

*"I exploit my children for millions
and millions of dollars on my
mommyblog"*

How Heather B. Armstrong's Personal Blog Became A Successful Business

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Abstract

This study interrogates strategies to convert a personal blog into a brand and a business by analysing the narrative and aesthetic techniques involved in generating audience engagement, trust and affection, and the branding and monetisation approaches involved in developing a blog into a revenue-generating enterprise. The strategies presented in this study have been extrapolated from an in-depth analysis of the extremely successful personal blog: www.dooce.com, the website of Heather B. Armstrong.

The research questions this study aims to address are grounded in distinct fields of enquiry, examining the narrative and aesthetic features underpinning the conversion of a personal blog into a brand; the representation of the everyday and its role in the construction of the blogger avatar as a human brand; the interplay between writing motivations and brand core values; and the influence that stereotypes about stay-at-home mothers, pregnancy and motherhood exert on the brand creation process of a female author. The interdisciplinary nature of this study is mirrored in its multi-faceted analytical approach which draws on theories pertaining to diverse fields of enquiry such as narratology, aesthetics, digital media, marketing communications and branding.

The study aims to present strategies to construct a personal brand in the context of co-created online forums, with an emphasis on attaining authenticity, followership and audience loyalty through careful framing and strategic use of second person narration, and aesthetic

categories such as zany, cute, interesting and abject. The study transposes a narrative approach to branding and online marketing studies with the aim of proposing a model of personal branding whereby blogger identity is simultaneously the product of authorial control and consumer-driven cultural work, with the blogger negotiating her personal brand in relation to personal values, everyday life circumstances, commercial pressures and audience feedback.

The key propositions of this study are, firstly, that the use of second person narration as interpellation into active readerhood and of the cute, interesting, zany and abject as aesthetic categories that create novel reading experiences can generate high audience engagement, the abject being also directly related to fostering trust and authenticity. Secondly, bloggers can become human brands by strategically exhibiting and then reinforcing personality traits related to sophistication, competence, sincerity, excitement, ruggedness and non-conformism. Thirdly, consistency in writing style and self-disclosure can foster audience attachment and trust in the integrity and authenticity of the human brand. Fourthly, consumer attachment can be strategically cultivated through audience autonomy, competence and relatedness to the human brand and the development of an online brand community.

Chapter 1

"Why do I daydream about Rod Stewart in inappropriate positions?"¹

The aim of this study is to interrogate strategies to convert a personal blog into a brand and a business. More specifically, this study analyses narrative and aesthetic techniques to generate audience engagement, trust and affection, as well as branding and monetisation approaches to develop a blog into a revenue-generating enterprise. The strategies presented in this study have been extrapolated from an in-depth analysis of the extremely successful personal blog: www.dooce.com. This interdisciplinary analysis is underpinned by theoretical frameworks pertaining to the diverse fields of enquiry of narratology, aesthetics, digital media, marketing communications and branding.²

www.dooce.com is the personal website of Heather B. Armstrong. Created in 2001, it is one of the very first personal blogs to

¹ Excerpt taken from the first entry on dooce.com. Full post reproduced below:

Thinking

2001/05/06

I should probably shoplift something before I die.

Why do I daydream about Rod Stewart in inappropriate positions?

(Armstrong 2001a)

² A note on the pronouns used in this study. Given that one of the themes covered in the study is that of gender stereotypes and biases, one cannot help but struggle with the generic third-person singular pronouns. For obvious reasons, the masculine "he" or "him" cannot be used to signify both genders. At the same time, using the plural "they" or "their" as singular might cause confusion in certain instances. "he/she", "s/he" or "he or she", "him and her" might make the text tiresome to read through tedious re-iterations. The solution adopted therefore is to keep the singular pronoun in its accurate grammatical form and deliberately alternate between the genders, so that both male and female readers feel included as implied readers of the text.

have attracted commercial advertisements (hereafter 'ads') (Rettberg 2008) and one of the very few personal blogs that are still regularly updated and read fifteen years later³. In 2015, the blog boasted 1,600,000 – 2,000,000 page views and 150,000 – 200,000 unique visitors each month (Armstrong 2015a). In 2009, *Time Magazine* featured dooce.com as one of the *25 Best Blogs* of the year, referring to Heather Armstrong as an 'old hand' even though 'blogging has been around less than a decade' (McNichol 2009). The same year *Forbes* magazine lists Armstrong as number 8 on its list of *25 Web Celebs for 2009* (Ewalt 2009) and upgrades her to number 7 the following year (Ewalt 2010). Online magazine and blog network, *babble.com*, registers dooce.com on its list of *Top 50 Mom Blogs* in 2010 (Bielanko 2010). The following year, dooce.com finds its way on the list of best websites and best blogs of 2011 in *Forbes* and *Time Magazine* respectively (Casserly 2011; McCracken 2011). The pinnacle of Armstrong's blogging success and popularity could arguably be her 2015 invitation to attend the White House Foreign Correspondent Dinner as one of Arianna Huffington's⁴ guests (Heil 2015).

In many ways, dooce.com's evolution mirrors the development of blogging in general, and the rise of the personal blog in particular. This is due partly to its longevity and most poignantly to its successive transformations and adaptations to the rapidly changing online

³ On 23rd April 2015, Heather Armstrong announced that she would be reducing the number of posts on dooce.com as she was launching a new company called HBA Media, Inc. dedicated to providing consultancy services on Internet marketing and social media brand presence.

⁴ Arianna Huffington is the editor-in-chief and co-founder of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Huffington Post* and author of fourteen books (Howard 2015).

environment. Spanning an online presence of over fifteen years, the blog has undergone a series of developmental stages, from a webpage read by a small number of Armstrong's acquaintances, to a personal website whose name coined an eponymous word in the English language, to a mommy blog featured in print and television media, to a business supporting a family of four, and finally, to a brand with a cross-platform presence.

