertheless does an excellent job of explicating motherhood as a central trope to the discussion of the feminine mythos. Despentes is far from the only writer to utilize this trope. As evidenced from both the scholarly and popular literature being produced, the discourses on motherhood intrigue numerous populations for a widely diverse set of reasons.

This is precisely why motherhood is so well suited to be examined through a Third Wave lens. Assuming feminism is a "usually defined as an active desire to change a woman's position

in society” (Delmar 12), motherhood more than qualifies a woman to participate in Third Wave feminist discourse. While mothering and motherhood has always held an important place in larger discussions of feminism because of the desire to change a woman’s place in society, its place in third wave feminism is of especial importance. Third wave feminists sought to create a post-modern, all- inclusive space for anyone willing to pick up the mantle and call him or herself “feminist.” However, those interested in rearticulating motherhood as a feminist issue found themselves unsurprisingly criticized by both women participating in the backlash but also more surprisingly, the second wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s (Thompson 2). While many of the second wave feminists considered motherhood an oppression (Reilly 3), its issues in the Third Wave start making important distinctions between mothers, mothering, and motherhood that are at the heart of the “Mommy Wars” being perpetuated by bloggers and their readers.

In the context of the topics produced by mommy bloggers, the considerations of motherhood as both a joyful and isolating life season are especially important. Here too intensive parenting rears its expectations on the genre. As intensive mothering produces a rhetoric and a culture that demands fulfillment through child rearing, it is only logical that a juxtaposition of the contradicting expectations of motherhood produce a rhetoric that is confusing. Mommy bloggers use parental topoi as a means to simultaneously build community and destroy it in blogging circles because as Morrison notes “personal mommy blogs are set apart by the twin and equal motivations of personal self-expression and community development” (48). As a result, the topoi used as source material for the blogs respond to both of these needs.

Generally speaking, the mothers producing mommy blogs are fundamentally seeking to communicate the same ideas: keeping children safe, healthy, and happy. The new momism of the 20th and 21st centuries reflect a changing society that demands that women not only be able to

“do it all,” but that they be able to do it all with grace. However, how moms are expected to “do it all” is a matter up to debate, especially regarding parenting. In the great debate of how to create and use best parenting practices, there is a large cultural conversation looking toward the mother to “fix” a generation of seemingly wayward children. The mommy bloggers respond to this by inventing and crafting their blog topics carefully, often focusing on discipline and safety as recurring blog topoi. Andrea O’Reilly, editor of *Feminist Mothering*, suggests that any discussion of motherhood as a feminist issue must begin with a differentiation: “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children” and the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (Reilly 3). Reilly discusses motherhood, the institution, as male-defined and oppressive to women, while juxtaposing it against mothering the act, a female-defined experience that is meant to empower women with choices (3-4). The experience of motherhood that Thompson’s students understood and described as the institution is certainly male-controlled and described with phallic language. Reilly revisits Thompson’s question of “good” motherhood that Thompson obtained through her students by stating:

Words such as *altruistic, patient, loving, selfless, devoted, nurturing, cheerful* were frequently mentioned to describe the personality of the ideal patriarchal mother. Mothers who, by choice or circumstance, do not fulfill the profile of the good mother—they are too young or old, or are poor or lesbian—are deemed “bad” mothers. Likewise, women who do not follow the script of good mothering—they work outside the home or engage in maternal activism—are seen “fallen” mothers in need of societal regulation and correction (10).

This attitude of correction toward “bad” mothers is a reflection of the rise “new momism.” In their book *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined Women*, authors Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels echo Despentés outraged voice that there is a societal insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has children (4). Douglas and Michaels also note the escalating demands on mothers that mirror slavery—if a woman has any chance of being one of those media and society desired “good” moms, she must be willing to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being to her children (4). Most importantly, this “new momism” represents a “set of ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate the standards of perfection that are beyond reach” (Douglas and Michaels 4-5).

Although Rich draws a line between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the more female-friendly act of mothering, there is still some obvious points of contention that must be addressed. While many communities and cultures in the world promote the “it takes a village to raise a child” cooperative approach to motherhood, there are an unfortunate number of communities that pit mothers against one another thanks to the new momism. Thompson gives this example:

“Circling the wagons,” a protective gesture normally, in this case aptly describes the way in which new momism promises false protection to mothers all the while suffocating them with products and foreclosing avenues of escape from a relentless message to define successful womanhood in terms of ceaseless self-surveillance, motherhood, and consumption (7).

While women are wanting and desiring to be part of a community of mothers that can give and receive constructive and useful advice on parenting issues, many of these moms are struggling to find one. The new momism reported by Douglas and Michaels plays out well in the media and is gaining ground in “Mommy Wars” scholarship.

Before the examination of the scholarship and the rhetoric of the Mommy Wars can even begin in earnest, it is critical to examine what the fuss is about. In the examination of motherhood and mothering as a feminist issue, scholarship often overlooks the children. As Page Evans, in an essay titled “Sharks and Jets” in the 2004 edition of the now famous *The Mommy Wars* book, states, “Happy children. That’s the bottom line for mothers. At least it seems to me it should be. Working, not working, or somewhere in between, our children will—with any luck—take their cues from us. And that, indeed, would be a grand finale” (36). Ina Schabert, author of the essay “Being a Radical Feminist and a Stay-at-Home-Mom,” offers us a similar perspective:

We will always disagree on the right amount of television our kids watch, or what kind of slang is appropriate, or whether it is polite to wear a hat at the dinner table, or whether a working mom is on the whole better or worse for children. These are matters of personal choice and opinion. It’s the individual integrity underlying all of these choices that defines us as parents and people. When we feel our behavior is wrong and continue anyway, we cannot laugh off our mistakes and expect others to think we’re “just doing the best we can” (245).

While it is obvious that happy children may be the desired end result (and perhaps arguably the only real measure of a “successful” motherhood), it is how mothers achieve those desired results that produces controversy and criticism from the social communities of mothers

that should be supporting them. Schaenen references how mothers quibble over the more trivial ideologies like television watching and hat wearing, but also forces her audience to examine larger questions that prevent the formation of a unified sisterhood of mothers. These smaller television watching decisions are not the decisions in question. What is being questioned are the global issues of parenting and especially of mothering. How do mothers best keep their children safe? How do mothers best keep their children healthy? How do mothers best keep their children happy? Even in the most homogenous cultures, these questions are problematic and difficult to answer. When faced with cultures and communities that are multi-cultural, the answers to these questions become even more important but are faced with more controversy.

Feminist mothering is only one of the possible frameworks to examine these questions, but is perhaps one of the frames most fraught with controversy. If the culturally based connotative meaning of motherhood is synonymous with self-sacrifice, dutifulness, and unrelenting devotion and the connotative meaning of feminism is ultimate self-interest, it is no wonder there is a clash within the greater mothering community. Third Wave feminist Fiona Joy Green, author of “Feminist Motherline,” explains this clash by explicating the social pressures that are burdens to “good mothers” (165). Green contends that the “good mothers”, like the ones explained by Thompson’s students, are expected to “do it all” (165). However, Green goes on to explain that feminist mothers have pressures added to them by not only by those upholding the patriarchal institution of motherhood, but also by other feminists (165). She offers us the example of Beverly, a 52- year old lesbian mother. Beverly states:

It’s a tough one because I think what we’re doing, what the feminist movement has done, is to kind of judge women in relationship to men’s achievement. And while we applaud men when they get involved with childrearing, there’s still an

expectation that still, you know, childrearing is women's work and you're gonna do that if you're a good mom. If you're a super mom, you're going to do that on top of, you know, your education and your work, your paid work. And I think it puts an enormous amount of pressure on feminist mothers that doesn't necessarily have to be there (Green 164-165).

While Beverly is undoubtedly doing her duty to fulfill the multi-faceted role of cook, maid, chauffeur, nurse, and caretaker that is universally recognized as "mom," her other primary role as "feminist" is judged because the rhetoric associated with it is that of selfishness. While this may be expected from mothers accepting the more traditionally-oppressed role of motherhood, its judgment from other feminists is surprisingly unexpected. Green acknowledges that Beverly is far from an isolated case (165) and cites the social expectations and the rhetoric surrounding feminist mothering as primary reasons for this social isolation (166). Obviously, "good mothering" is not limited to the homogenous group Thompson's students identified with when journaling about the qualities of the "perfect mom." These expectations and pressures are everywhere and infect many of the communities of mothers. Despite the Third Wave's desire to be as inclusive as possible, passing judgment on what is still considered to be the feminine act is still acceptable, if not encouraged.

And this judgment of mothering from other communities is played out in stages of every kind. It's seen in the coffee shop with two moms taking time to catch up over lattes. It's seen on the playground when moms compete to see whose child can run the fastest. It's seen in PTO and Girl Scout meetings. And unsurprisingly, it's seen in the mommy blogging communities as mothers struggle to communicate about the difficult topics of motherhood.

Chapter Five will examine how issues of discipline and safety become common topics in the mommy blog and why they are prone to rhetorical incivility. Furthermore, Chapter Five will also look at the specific style choices made by both bloggers and commentators and analyze how style choice influence how well an argument is received in the mommy blog.

CHAPTER 5

TOPOI AND STYLE ON CAFÉ MOM AND DOOCE

As mothers increasingly seek kinship and support in online communities, it becomes clear from the discussions taking place in these rhetorical spaces that there are as many different flavors of motherhood as there are individual mothers. Online discussions of parenting showcase a number of different rhetorics produced by mothers and also a number of questions from one mom to another. The joy of the internet lies in its wonderful ability to answer almost any question at any given time. Google has become as an invaluable of a resource as Mom used to be when it comes to answering questions about a fussy baby, a bossy toddler, or a tween with an insufferable attitude. While the myriad of questions that both new and experienced parents, especially mothers, have regarding their offspring is overwhelming in scope, the online community of mothers offers some relief to parents overburdened with questions and concerns. As Lisa Hammond Rashley, an associate professor of English at the University of North Carolina Lancaster, writes:

Parenting websites can provide an important area of study for feminist critics as parents begin to supplement or even replace print resources for parenting questions with online materials... Since our culture has become increasingly mobile, young parents are, therefore, more likely to be removed from a network of family and friends as they establish their new families; consequently, first-time parents may lack the social structures that traditionally supported their learning and growth as parents... Most mothers don't actively enter such (parenting) websites seeking communities, but they quite often do find them there (58-59).

While the parenting communities being built online may not be seeking to replace the wisdom of experienced mothers, their influence on mothers is undeniable. A study by *Growupmilkinfo.com*, a website sponsored by DANONE Baby Nutrition, found that “more and more mothers are turning to websites like Netmums, Mumsnet, Google, and Facebook when they have questions or concerns about bringing up baby”(“Internet Parenting”). The same survey found that 8 in 10 new moms are more likely to log on than go to their own mothers for parenting advice (“Internet Parenting”). This survey also suggests that social media savvy moms were the ones most likely to seek parenting advice and guidance from online mediums, including static websites and interactive blogs.