In its inception period, dooce.com was a repository of humorous, sometimes irreverent, stories about Armstrong's co-workers, manager, and her life as a 'disaffected former Mormon' living in Los Angeles and working as a web designer (Mead 2015). The discovery of the website, led to the blogger's dismissal in 2002, an event which increased the blog's audience (Mead 2015) and generated the neologism 'dooxed' used as "She got dooxed last week", meaning she was made redundant because of the content published on her blog (Collins English Dictionary 2012; The Free Dictionary 2008; Cambridge English Dictionary 2015).

The year 2003 marked a change in blog content, with Armstrong's pregnancy, birth and daily mothering struggles becoming the main focus of blog posts, which led the media and the audience to refer to dooce.com as a 'mommy blog'⁵. By 2004, the blog attracted such popularity that it generated sufficient revenue to support the entire family, with Armstrong's husband resigning from his place of employment to take up the management of the blog's business side.

⁵ The term 'mommy blog' will be analysed in sub-chapter 1.3.

In spite of Armstrong's declared misgivings about the term (Rudolph 2015), it is as a mommy blogger that she had come into fame. Armstrong discussed issues related to parenting, stay-at-home mothers and blogging on American television programs such as *Oprah*, *Nightline*, *The Today Show*, *Dr. Phil* and *Good Morning America* (Armstrong 2015a). She was also featured on CNN news for 'joining forces with Michelle Obama' at the White House Forum on Workplace Flexibility (L. Petty 2010) and on American television ABC 4's program *On the Record* with the story of her post-partum depression (Armstrong 2015; "Dooce.com's Heather Armstrong Appears on ABC 4's" 2009).

In 2009, *Forbes Magazine* included Armstrong on their list of *The Most Influential Women in the Media* as number 26. The magazine refers to Armstrong as "one of the most successful bloggers in the country" with a "loyal network of readers, now averaging about 300,000 a day" and an advertising revenue high enough to allow her to blog full time. Armstrong's placement as number 26 on the list, higher than four American TV news personalities, speaks to the blogger's popularity and rising fame (Blakeley 2009).

The years 2008-2011 trace the development of dooce.com into a brand pertaining to the emergent 'mommy blog' field, while 2013 to the present date showcase a mature brand with a cross-platform presence and a successful business model. The metamorphosis from personal blog to brand is a fluid and often hidden process. Some of its fundamental stages can however be identified by analysing blog announcements, social media posts, reader comments, and media coverage on Armstrong. All of these channels provide insights into the

strategy behind the blog's success, as well as the changes undergone by the industry over the past decade. The coverage of Armstrong's Twitter battle with Whirlpool, for example, showcases the blogger's rising status as influencer as well as changing modes of interaction between consumers and brands. In August 2009, the blogger purchased a new washing machine, which broke down immediately after its installation. Following repeated failed attempts to get the machine replaced, Armstrong resorted to expressing her grievances on her blog and on Twitter (Armstrong 2009b; Armstrong 2009l; Armstrong 2009k; Armstrong 2009j). The five tweets Armstrong posted prompted the company to get in contact and offer her two new washing machines, one of which the blogger donated to a local shelter.

The incident received wide coverage in the media and marketing literature, the story being presented from different angles, from the power of Armstrong, the mommy blogger (Belkin 2011; Bazelon 2009) to Armstrong's responsibilities when writing about brands (P. Olson 2009), to a discussion of the power of social media in general with Armstrong as a case study (Falls and Deckers 2011). This example illustrates that by 2009, dooce.com had already acquired a significant number of readers. It also points to the kind of fervent followership Armstrong was able to engender through her blog and social media presence. Reinforced by the core brand value of honesty, Armstrong's grievance resonated with a substantial consumer segment, which prompted Whirlpool's quick response. The incident drew media's attention, the story being featured in later years in well-established newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* or *Salt Lake*

City Tribune (Belkin 2011; Heil 2015; Canham 2006). National media coverage can arguably be linked to an increase in brand awareness and subsequent rise in audience numbers. Although exact data on blog traffic and its correlation to the Maytag incident is not available, it would be reasonable to assume that exposure in traditional print media is likely to result in higher visibility for the brand in alternative market segments and potentially generate new consumers.

1.1 Rationale for the study

The last decade has registered a great proliferation of personal blogs (Rettberg 2008). On 22nd February 2014, *Technorati*, at the time one of the largest blog aggregators on the web, registered a total number of 1.3 million blogs (Technorati.com 2014)⁶. By August 2015, blogging platform *Tumblr* reported hosting 252.2 million blogs, with 70,109,023 posts per day (tumblr.com 2015). Competitor blogging platform *WordPress* features equally impressive numbers purposefully placed on their website underneath a live animated world map showing *WordPress* activity around the world in terms of comments, posts and likes. On 30th August 2015, *WordPress* reported 409 million views of 19.8 billion pages in a month, 53.6 million monthly new posts and 59.3 million new comments (wordpress.com 2015). While *WordPress*' webpage features prominently the names of well-established organisations such as TED or CNN who publish their blogs on the

⁶ On 29th May 2014, *Technorati* deleted its blog directory as part of its rebranding as an advertising technology platform rather than a blog aggregator, an index of existing blogs (Bhuiyan 2014).

platform, it is nonetheless common knowledge that the majority of blogs published on it are created by private individuals, a fact that holds true for other blogging platforms as well⁷ (Technorati.com 2011).

In this study, the term 'personal blog' is defined as an online webpage created and regularly updated by a private individual, a webpage whose content features the author's personal experiences and/or opinions on different topics.⁸ The broad definition of the term is attributed to the great variety of subject matter, authorial intent and graphic design of personal blogs. In their 2011 report *The State of the Blogosphere*, Technorati identified five types of bloggers: the hobbyists, professional part-time and full-time bloggers, corporate bloggers and entrepreneurs⁹. All these types of bloggers, except the corporate ones, create personal blogs whose content revolves around their "personal musings" about everyday occurrences or about a specific topic or industry. While hobbyists use blogging primarily as a tool for self-expression, professional and entrepreneur bloggers use their websites to gain greater visibility in their industries and/or attract potential clients (Technorati.com 2011).