Clearly, there is a need for moms to have both the guidance of another mom who has “been there, done that” and the comradery of another parent she can feel she is in a cohort with. As indicated earlier, childrearing, especially for first-time moms, can be both challenging and lonely. While online communities cannot give new moms all the support and guidance needed to navigate the murky waters of first-time parenting, they can serve as important social structures for the technologically adept mother. Online communities, like those supported by blogs, generally provide a safe and convenient means for mothers to have questions answered, and in best practices, find a supportive group of like-minded moms to give guidance and support.

But best practices are just that: best practices. As Lori Kido Lopez writes in her article “The Radical Act of Mommy Blogging: Redefining Motherhood Through the Blogosphere,” the single most important thing that differentiates blogs from other web content is that blogs are flavored with a “strong sense of the author’s personality, passions, and point of view”(734). Weblogs are not free of bias, nor are they intended to be. As such, the community building ideal espoused by feminist scholars like O’Reilly, Lopez, Kukla, and Morrison is mostly only theory

achieved by bloggers and commentors using best communicative practices: compassion, respect, and civility. Those who have spent more than a few minutes engaging in communication online know that the communication practiced in online forums has little to do with compassion, respect, and civility.

The rhetoric of motherhood is one that is already emotionally charged. Its connotations assume that mothers, at least those who are “good mothers,” have a strictly defined methodology of child rearing that will produce children who are happy and healthy. As Thompson’s students proved, this is a difficult social rhetoric to escape. When the social expectations of “new momism” combine with a rhetorical space that gives the ultimate communicative freedom because of its lack of accountability, there is little wonder that taboo topics in parenting become easier to broach, discuss, and argue about. The lifting of the feminine veil of politeness frees women to discuss parts of motherhood that are not always nice in ways that are not always nice.

Safety and Discipline: Common Topics of Interest in the Mommy Blog

Two of the largest reaching and most nebulous parenting topics, discipline and safety, are also two of the most controversial. As Richard M. Weaver argues in his 1963 essay “Language is Sermonic,” all language is rhetorical and therefore persuasive in nature (1354). With an assumed persuasive element, it is difficult to separate the rhetor from the rhetoric and “to speak or write is to perform a positive ethical action, and the value of rhetoric as a discipline comes from its goal of revealing the ethical bases of a given discourse” (Bizzell and Herzberg 1194). Controversy producing rhetoric, such as those concerning the common topics of child rearing, is merely a reflection of what a rhetor considered to be ethical, just, and right contrasted against a conflicting opinion.

While this may look like merely a difference of parenting choices, the medium of the mommy blog gives bloggers and their commentors a unique rhetorical space to practice Weaver's sermonic language by exploring two of the most hotly debated topics in parenting: discipline and safety. The rhetorical space in the mommy blog gives its readers a chance to interrogate parenting choices in a community of other mothers, who are most likely in the same season of parenting. As Andrew Cline notes, once topoi have been developed, the rhetor should be asked by her audience to consider their feelings, thoughts, and desires as well as create a persuasive argument to promote discussion ("Canons").

In mommy blogging, discipline and safety as topoi does much to promote both discussion and argumentation among bloggers and readers. As Weaver argues, one way to interpret a topic is by placing it in a cause and effect relationship because "the process of interpretation is then to affirm it as the cause of some effect or as the effect of some cause. And the attitudes of those who are listening will be affected according to whether or not they agree with our cause-and-effect analysis" (1354).

This is certainly the case on several mommy blogs, but is perhaps seen most clearly on at Cafe Mom on theStir.com. A simple search for "discipline" on the site's search engine pulls up over 9,500 results, ranging in topics from infant to teenage discipline ("theStir"). A search for "safety" yields an astonishing 29,000 hits ("theStir"). With numbers like these, it is clear these are common topics for bloggers. A sampling of the thousands of blogs available to read on Café Mom at theStir.com reveals an ongoing conversation about a cause and effect relationship between individual bloggers and their readers regarding discipline and safety.

One of the more popular topics of conversation in the mommy blogs of Café Mom is corporal discipline, mainly spanking. Two of the blogs with the most hits, Suzanne Murray's

“Toddler Discipline: What’s Wrong with a Little Spanking Now and Then?” and Jeanne Sager’s “If Spanking Works, Why are You Still Doing It?,” argue opposite sides of one of the greatest divisions in modern parenting. While the differences in the blogs are glaringly obvious, there are a number of important similarities. Each blog is written by a seasoned blogger on Café Mom. Each blog, as expected for the blogging genre on this particular website, ends with a leading questions such as “Do you spank your child?”(Murray) or “Do you spank? Please explain to me how it works if you have to keep doing it?”(Sager) to incite responses in the comment sections.

Largely, this is an effective strategy. Within 7 hours of its publication, Murray’s blog garnered an impressive 45 responses (Murray). Many of the responses were a protest against Murray’s anti-spanking ethos. Commentor HaydensMom178 bluntly replied, “I think this article is crap—sorry, but it’s truth” (Murray). Commentor Stacha echoes HaydensMom178’s statement by saying “I’m tired of your new age hippie parents saying that it’s wrong to spank ur kids” (Murray). While Murray had a number of pro-spanking voices to protest her blog, she still had commenters willing to argue for her. Commentor momoflilangel argues, “I usually think to each their own, BUT I think you’re straight up dumb if you can’t discipline your kids without beating them” (Murray). Here the language of blame is clear and biting through the use of disparaging words such as “crap” in reference to the writer’s article and argument, and “dumb.” But these are some of the tamer examples, the language of blame and shame can get even more dismissive and rude.

“If Spanking Works, Why are you Still Doing it?” earned 148 comments over the course of two days (Sager). Like the comments Murray’s blog garnered, these comments are rude and mean-spirited. Commentor melanniek wrote “I find it presumptuous that you assume all spanking parents STILL spank their children. Well this one certainly doesn't. And your smug

attitude is annoying” (Sager). Kasey Comingore chimed in as well:” was i spanked? yes. do i remember it? no. did it scar me for life? no. did it teach me to fear my parents? no. get over yourself, bitches [sic]” (Sager). Monique221 argues for spanking as well. She states, “This article is stupid and the people who agree are even more stupid. I spank my kid whenever she does something she isn't supposed to do. Also, i do it to make her respect me. My mother spanked me as a child and i respected her. So nobody can tell me anything different, it's my kid so i'll do what i want” (Sager). These are just a sampling of the condescending remarks found on these two blog entries. These commenters use both the topoi of testimony and comparison in order to make a counterargument about the benefits of spanking.

These types of comments and the high number of comments are not uncommon for Café Mom at theStir.com blogs. While Café Mom is considered to be a multi-authored blog, individual bloggers have built relationships with their readers, sometimes even resulting in readers referring to previous blogs in the comment section of the current blog post. Overall, the blogs dedicated to the more controversial topics gain the biggest readership and solicit the most comments.

While Murray and Sager’s individual blogs regarding discipline are two of the most viewed and commented on, they are certainly not the only mommy bloggers on Café Mom at theStir.com to approach discipline. Of the thousands of blogs posted on Café Mom, discipline remains a hot button issue for many of the bloggers and the commentors. While some of the blog posts are titled in a straightforward fashion to indicate the blog’s contents in a non-descript manner, many of the bloggers take a more inflammatory approach to blog titles. Titles such as “If Your Kid Is In My House, I’ll Discipline Him My Way,” “Public Shaming Isn’t the Worst Way to Discipline a Kid,” and “‘Punishment Wheel’ Makes Disciplining Bratty Kids Fun” show

that not only is discipline a common topic of the mommy blog, but also that the inflammatory rhetoric in the titles is a method to gain reader's attention and ensure that their blogs are viewed, read, and commented on.

It is obvious that blog titles like these are a strategy meant to gain attention in the oversaturated mommy blogosphere. The titles are shocking and are meant to provoke readers into clicking the link, reading, and hopefully leave a thought provoking comment. Like the Murray and Seager's previous articles, these blog titles generate a substantial amount of interest. Andrea Kardon's "If Your Kid Is In My House, I'll Discipline Him My Way" generated 152 comments, most of which came from within the community and were overwhelmingly negative. Commentor Angie was perhaps the most aggressive and straightforward in her response: "Discipline my kid and I will discipline your ass"(Kardon). Other responses had a similar, if more subtle, feel. Tiny Possum writes "You've got no business putting someone else's kid in timeout or whatever right under another parent's nose. That's way overstepping. It's just a stupid suggestion" (Kardon). However, Angie's aggressive comment about disciplining the people who disciplined here kids had negative feedback as well. Commentor Michelle went on the offensive and used sarcasm to counter Angie's aggressive tone. Michelle states, "Awesome, Angie...so you must have one of those kids who can do whatever the hell they want in someone else's house because he/she will NEVER get disciplines for misbehaving"(Kardon).

Julie Ryan Evans' blog post "Public Shaming Isn't the Worst Way to Discipline a Kid" and Ericka Souter's "Punishment Wheel Makes Disciplining Bratty Kids Fun" earned a respective 69 and 60 comments apiece. Like the blog posts mentioned previously, these blogs inspired a number of comments that inflamed the blogger-commentor relationship. Registered user Megan Molina had plenty of criticism for Julie Ryan Evans' blog "Public Shaming Isn't the

Worst Way to Discipline a Kid.” Molina says “...this is abuse, not physically, but even mental abuse is still ABUSE. That’s exactly what it is” (Evans). Registered commentor Courtney Paige Neale seemed to reply directly to Michelle’s concerns about public shaming as abuse. She states, “Coming from someone who was mentally abused, this is NOT mental abuse. This is DEF not abuse at all...It is silly to think it is” (Evans).

Ericka Souter’s blog “Punishment Wheel Makes Disciplining Bratty Kids Fun” earned a lot of criticism as well. 333Sandy writes, “What a bunch of crap. If you do something wrong the consequence should be related. That's how it works in the real world. That's what we should be teaching our children. This is just dumb” (Souter). Register user Jean van Zyl agrees and says, “No, I think it is incredibly disrespectful. I am pretty sure this is the exact opposite of what I want to teach my children. You don't exactly have to be brilliant to resort to this kind of caveman response” (Souter). These are just a sampling of the responses to this blog.

These titles are just a small sampling of the ways issues of discipline are being blogged about on Café Mom. The thousands of other blogs that are searchable under the keyword “discipline” and the sheer number of comments generated by bloggers writing about discipline indicate a very real need for women to discuss issues of discipline in a safe community.

It is clear that discipline is a common concern for a number of mothers based on the number of blogs written for and by women. However, while it is fair to assume that because Café Mom is a multi-authored blog with such a diverse set of writers that it is a reasonable representation of mothers, discipline as a rhetorically common topic is not limited to the multi-authored blog. Heather Armstrong, blogger and moderator for the mommy blog dooce.com, writes about issues of discipline as well.