⁷ Some of the most common blogging platforms are: Blogger.com, WordPress.com, Tumblr.com, Ghost.com, TypePad.com, Movable.com (Wallagher 2015; O. Williams 2015; Magazine 2012).

⁸ The terms 'blog' or 'weblog', 'personal blog', 'mommy blog', 'daddy blog' and 'parent blog' will be defined and analysed in more detail in chapter 2.

⁹ A hobbyist is an individual blogging "for fun", with no income generated through his blog. Professional part/full-time bloggers are "independent bloggers who either use blogging as a way to supplement their income, or consider it their full-time job." Corporate bloggers blog as "part of their full-time job or blog full-time for a company or an organization". Entrepreneurs are individuals "blogging for an organization they own" (Technorati.com 2011).

Current scholarship on personal blogs from the fields of marketing and media communications focuses on electronic word of mouth (henceforth eWOM) and the power of bloggers to influence reader's opinions and purchase behaviours (Duan, Gu, and Whinston 2008; Forrest and Cao 2010; K.-T. Lee and Koo 2012; Klein and Ford 2003; M. Lee and Youn 2009; Zhu and Tan 2007; Park and Kim 2008). A limited amount of scholars from the same fields discuss the creation of online personas on personal blogs and their relation to branding and marketing communications (La Ferla 2010; Laura J. Gurak and Antonijevic 2008; Trammell and Keshelashvili 2005), as well as strategies bloggers employ to foster trust in their readers (Doyle et al. 2012; Lu, Chang, and Chang 2014; Sprague and Wells 2010; K.-T. Lee and Koo 2012; Sullivan 2009). The scholarship from these fields is directed primarily at marketers and aims to provide statistical evidence of bloggers' influence on consumer behaviour without analysing in detail the narrative strategies which underpin said influence. That gap in the existing scholarship is what the present study aims to address through its interdisciplinary approach, bringing thus a narratological and literary studies perspective to personal blogs.

Personal blogs receive a rather cursory treatment in current literary studies scholarship, being primarily mentioned as blog categories in overarching studies looking at the features of hypertext and at blogging as a new phenomenon (Morrison 2007; Blood 2000; Myers 2010). In her informative study *Blogs and Blogging: Text and Practice*, Morrison outlines historical, cultural and technical aspects involved in the development of this emerging industry. While her study

offers an insightful discussion of the category with relation to genre, it does not however give 'personal blogs' in depth consideration (Morrison 2007). Similarly, Blood offers a comprehensive historical perspective on the development of blogs, with minimal discussion of personal websites (Blood 2000). Myers' seminal study on blogs and wikis focuses on discussing the two as genres defined primarily by their usage rather than their content and by the communities of practice they engender. *The Discourse of Blogs and Wikis*, as the title suggests, traces the discursive and rhetorical features of the two categories, without analysing 'personal blogs' in depth (Myers 2010). Rettberg's *Bloggling* offers a comprehensive contextualisation of blogs in terms of digital media history and critical theory. She discusses the intersection between blogs and marketing, briefly lists revenue avenues open to blogs and mentions dooce.com as one of the first websites to generate income through advertising (Rettberg 2008, 132–136). Her analysis, while opening avenues for further research, does not however comprehensively address the narrative underpinnings of a personal blog's transformation into a brand.

A personal blog category that has nonetheless received critical attention over the past decade is that of 'mommy blogs'. I employ the term 'mommy blog' to mean a personal blog whose subject matter is parenting and whose author is a woman¹⁰. Parenting is an extensive topic and the diverse everyday scenarios in which it takes place

¹⁰ The reason why the term 'parent blog' is not used here instead of the term 'mommy blog' is because most of the scholarship on parent blogs focuses on blogs authored by women as opposed to similar personal webpages authored by men, also known as 'daddy blogs'.

accounts for mommy blogs' multiplicity and variety, from blogs who simply record the author's experience of becoming a parent, to blogs focused on the specific discussion of parenting children with physical or mental impairments, to single-parenting or same-sex parenting, among many others. BlogHer, an online blogging community, registered more than 400 blogs on parenting in 2007 (S. Thompson 2007) while in 2014 their directory counted 9250 family blogs ("BlogHer" 2014). Following Alice Bradley's comparison of blogging to a 'radical' act at the first BlogHer conference in 2005 in San Jose, California, US (Lopez 2009), mommy blogs have drawn scholarly interest, particularly in the fields of women's studies, sociology and literary studies (C. R. Miller and Shepherd 2004; K. V. Williams 2015; C. R. Miller and Shepherd 2004; Lawson 2013; M. Jones and Alony 2008; Rogers and Weller 2012; Karlsson 2007; Salvio 2012; Chen 2013; Haines 2011; Hunter 2015; Heisler and Ellis 2008; Petersen 2014). The most notable scholars writing on mommy blogs could arguably be Aimee Morrison and May Friedman. Morrison looks at mommy blogs from a discourse analysis perspective, focusing on the rhetorical strategies employed by bloggers to create a sense of intimacy with their audience or to mitigate potential conflict with other bloggers (Morrison 2007; Morrison 2010; Morrison 2011; Morrison 2014). Friedman writes from a sociological and women studies' perspective focusing on the role mommy blogs play in shifting perspectives on motherhood (Friedman 2010a; Friedman 2011; Friedman 2009; Friedman and Connors 2009; Friedman 2010b). Current scholarship on mommy blogs does not offer an analysis of the narrative and aesthetic strategies employed by bloggers to create audience

engagement, generate followership or transform their blog into a brand. The present study aims to bridge that gap by employing an interdisciplinary approach structured around five main research questions which delineate the different stages involved in the transformation of a personal blog into a brand, from generating audience engagement and steady followership to creating a cross-platform brand presence. The research questions and their potential answers are mapped onto the case study of the blog dooce.com, and they are as follows:

1. What are the narrative and aesthetic features underpinning the conversion of a personal blog into a brand?
2. How is the representation of the everyday featured in the construction of the blogger as a human brand?
3. How do the motivations for writing the blog inform the brand core values?
4. How do stereotypes about women entrepreneurs, stay-at-home mothers, pregnancy and motherhood influence the brand creation process of a female author?

The present chapter aims to offer a review of relevant literature from the diverse fields of enquiry included in this study, while Chapter 2 will provide a detailed overview of existing mommy blog scholarship and discuss the early stages of the blog with a specific focus on narrative and aesthetic techniques. The following chapter traces the evolution of these techniques into product attributes and the role of the online reality effect in the construction of Heather B. Armstrong, the human brand. Chapter 4 looks at the development of core brand

values, initial strategies to create blog visibility and appeal, to generate audience engagement and cultivate consumer loyalty. Chapter 5 discusses the delicate balancing act of mitigating brand identity, consumer loyalty and blog monetisation, while the final chapter presents reflexions on the future of blogs and potential avenues for further research.

1.2 Methodology

For the purpose of this study a thorough analysis of all dooce.com content published between 6th May 2001 and 16th August 2015 was conducted. Although the 27th February 2001 is the date when dooce.com was officially registered as a domain and its first post was published, the website's archive does not contain any posts prior to 6th May 2001 (Armstrong 2015f). Additionally, the study considered the text and images published on Armstrong's Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, the blogger's interviews spanning the same time period and the three books published under the Blurbodoocery Inc. copyright: *It Sucked and Then I Cried. How I Had a Baby, a Breakdown, and a Much Needed Margarita* (2010a), *Dear Daughter. The Best of the Dear Leta Letters* (2012a) and *Things I Learned About My Dad (In Therapy)* (2008a)¹¹.

The analysis is underpinned by theories from diverse scholarly fields, spanning from narratology to human brands and marketing. In order to provide a seamless reading experience, the literature review is structured around nine thesis statements, whose rhetorical function is to summarise the main content points derived by combining interdisciplinary scholarship frameworks¹².

¹¹ Blurbodoocery Inc. is Armstrong's registered company name. It is a portmanteau term created by combining the first part of Jon Armstrong's website, blurbomat.com with Armstrong's website, dooce.com and nominalizing the result by adding the suffix -ry. Armstrong authored the first two books and edited the third.

¹² In order to facilitate navigation between different sections, the thesis statements will be italicized and numbered.

1. *Interpellation into active readerhood can generate high audience engagement.*

Interpellation is linked to the use of the personal pronoun 'you' and the response it elicits from the reading audience. Traditionally, narrative theory established the personal pronoun 'you' as a marker of one of the three narrative 'persons'. This study bases its analysis of second person narration on Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980), as well as Mieke Bal's and Brian Richardson's 1993 and 1994 respective looks at the relation between narrative person and ideologies of social forms. In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette introduces a move away from a simple juxtaposition of a grammatical pronoun onto a narrative person given that, in his view, the narrative person's referent should not be the narrator itself, but rather the 'person' the narrator speaks about, so that first person narration for example, would be the narrator talking about herself. Hence the classification of narrators into: heterodiegetic and homodiegetic depending on their relation to the story; intra and extradiegetic based on their relation to the text-world (Genette 1980, 245–249). Genette's classification brings insights to most narratological analyses of text. For the purpose of the present analysis, however, grammatical pronouns and their usage reveal fundamental differences between online and print narratives, especially with respect to the ideological underpinnings of cyberspace, and will therefore be utilised alongside Genette's narrative categories.

Mieke Bal and Brian Richardson point to the intrinsic relation between narrative persons and different ideologies. Bal notes the link

between third-person narration or omniscient narration and the “epistemological notion of objective truth and impersonal knowledge” (Bal 1993, 297). Richardson takes Bal’s point further by stating that the third person “tends to reify and ‘naturalise’ existing social relations” (Richardson 1994, 320). By contrast, first person narration, with its inherent subjective undertones, is seen as a form of resistance to and subversion of a dominant ideology. This is especially the case made by feminist critics with respect to eighteen and nineteen-century autobiographical writing by women (Richardson 1994, 321). Second person narration is, however, more complex, both in terms of its relation to an ideology and also to non-fictional writing. Richardson declares that second person narration is restricted to the realm of fictional narratives, which renders it difficult to theorise.

Traditional narrative theory, perhaps implicitly based on the more nonfictional types of biography (third person) and autobiography (first person), has a difficult time comprehending forms that, like second person and impossible narration, do not or cannot occur in nonfictional narrative.

(Richardson 1994, 323)

Richardson’s theory precedes the creation of the blogosphere and thus does not account for personal blogs and their use of first person and second person narration in non-fictional, autobiographical writing. Furthermore, it does not address the direct interaction between the author/blogger and reader made possible by the technical affordances of cyberspace. Print texts, even those addressing the reader directly, lack the ability to instil a similarly dialogic response, primarily due to the constraints of the medium. Cyberspace as such and

blogging platforms in particular, allow users to interact with each other and with the author and by doing so to form online communities through shared communication practices of well-wishing, humour and reciprocal self-disclosure (Morrison 2014). Facilitating the emergence of online communities has come to be seen as an integral part of the web, especially Web 2.0 which heralds platforms and technologies that allow non-expert users to create their own webpages (Rettberg 2008). This software readily available to non-expert users promotes great interactivity and opens hitherto closed channels of communication and of community engagement. The gradual emergence of Web 2.0 metaphors such as "online communities" or "cyber chat rooms" attest to the generalised analogy between the Internet and physical locations which promote user exchanges and community building (R. Johnston 2009)¹³. This analogy is particularly relevant for this study given that as metaphors of the Internet as a physical location become implicit or obvious, they foster in blog readers a greater sense of ownership over a