However, unlike the bloggers at Café Mom, Armstrong restricts her comments about children discipline to the discipline moves she uses for her two daughters, 10 –year- old Leta and 5- year -old Marlo. Writing about one’s own children is a common move for the mommy blogger, but even this limitation does not prevent discipline from being a common topic of discussion on Armstrong’s blog. Like the blogs at Café Mom, Dooce.com is searchable to both keyword and hashtag. Interestingly, both a keyword search and hashtag search for “discipline” yield no direct results. Armstrong, for whatever reason, has not coded the blog with this particular rhetoric. Despite the blogs lacking an official rhetorical label as “discipline,” Armstrong’s blog clearly refers to discipline. A blog post from 2009 titled “Not Necessarily a Better Liar, But At Least She’s Getting Creative” relates a story of her older daughter stretching the truth to get out of eating dinner and Armstrong’s means of resolving the issues (Armstrong). A second post from 2005 titled “It Will Come With a Money Back Guarantee” expresses Armstrong’s frustrations with one daughter pulling another daughter’s pigtails and barrettes and how Armstrong would discipline the girls with a hair barrette that shocks the puller (Armstrong). Although Armstrong’s blog posts are not titled in such a way to gain negative attention, they are still cleverly titled to gain attention from readers. Even a casual reader of Dooce.com would note a deeply sarcastic and cynical undertone to Armstrong’s writing that would lead readers to believe that while Armstrong is a normal mom experiencing normal frustrations with her children fighting, she by no means wishes to actually shock the hair-pulling little girl with an electrified barrette.

Despite some of the more shocking claims made by Heather Armstrong on Dooce.com, readers flock to her blog in huge numbers and seek her advice and expertise. Unlike her fellow mommy bloggers at Café Mom that allow commentors to a) comment directly on the blog and b)

do so anonymously, Armstrong requires her very large community to register and discuss blogs in the Dooce Community Chatroom. Here again, readers can easily see that Armstrong's community of readers, like the communities of most mommy bloggers, is one that is concerned with a topic of discipline. A keyword search for "discipline" in the Dooce Community Chatroom produces hundreds of results from those simply responding to a blog written by Armstrong to women posing questions of discipline themselves.

The sheer numbers of mothers finding friendships in blogging communities is too large to ignore. Obviously, the numbers suggest that the need to discuss and argue disciplinary measures for children in the blogosphere is a valid one. While discipline is a rhetorically important topic of interest to many mommy bloggers, issues of safety are also commonly examined in the mommy blog. Both Café Mom and Dooce examine issues of safety.

As with issues of discipline, a keyword search for "safety" returns an astonishing number of results on Café Mom's blog: 23,704. A sampling of the thousands of blogs available to read and comment on indicate that safety as a topic of invention is quite broad. While it is clear that mommy bloggers and those that are interacting with them prize "safety," it is unclear what the term "safe" actually encompasses. Of course, there are the typical issues of safety that the reasonable mom would probably be concerned with: SIDS, car seats, germs, nutrition, and as children grow older, stranger danger, peer pressure, and dating. Most of these types of safety issues are time-honored traditions, worries handed down from one generation of moms to the next. The majority of the blogs on Café Mom reflect this definition of safety. However, there are a number of bloggers that reinvent issues of safety and cause the common topic of safety to become an uncommon topic that is more difficult to explore. Under the guise of "safety,"

mommy bloggers at Café Mom discuss every topic from wood chips versus rubber matting on playgrounds to vaccinations as means to invite autism into a child's life.

While both members of the blogging community and casual readers can assume that the individual blogger does have the best interests of a child at heart, it becomes difficult for readers to accept that every issue related to child rearing has the life-altering impact of a child's safety and well-being. Sheri Reed, in a blog titled "22 Surprising Safety Hazards Around the Home and Garden," encourages moms to keep children away from plastic clamshell packaging because she claims over 6,400 people went to the ER in 2004 for lacerations sustained while opening a plastic clamshell (Reed). She also advises her readers to pay careful attention to what types of video games children play because sports-based games such as those played on the Nintendo Wii can cause damage to the wrists and shoulders (Reed). Reed is not alone in her bizarre assertions of childhood safety. Bloggers on all parts of the vaccination spectrum make claims that vaccines are the definitive answer to eradicating childhood illness that they are safe in moderation, or that vaccines are poisons waiting to destroy children's immunities (Felier).

Like the common topic of discipline, it makes sense for the mommy blogosphere to explode with chatter about issues of safety because it concerns every mom, and rightly so. However, with the sheer amount of bloggers on Café Mom, it also makes sense that the discourse being produced by mommy bloggers is extraordinarily diverse and at times even conflicting. While the discussion of safety is obviously an important one to have, it is also evident that there is no one definitive way to define it. The resulting common topic of safety therefore turns into a mess of bloggers calling for moms to stop handing defenseless children plastic clamshell packaging lest it lop off a finger.

As discussing regarding safety and its various manifestations abound on the Café Mom blog, Heather Armstrong at Dooce grapples with issues of safety rearing her children as well. While the mommy bloggers at Café Mom are seemingly concerned with not only the safety and well-being of their own children but also everyone else's, Armstrong's focus on safety takes a more relaxed approach. As with her blogs regarding the disciplining of Leta and Marlo, there are no hastags or searchable key words for safety. Instead, Armstrong tucks away her lessons on safety inside other blogs tagged with specific tags for the situation and the child. Some blogs, including a 2009 blog written to share the immense fear Armstrong experience when she found her preschool daughter eating mothballs, are simply tagged "parenthood."

While a tag of "parenthood" can be considered vague and probably unhelpful in searching for specific parenting issues on the web, its simplicity is also genius. Parenting, especially the acts of motherhood, have broad implications. Mothers are concerned with and responsible for so much with their children. Based on the sheer number of bloggers writing about discipline and safety, it is clear that these common topics are valid concerns that mothers have not only for their own children, but also for other mothers' children as well. Yet despite these well-intentioned concerns and the desire to build community, the blogger-reader relationship does not always work as intended.