¹³ Ideologically, the Internet is perceived simultaneously as a locus outside ideology, a locus of freedom of expression and grassroots collective action, as well as a locus of extreme ideological domination and subjugation. These two paradoxical perceptions are best represented through the metaphors commonly used to refer to the World Wide Web, given that metaphors are integral to our conceptual systems and could be seen as receptacles of ideology. The central role of metaphors in defining our perception of reality and their potentially ideologically-charged messages is persuasively outlined in the work of linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson. In their 1980 seminal book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson compellingly highlight the ubiquitousness of metaphors in language. They argue that metaphors are pervasive in our everyday speech and they structure our perceptions and understanding of the world even though most speakers are unaware of them (Lakoff 2003). A study on the metaphors used to refer to the Internet outlines four types of metaphors: metaphors of physical space, physical speed, destruction and salvation (R. Johnston 2009).

shared virtual space, and physical space or the perception of it is fundamental to the creation of virtual communities.

In a world where individuals maintain relationships with others in physical space, many virtual communities are composed of members who share a virtual space and, intermittently, physical space.
(Porter 2004)

Bloggers and their readers create these online communities through frequent interactions via the comment function. They employ a series of communicative strategies to foster this sense of community and to mediate potential conflict arising from the discussion of controversial topics (Morrison 2014). By extrapolating from Richardson's and Bal's propositions therefore, second person narration and the use of the personal pronoun 'you' could be linked to solidarity, group cohesion and perhaps interrogation and subversion of a dominant ideology. Whether rhetorical or not, questions addressing the audience directly are meant to elicit a response, to create a shared perspective between the audience and the author and establish a relationship between them. Of course, this social exchange can then be capitalised to reinforce political and economic ideologies, as exemplified by bloggers who commodify this social interaction as service in the form of eWOM¹⁴.

Second person pronouns are also used to 'interpellate' the person perusing the text into a recurrent and responsible reader. The blogger interpellates individuals into community members and readers respond to and reiterate this interpellation. I employ the work of

¹⁴ eWOM will be discussed in greater detail below.

Althusser, Butler, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Gauntlett to arrive at a working definition of interpellation for the purpose of the present project (Althusser 1972; Butler 1997; Adorno 1979; Gauntlett 2002). My claim is that interpellation in the context of personal blogs functions as Althusser's policeman hail, with the blogger taking up the policeman's role. The act of reading the blog represents the individual's ideological "one-hundred-and-eighty-degree" turn-around and implicit acceptance of her position as subject/recurrent reader. The individual's interaction with the blogger and/or other readers, through the comment function or through a community forum reinforces his 'subjection' (Butler 1997, 90) and ignites the repetition of the interpellation scenario. The blogger's interpellation differs from that of the mass media whose homogenous content fraught with reiterated tropes interpellates individuals into passive subjects who demand predictable plot lines and a comfortable consumption of texts (Gauntlett 2002).

Interpellation occurs when a person connects with a media text: when we enjoy a magazine or TV show, for example, this uncritical consumption means that the text has interpellated us into a certain set of assumptions, and caused us to tacitly accept a particular approach to the world.

(Gauntlett 2002, 27)

As opposed to the passive consumption encouraged by mass media channels, personal blogs, through the interactive features embedded in their interface, allow for the interpellation of individuals into active consumers of content. Indeed, the interpellation strategies of successful personal blogs have a twofold target. On one hand, at the narrative level of the text, the blogger's 'hail' aims to interpellate the individual into becoming a loyal consumer who returns regularly to the

blog and/or uses an RSS Feed¹⁵. On the other hand, the second-person pronoun prompts the reader to go beyond the passive consumption of content and engage with it either through comments directed at the blogger or at other readers or through email. At the same time, a skilled blogger manages to interpellate the reader into an accountable member of a readership community, ensuring thus his emotional involvement and growing sense of ownership of a shared virtual space. This affective engagement underpins the development of loyalty¹⁶ to the brand and the creation of a successful brand community.

2. Zany, cute and interesting aesthetics create engaging and novel reading experiences. Through consistent use they can become product attributes instrumental in securing consumer loyalty.

Creative content that fascinates and entertains represents a core driver of audience engagement. The present study discusses the modern aesthetic categories of the cute, the zany and the interesting, as well as abject aesthetic objects, as effective techniques in crafting engaging content. Literary and cultural studies critic, Sianne Ngai defined 'the cute', 'the zany' and 'the interesting' as twentieth-century aesthetic categories (2012). In spite of their existence at other historical

¹⁵ RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication and it represents a format for delivering regular updates on content changes to websites. Websites can syndicate their content as an RSS Feed, meaning that readers can choose to receive notifications when the website content has been modified.

¹⁶ In the case of personal blogs, brand loyalty translates into regular visits to the main blog, as well as 'following' the blogger on other platforms. The verb 'follow' is used here in relation to social media platforms such as Twitter or Instagram and it means to opt to receive notifications when the person you are following publishes new content online. (The Cambridge English Dictionary 2015)

times, these categories seem to supersede modernism and postmodernism to embody a certain response to “new conditions of production (the machine, the factory, urbanization), circulation (the new systems of transport and communications) and consumption (the rise of mass markets and advertising)” (Harvey 1991, 23). The products of modern Western capitalism, these three categories co-exist and reaffirm each other’s aesthetic claims in the Web 2.0 cultural sphere “with its zany blogs, cute tweets and interesting wikis” (Ngai 2012, 14). The zany, cute and interesting seem to respond to an increasingly unclear distinction between labour and play, performance and production and the mediation of aesthetic experience through the exchange of information. They are “ ‘about’ production, circulation and consumption” (Ngai 2012, 13).

Zaniness resides at the meeting point of “cultural and occupational performance, acting and service, playing and labouring” (Ngai 2012, 182). It is an aesthetic of performative action, or in other words, action performed with intense affective and physical labour for an audience. Using Marxist analytical tools, Ngai positions the zany character in the sphere of reproductive and immaterial labour, with reproductive referring to the unpaid labour of domestic work and childrearing and immaterial labour encompassing the work of artists, teachers and information workers (Ngai 2012, 189, 205–206). Bloggers fall into the latter category as well, and when the blogger happens to be a “stay-at-home” mother¹⁷ attempting to generate income through

¹⁷ The full implications of this term from a feminist critical perspective will be further discussed in chapter 2.

her blog, Ngai's analysis becomes all the more poignant. Armstrong's trajectory from the immaterial labour sphere of web designer to the reproductive one of stay-at-home mother and blogger mirrors the transition from a zany character trapped in the wheels of a job requiring her to perform endlessly for the satisfaction of clients and superiors, to a zany housewife and mompreneur.¹⁸

Being an aesthetic characterized by action, an exacting type of action, zaniness cannot exist outside a relation to an agent. The zany character's existence is therefore both endangered and defined by the action she is required to perform (Ngai 2012, 223–224). She lives under the perpetual strain placed upon her by the labour-intense nature of the activity she is engaged in. Yet, there is no foreseeable end to this activity nor to her ever-replenishing resources of physical and emotional energy, primarily because the end would mean her very extinction. Similarly, a blogger is trapped in a perpetual cycle of production of posts about his misadventures and everyday frustrations, a production whose end would mean its author's virtual demise. This reliance on continual content fabrication does not necessarily mean that the zany is fixed into a specific labour production role. Her role can morph given that the nature of the post-Fordist zany is that of the iconic temp (Ngai 2012, 202), the individual who takes on several ill-defined roles and amasses skills pertaining to different fields. This will be exemplified in the case study of dooce.com through the various roles performed by

¹⁸ Mompreneur is defined by the website entrepreneur.com as a "female business owner who is actively balancing the role of mom and the role of entrepreneur" (Knerl 2015).

Dooce, Armstrong's online persona in her trajectory from anonymous author to human brand.

The other two aesthetic descriptors of the "hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven" world of "late capitalism" (Ngai 2012, 1) are the cute and the interesting. The cute is an aesthetic concerned with the rather wide range of affective responses towards perceived unthreatening or subordinate "commodities", whereas the interesting is positioned as an aesthetic about "difference in the form of information and the pathways of its movement and exchange" (Ngai 2012, 1). The cute represents an aesthetic grounded in mass culture as opposed to high art and it points to the appeal powerlessness exerts. A Marxist reading of the cute would prompt the identification of the cute with an anthropomorphised commodity "in search of its mother" (Merish 1996, 186), a humanized being or object, less powerful than the aesthetic subject whose protection and care it urges. In order to elicit a cuddle or protective response from the aesthetic subject, the reader, the cute object is miniaturized or infantilized. Interestingly however, the aesthetic object has the power to infantilize the language of the aesthetic subject in return, with the aesthetic subject engaging in a mimetic act of language cutification due to his desire to minimize the distance between himself and the cute object. This mirrors the very origin and evolution of the word 'cute' from 'acute' by way of aphaeresis, with a notable change in meaning however. Whereas 'acute' is defined as "coming to a sharp edge or point" and refers to mental awareness and alertness, 'cute' points to small, innocuous and amorphous objects whose 'cuteness' is intensified when they are sleepy

or non-alert (Ngai 2012, 87). Interestingly, this reversal of meaning, particular to the aphaeresis of the word cute alone, could be linked to the “deverbalizing effect” that “prototypically cute objects – babies, puppies and so on – have on those who judge them as such. Resulting in a squeal or a cluck, a murmur or a coo, the cute object seems to have the power to infantilize the language of its infantilizer” (Ngai 2012, 87–88). Rendering the cute object unthreatening, reducing it to a diminutive size for easier consumption bears nonetheless an underlying violence towards it built on the assumption that the cute object is able to withstand any violent miniaturization or handling. This desire for mastery and wilful consumption of the cute object is as strong as the desire to cuddle, protect or nurture it (Ngai 2012, 70–87). On personal blogs, the cute can be used to engender an affective response in the reader contributing in this sense to the blogger’s interpellative hail.

The interesting as aesthetic category is connected to a feeling of surprise, albeit reduced surprise generated by either new information or a deviation from an existing norm or assumption. Historically, this aesthetic judgement was dismissed as subjective and feeling-based, lacking the gravitas of an objective style. The concept’s origins date back to 18th century German romantic critical valuations, with “*interressante*” literature pointing to an aesthetic of eclectic differences. Similar uses are recorded in 20th century conceptual art criticism, as well as scientific and historical texts (Ngai 2012, 112). Irrespective of the field of use, the term ‘interesting’ seems to retain similar core features in that it ascribes “value to that which seems to differ, in a yet-to-be-conceptualized way, from a general expectation or

norm whose exact concept may itself be missing at the moment of judgement" (Ngai 2012, 112). Furthermore, the aesthetic judgment is underpinned by a seemingly calm or detached emotive engagement, the minimalism in affect aiming to secure the judgement's link to objective cognitive processes rather than subjective valuations. The interesting relies on an association with a third party, whether it be to elicit its interest in something or to define it as significant by comparison to something else. This reliance on association situates the aesthetic subject in a network of multiple actors (Stengers 1997, 83–84) and the written text in a position to have its success evaluated based on its ability to stimulate readers' curiosity (Ngai 2012, 114–115). This requirement holds true especially for personal blogs given that cyberspace is populated by a vast number of them (Technorati.com 2014), all competing with each other and with social media platforms for readers' attention and loyalty. One of the contentions of the present study is thus that a blogger's ability to engender audience engagement and brand loyalty relies on the production of content whose narrative and aesthetic features make the reader experience a sense of wonder and inquisitiveness and, equally important, a desire to become part of a dialogue about the text. This engagement results in the creation of a network of actors whose interactions are underpinned by their common interest in the brand. Comments directed at other readers or at the blogger, purchase of brand merchandise, attendance of brand PR events such as book launches, or word-of-mouth advertising, exemplify interaction scenarios common to such networks. These networks form the basis of brand communities and they can be powerful and effective