"That's Not How I Said It": Style in the Mommy Blog

While the importance of invention cannot be overstated in the creation of a rhetorical situation, the decision on what to say must be well-supported by the choices of how to say it. Style, or as its original Latin name *elocution* implies, eloquence, is the artful expression of ideas. It is a separate entity from invention and arrangement, in the five-part canon because it "dresses up previously formulated ideas in attractive verbal garb" (Bizzell and Herzberg 6). Although

rhetoric has been accused of being the “superficial ornamentation” of language and argumentation (Cline), style as rhetorical form is of much greater importance than just embellishment.

Like its predecessor invention, style too is somewhat systematized and categorized to create easier usability. Style is broadly characterized by three styles of speaking or writing: High or grand, middle, and low or plain. A high style of speaking is the least used usually. Its primary purpose is to inspire and can often be found in speeches that are invented to be epideictic. This style is characterized by highly stylized language and multiple figures of speech designed to capture and engage an audience’s attention and turn the ear and the eye toward beauty. The low style is a specific style of speech meant to teach or instruct. It is the utilitarian by necessity and its specific style speaks to clarity, brevity, and sincerity. Hiding in the middle of these styles is the clearly if not cleverly named middle style. It serves as common denominator between grand and low styles. The language stylings in middle language are neither as grandiose nor elegant the high style nor as perfunctory and plain as the low style. Its purpose is to amuse and to please and does so by stylizing rhetoric that is easy to understand while still maintaining an air of elegance.

Although these broader definitions of style do much to help distinguish the particular functions of various speeches, style as a canon also details the particular use of language. Style also functions as a means to “correct” language through grammar and structure. It works to create argumentative clarity through clearness and correct verbiage. Style is also a function of appropriateness. A rhetor looks at the occasion, the audience, and the rhetorician to determine the style of language for the rhetorical situation. And yes, it does also serve ornamental purposes by creating and utilizing effective rhetorical devices and clever figures of speech to add a boost of rhetorical power to persuasion.

Clearly, both motherhood as an institution and mothering as an act are heavily weighted down with denotative and connotative meanings. As the Mommy Wars continue to escalate and mothers are continually pitted against each other, the rhetoric being levied by both sides is the result of a culturally constructed binary that polarizes mothering communities and increases hostilities, frustrations, and incivility (Johnston and Swanson 497). These binaries result from any of the thousands of choices a mother can make in regards to raising her children: working or staying at home, helicopter or free range parenting, etc. For whatever ideological choice a mother makes to raise her children, there is certainly bound to be another mother to tell her how she is doing it incorrectly. In online forums, this is true more often than not.

While generations of mothers have been telling their children “sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you,” the 2008 study performed by sociologists Dierdre Johnston and Debra Swanson suggest otherwise. The aim of the study is to examine culturally constructed binaries that affect the Northern American view of “good” mothering. Johnston and Swanson examined one of the most controversial and one of the most argued aspects of the Mommy Wars: the role of outside work in a mother’s life (497-499). They state:

It is as if at-home and employed mothers are pitted against each other in a crazed cultural contest for “Worst Mother of the Year.” We imagine the at-home mother, toxic with Prozac and smiling a beatific smile that suggests she’s one day shy of institutionalization, freezing organic vegetables in ice-cube trays for baby, constructing life-size geodesic forts out of rolled newspaper for toddler, and baking welcome-home brownies for her kindergartner. We imagine the employed mother, frazzled, yelling at her children to hurry up, dragging screaming kids and diaper bags to the minivan to drop off children in substandard daycare, while

clearly preoccupied with concluding a big business deal on her cell phone. As a result of these stereotypes, work status (i.e. employment or at-home) and mothering (good or bad mother) are culturally constructed as rigid binaries (497).

The results of Johnston and Swanson's study suggest that Mommy War rhetoric does indeed affect the quality of life for the mothers engaged in it (506). Culturally, there is a tendency to measure motherhood by "signal moments" such as how they respond to an ultrasound picture, how they choose to give birth, or how they choose to feed their newborns (Kukla 81). These types of judgments from other mothers begin early in the mothering process and the rhetoric that is provoked by discussing these choices is often both unkind and unhelpful to the mother. Once again, the highly individualized and personalized choices being made by mother is under critical fire from those who are supposed to understand and respect the choices being made. This type of flaming continues well beyond the criticisms of early motherhood and helps shape the rhetorical discussions of discipline and safety *topoi*.

The uncivil rhetoric being generated on mommy blogs is largely the result of controversial motherhood philosophies meeting a public not being held accountable for their rhetorical choices in an anonymous digital medium. Because part of the specialness of the mommy blog is its ability to create a public intimacy through self-disclosure, it is only natural that criticism from readers stems from the same disclosures. Often times, this criticism is rooted in "new momism" theorized principles—the expectation that mothers should not only be able to do it all, but should accomplish it gracefully and joyfully (Lopez 732). This criticism for other mothering is also rooted in intensive parenting's expectations of motherhood. Specifically, mothers are criticized when they admit their children are not the ultimate fulfillment of their lives and when they publicly admit that they are raising their children in a way that might differ

from accepted social norms. Here then, it becomes more expected, if not always more acceptable, to criticize mothers for deviating from cultural norms – using blaming and personal testimony to distinguish bad parenting from good parenting..

In the social communities of the mommy blog, the interaction between reader and blogger is almost exclusively and unsurprisingly, mom-to-mom. Mothers, usually parenting children under age 10, are writing and discussing common topics such as discipline and safety to promote their own worldviews and build community with readers. While there are a number of expected similarities among moms relating to one another through the shared experiences of childrearing, there are also a number of growing communicative disconnects that interfere with the main purpose of the mommy blog: community building.

There are a number of reasons the rhetorical canon of style can hinder community. In print, there are difficulties translating comments that are left in jest or meant to be sarcastic or ironic. There are issues of misunderstanding the original blog. And sometimes, there are issues of personality conflict that play out in terms of how a communicative action is styled.