tools to increase audience numbers and conversion rates of first time users to loyal consumers. A panoply of techniques, apart from the obvious regular blog updates with fresh and engaging content, can be used to promote the growth of these networks. Some relate to technical aspects such as ensuring the comment function is moderated¹⁹; the website host provider offers enough bandwidth to ensure an optimal user experience; the content is categorised for easy access under different tags; and the archive function allows seamless navigation. Others relate to marketing endeavours such as establishing mutually beneficial exchanges with other websites or bloggers by way of cross-promotion, engaging with institutions, private or not-for-profit organisations by attending their events or promoting them on the blog. The case study of dooce.com highlights the strategies employed by Armstrong to build her extensive network of actors, as well as her insightful creation of the Dooce community section of the website which functions as a forum where readers engage with each other and with the blogger.

Creating interesting content represents nonetheless the core pre-requisite for any personal blog, underpinning the success of all additional brand awareness strategies. The main challenge posed by this aesthetic category is its precariousness. Embodying a feeling-based valuation of the blog content with relation to its non-aesthetic

¹⁹ Content moderation refers to the practice of monitoring reader submissions and applying a set of pre-defined rules to establish their appropriateness. Software has been developed to perform this function automatically, with services such as Disqus offering website owners moderation tools packaged with engagement and monetisation solutions (Disqus.com 2015). Armstrong started using the platform in 2015.

properties, the interesting is the result of consumers' perception of novelty or difference in their reading experience. The provisional nature of appraisals such as "new" or "different", their perpetual need for re-affirmation by comparison to something else, means that there is no particular kind of evidence that would indisputably support this aesthetic judgement.

Anything can presumably count as evidence at one moment or another for the interesting – meaning also that no piece of evidence can void or rule out a judgment of "interesting" – and so no particular kind of evidence will ever seem especially or finally convincing.
(Ngai 2012, 120)

On personal blogs, this translates into strict publishing deadlines and high content engagement standards. As the number of blogs proliferates, consumers' expectations become higher and their aesthetic valuations more demanding. The labour involved in the production of consistent interesting content is often immaterial, as few bloggers manage to monetise their websites successfully. Success is understood here to mean adequate labour compensation, which is substantially less than what dooce.com is presumed to generate. While Armstrong has never made her business profit public, press estimates point to \$1 million, although they are not specific over what period of time (Belkin 2011)²⁰.

The interesting's lack of definitive persuasive power is taken up by Susan Sontag in her rather negative evaluation of the term with

²⁰ Armstrong's blog revenue and monetisation channels will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

respect to photography and the modern penchant for what she refers to as an indiscriminate recording of reality.

The urge to take photographs is in principle an indiscriminate one, for the practice of photography is now identified with the idea that everything in the world could be made interesting through the camera. But this quality of being interesting, like that of manifesting humanity, is an empty one. The photographic purchase on the world, with its limitless production of notes on reality, makes everything homologous. (...)

It is not altogether wrong to say that there is no such thing as a bad photograph—only less interesting, less relevant, less mysterious ones.” (Sontag 2005, 86, 110)

For Sontag, the subjective valuation of an event or object as interesting and thus worthy of photographic recording has as direct consequence an abundant production of “notes on reality”, notes which become interesting by default due to the passage of time. The relation between the interesting, photography and the everyday is particularly poignant with respect to personal blogs in general and mommy blogs in particular given that their visual repertoire comprises ordinary individuals engaged in commonplace activities around the home. Bloggers are thus faced with the challenge of rendering the ordinary extraordinary or, at least, interesting enough. Armstrong is particularly skilled in this respect, presenting readers with high-quality photographic “notes on reality”. She capitalises on readers’ voyeuristic curiosity and positions the interplay between image and zany aesthetics as her blog’s unique point of interest. With the appropriate caption, the everyday transcends the banal and becomes entertaining.

(...) At one point in the night I handed George the camera and told him to play around with it. I just now looked at all the pictures he took, and JESUS! GEORGE! Are you blind? What is this:



Pictures need a focal point, dude. WHERE IS THE FOCAL POINT IN THAT SHOT? Chuck's ass? (...)
(Armstrong 2004b)

3. The transformation of a blogger into a human brand is facilitated on a discursive level by the online reality effect and the representation of the everyday.

The relation between photographs and the representation of the everyday on personal blogs underpins my proposition of a new concept: the online reality effect. I employ Sontag's ideas on photographs as "notes on reality" (Sontag 2005) together with Barthes' assertions on verisimilitude (Barthes 1989) and the authenticating power of photography (Barthes 1981) to theorise a referential illusion specific to personal blogs.

Barthes asserts that verisimilitude, the likeness of a text to the reality it aims to represent, is created through an abundance of small and seemingly insignificant details whose narrative purpose is to "denote the real directly...[to] signify it". This is possible when there is

a " *direct* collusion of a referent and a signifier; the signified is expelled from the sign, and with it,, the possibility of developing a *form of the signified*" (Barthes 1989, 147–148). Barthes calls this the referential illusion, namely the illusion of the unmediated representation of reality or, in other words, the reality effect positioned as "the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity" (Barthes 1989, 148). I employ Barthes' assertions on the reality effect of realist narratives to analyse the reality effect produced on personal blogs where text, images and videos co-exist and mutually reinforce each other's claim to truth. Content on personal blogs is purportedly a representation of the everyday rendered in written, visual and audio format.