Heather Armstrong regularly sees the intersection of these three issues on Dooce. As previously indicated, Armstrong's writing style, brash, bold, and unabashedly honest, invites criticism from both casual readers of her blog and members of Dooce's community. As Dooce's readership grew in number, the number and variety of negative responses to her blog grew as well. Beginning in early 2010, Armstrong actually deactivated the comment section on her individual blog posts, forcing readers to redirect their comments to a general chat room requiring a free buy mandatory membership registration (Armstrong). While this move initially earned Armstrong a swath of scorn from loyal readers, this action ultimately improved community between Armstrong and Dooce readers.

However, the move by Heather Armstrong to relegate community degrading comments to a general chat room has not always stopped readers of Dooce from criticizing Armstrong and her parenting choices. Armstrong still reports receiving a number of emails and contacts from people concerned about the well-being of her daughters. In 2011, Armstrong stopped responding to criticisms of her personal blog all together. Dooce's FAQ page imagines the type of critical questioning Heather Armstrong receives and replies to it the way that only Armstrong would:

(FAQ Question) I'm surprised you haven't been reported to child welfare with how public you are about some of the things you think and do regarding your daughter. Paper towels are very dangerous for your daughter to chew on. She could suffocate. Don't let her be alone with them. I'm amazed at how foolish you can be sometimes.

(Armstrong's Response) When you call DCFS(Department of Family and Child Services), please get the story straight. Not only do I leave her alone with paper towels, I set her in the middle of a flea-infested floor and surround her with sharp objects and porn. Then I turn on a wood-burning stove in the corner of the room and seal all the windows. Before I leave the room and lock the door, I stick a bottle full of vodka in her mouth to muffle the screaming (Armstrong).

In this instance here, it is not the commentor or reader offering inflammatory remarks, but rather a preemptive strike by the blogger. Based on previous interactions that Armstrong has since removed from her blog, she is choosing to ward off attacks on parental choices by sarcastically acknowledging that while she is not a perfect parent, she is not a vodka-bottle-in-the-mouth sort of mother either. Armstrong's choice of weapon, sarcasm, is then unexpected. Its deeply rooted cynicism is an unanticipated choice for the mommy blogger because as Swanson

and Johnston suggest, the rhetoric of mothers and those discussing motherhood has traditionally been kind (500).

While Armstrong takes the offense on Dooce to combat criticisms, mommy bloggers at Café Mom utilize the more expected strategies to manage the blogger-reader relationship. Bloggers write blogs, post them, wait for reactions to comment via the comment sections, and then respond accordingly. However, this does not necessarily mean that women respond to each other in the kinder ways that is more typically expected from feminine communication. Mommy bloggers from Café Mom experience a number of interactions that suggest the style of communication between mothers when discussing hotly contested topics can be spirited and lively at best and disagreeable and rude at worst.

It is these worst case interactions that the biggest single goal of the mommy blog, building community, becomes more difficult to achieve. Café Mom blogger Andrea Kardon's blog post "If Your Kid Is In My House, I'll Discipline Him My Way" argues that as the adult of the house, she has ultimate control of disciplining any children in her house (Kardon). Responses to this proposition are interesting, ranging from simple agreements to more curt disagreements. As mentioned previously, one commentor goes on the offense by saying "Discipline my kid and I will discipline your ass" (Kardon). Another commentor, Café Mom member Desireemom2011, acknowledges that while it is fine to discipline another mother's child at home, there are limits that must be respected. She adds that while certain measures of discipline are fine, "if you ever lay a hand on my child I will knock you out. If my daughter is being that bad you need to call me so I can deal with my way" (Kardon). Although it is unlikely that Kardon and any of these commentors know each other in real life and are equally unlikely to encounter the a situation when they would need to discipline each other's children, the message is clear: No one gets to

discipline my children but me. While the moms are still discussing a topic common to them that can be expected in feminine communities, the aggressive choices in style are atypically unfeminine and therefore unexpected.

In its usage as part of the overall rhetorical canon, style is often dismissed entirely or has its role severely diminished. However, in the rhetoric of the mommy blog, style serves a number of roles unique to both the rhetorical medium and the rhetorical situation. As previously explained, blogs offer a specific space to build niche communities. This specialized rhetorical space requires a type of style not used in other types of communications. Because bloggers and commentors do not have the luxuries of hearing a tone of voice or seeing facial expressions or body language for meaning cues, the ornamental function of style becomes especially important. While what is being communicated remains exceptionally important, how it is dressed up becomes even more so. Individual word choices carry a weight that may not in a face-to-face conversation that can be tempered with vocal inflection and body language. The blogging medium demands a precision of language—without it, the rhetor may unintentionally offend. The blogging medium demands a specific style of language that prizes and sometimes demonizes individual word choices. Heather Armstrong was once denounced for using the word “stinky” to describe her youngest daughter. This one word produced such a stink between blogger and readers that Armstrong offered an apology in the next blog post.

It is also vital to consider how style impacts the rhetorical situation of blogging. While it is clear that the stylized rhetoric of the interaction between bloggers and commentors can take an atypically aggressive tone, it is less clear exactly why the common topics of discipline and safety provoke such fierce responses from the communities. As part of the larger rhetorical situation of the blog, style becomes an essential rhetorical element. Do mothers feel safe in their self-chosen

communities and are therefore free to use what kind of language they desire? Are they dashing off thought between diaper changes and are therefore not as careful in their language choices as they ought to be? As these considerations take shape, it is clear that style cannot work alone as a rhetorical function in the mommy blog.

CHAPTER 6

The Mommy Blog as a Microcosm of Incivility Online and the Illusive Potential of On-Line Communities

While Mommy War rhetoric provides the foundation for a discourse in the mothering community, its explosive power is best examined in a medium where women, often times new moms, feel safe expressing their concerns, desires, and needs: the mommy blog. In many senses, the mommy blog is perfect venue for the new mother to build community among like-minded people while gathering the advice, support, and resources necessary to conquer the arduous task of mothering. Evidence from a variety of blogs suggests that motherhood can be overwhelming and exhausting, hilarious and exuberant, dirty and disruptive, all at once (Lopez 744). Aimee Morrison states, “On balance, personal mommy blogging offers a model for more politically and personally empowering women’s cultures” (37). Morrison also attests to the power of the mommy blog as a way to create a “purposive and deliberative social engagement” that equally foster personal self-expression and community development (38). The need for invention here is certainly great however, the opportunity to be constructive in building common values and understandings is often illusive.

The rhetorical choices of those who participate in mommy blogs is oftentimes ugly and accusatory. When stripped of the accountability of face-to-face interaction or even a user name and profile, commentators are free to utilize whatever type of rhetorical discourse they have at their disposal to get their point across. While some of the rhetoric gently rebukes the choices being made by the mommy bloggers in a way that is critical but constructive, a lot more of the rhetorical choices being made by commentators are harsh and fundamentally not useful for anything but tearing down self-esteem. The rhetorical sensitivity marked by style is largely gone,

replaced with a type of stylized language that is specifically designed to be ugly, hurtful, and rude. The polite tone that underscores feminine forms of argumentation and disagreement in conversation is notably absent in dissenting blog comments. Although these comments are often anonymous, many of the commentors will refer to themselves by identifying statements such as “Well, I’m a mom too, but...” that immediately gender the comments.

As the mommy bloggers write and create these blogs in an attempt to build their community of supporters, there are groups of women that use the comments section as way to discourage and defeat mothers. It is deeply troubling to hear other women, other mothers even, use sexist, racist, and inflammatory rhetoric as means prove a point. There is little reason to call Heather Armstrong an “idiot” for feeding her kids cookies for breakfast one morning (Armstrong). Is that a bad parenting choice? Perhaps, but the way express it could be more anchored in civility and perhaps would have had a better communicative outcome. Unfortunately, “idiot” isn’t in the worst. Other mommy bloggers, Armstrong and several Café Mom bloggers among them, have been called “stupid,” “bitchy,” “whore,” and much worse for their choices in parenting. While these rhetorical choices certainly get a point across, they do little but put the blogger on the offensive and shuts down any hope of creating a discourse that would be conducive to forming a community of motherhood.

These small choices in language in a specific medium aimed at a specific group of people may seem insignificant when examined on their own, but they point to a larger problem. Muriel Schulz, author of “The Semantic Derogation of Woman,” argues:

The question of whether or not language affects the thought and culture of the people who use it remains to be answered. Even if we were to agree that it does, we would have difficulty calculating the extent to which the language we use

influences society. There is no doubt, on the other hand, that a language reflects the thoughts, attitudes, and culture of the people who make and use it (134).

These blogger-commentor interactions are not a case of the patriarchy using rhetoric and rhetorical choices to manipulate women. This is not a case of simple disagreements among mothers. This is a case of women using language to undermine, terrorize, and oppress a particular group of women that are perhaps one of the most vulnerable subsets of women.

Although this project is rooted in examining incivility in the mommy blog genre, it is worth noting that the mommy blog is only a microcosm of online communication. While the popular discourses of new momism and intensive mothering provide an important framework for the rhetoric of the mommy blog, uncivil discourse is an unfortunate reality in many online interactions. The social expectations of mothering through both new momism and intensive parenting provide ideologies that allow mothers to remain deeply critical of one another. However, this attitude of conflicting ideologies will produce online incivility in any genre that expects to have a rhetor and audience who interact. The mommy blog is not special in that regard, but it is worthwhile to study as small piece of the much larger picture of a combative online culture.

While it is clear there are many issues of critical and mean-spirited communication on blogs in general and on mommy blogs in particular, it is also clear there are a number of issues that still need to be addressed. If one of the central problems surrounding the mommy blog is the issue of incivility and the rhetorical actions associated with it, it would be worthwhile to study the mommy blogs modeling civil communication. Although this thesis focuses on mommy blogs that have trouble with incivility, there are mommy blogs that do not struggle with uncivil discourse. Several popular mommy blogs have fulfilled the blogging genre expectations of

community building. Despite its scary-sounding name, the community at Scary Mommy is largely cooperative and kind to one another, even when responding to controversial posts. Like the bloggers at Café Mom and Dooce, Scary Mommy does not shy away from potentially controversial topics in parenting such as discipline and safety. For a blog that has 1.7 million readers, that is impressive.

Having a better understanding of effective civil communication in the mommy blog would serve to help bridge the rhetorical gaps in communicative intent between blogger and audience and perhaps help restore the mommy blog back to its community-building original intention. While the models of these types of mommy blogs exist, they are far too few and the question begs to be asked “why?” In addition, it would be worthwhile to examine the issue of audience as it relates to the mommy blog. There are a certain amount of assumptions that can be made about the audiences of mommy blogs—that they are mothers or want to be, that they are younger or more inexperienced mothers, that they are middle class. These assumptions about audience do little to challenge public perception about mothering in terms of race or socioeconomic status and an examination of the rhetoric produced as an extension of audience analysis would greatly enhance the discussion of incivility in blogs. While the writers at Café Mom and Heather Armstrong at Dooce.com are a good cross-section of the mommy blogs available, many other mommy blogs remain to be examined. If this project was opened up to examine a larger variety of mommy blogs or to include the audience analysis, perhaps the finding would uncover another discussion regarding style and invention.

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