The content published on a personal blog such as dooce.com claims to be a non-fictional account, written in a combination of first-person, second-person and, occasionally, third-person narration. Whereas realist texts were restricted to the use of insignificant details in their attempt to imitate the complexity of reality (Barthes 1989), online text offers readers the possibility to authenticate the referent to such an extent that even considering the existence of a signified as an intermediate layer between signifier and referent becomes highly improbable. The comment function on blogs allows readers to seemingly access the referent at any point, to test its authenticity. Even when the audience reads an older post whose comments are closed, the very existence of that function with or without other reader's comments is perceived to be an authentication of the referent. The collusion between referent and signifiers happens thus seamlessly, through the illusory juxtaposition of the real life (hereafter RL) writer to

the blogger persona. In this process, the reader omits the signified, namely the fact that the blogger persona is a formal representation. This formal representation however cannot be equated to the referent and indeed cannot hope to replicate its full complexity. This representation is the signified and it refers to the different aspects of the blogger persona revealed on the blog. For ease of use, it would perhaps be more illustrative to call the blogger persona an avatar. The avatar can be seen as a sign with its trifold structure: a signifier, the form it has online (the picture of the blogger for example); a signified, the interpretation of the form, the meaning ascribed to the avatar's actions, words and images (this is both the interpretation the author aims to create and the one each individual reader constructs); and finally a referent, the RL author. In the case of dooce.com, the referent is Heather Armstrong, the real woman, the signifier is Dooce, while the signified is a repository of meaning both writer and readers ascribe to Dooce/Heather Armstrong the human brand. What a reader encounters on dooce.com is an avatar of Heather Armstrong, an avatar which is the result of certain narrative decisions about content and its rendition. The avatar does not correspond to reality entirely and does not represent it faithfully, albeit it resembles it closely. The avatar is a construct, a carefully crafted narrative and visual accumulation of insignificant details over a very long span of time. The referential illusion of the avatar is further strengthened by its appearance in images and videos, two mediums whose fundamental trait is their power of authentication, of representing the real. I base this contention on Sontag's theories of photography as substitute for experience itself, "an invention of it or a

replacement" (Sontag 2005, 128) and Barthes' observations that "Photography's *noème* [is] "That-has-been"... [and that] [t]he photograph is indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself" (Barthes 1981, 77, 80, 87). On personal blogs, the explicit purpose of photographs and videos is to give a visual representation of a narrativized everyday and its main protagonists, the blogger avatar, her family and pets and, indeed, any other character regularly mentioned or making cameo appearances.

The blogger avatar represents a different type of character from the examples defined in the literary studies tradition from Aristotle's actant (Aristotle 1970) through to Henry James' character as mimetic representation (James 1986, 174) or Roland Barthes' character as network of *semes* or signifiers (Barthes 1970). The emergence of this avatar is linked to the affordances of technology and the referential illusion inherent to personal blogs. I employ two concepts from the field of literary studies to propose a working definition of the blogger avatar. The first concept is that of the character being ontologically bound to the plot line and the story world it forms part of (Margolin 1990). The second one is that the character is a construct, a mental image, the creation of the reader engaged in an active process of hermeneutical and semiotic construction and deconstruction of signs and signifiers (Barthes 1970; Schneider 2001). Accordingly, the blogger avatar can be considered ontologically linked to the blog and to the greater realm of cyberspace, meaning that it partakes in its referential illusion. My contention is that this avatar, simultaneously a signifier and a signified, is a narrative construct whose features can be purposefully chosen to

instil certain reader reactions. Of course, the reading process, particularly the encoding and decoding of meaning, resides outside full authorial agency. The referential illusion, however, renders readers less suspicious of authorial intent and, therefore, less likely to question the contriteness of the avatar's character features. Readers thus form emotional bonds with the blogger²¹ more easily and become more susceptible to the interpellative call into recurrent readership.

4. Reader trust can be cultivated through the rhetorical use of the abject as an aesthetic category.

The abject together with zany and cute aesthetics can facilitate the creation of interesting content, whilst admittance of abject bodily functions can support the blogger's image as nonconformist and uncensored. I employ Julia Kristeva's definition of the concept introduced in her seminal work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) to signify an eruption of the Real²² perceived by the individual as a traumatic encounter with her inherent mortality and materiality.

²¹ For the remainder of the study, I will employ the term "blogger" alone to mean "blogger avatar" with all its theoretical underpinnings.

²² Kristeva builds on Jacques Lacan's theories around the structure of the psyche and the three major concepts which underpin its functioning: the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. For Lacan, the Real alludes to the ultimate state of nature which is impossible for us to perceive or name. The impossibility of expressing this state of nature through language is caused by the fact that the very acquisition of speech marks the individual's irrevocable separation from the Real. The Real, nonetheless, affects the individual's life being the undeniable proof of the materiality of existence. The Imaginary Order is the realm of the 'ideal ego', the fantasy the child constructs in order to compensate for the sense of lack it begins to perceive once it starts realising that its body is separate from the world and the mother. The Imaginary continues to exert an influence in the life of the adult, being inextricably intertwined with the Real and the Symbolic. The Symbolic Order refers primarily to the entrance into a linguistic order. Once the child acquires language, it accepts the rules of society. This

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.

(Kristeva 1982, 3)

The encounter with the Real, with the visceral materiality of the human body disturbs the individual's sense of identity and the seeming rule of the Symbolic order. While it is a traumatic encounter, it is also linked to the pleasure principle, with the individual harbouring a certain drive to continually seek the abject and repeat the encounter with it. "One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [on en jouit]. Violently and painfully. A passion" (Kristeva 1982, 9). This point is particularly relevant for the present project in that it reinforces the reader's fascination with the abject.

The aesthetic experience of the abject is linked to catharsis or a process of purification (Kristeva 1982, 17). This sublimation is experienced by the reader after an encounter with a breakdown of the text, a place where boundaries between linguistic binaries such as self and other or subject and object begin to dissolve (Kristeva 1982, 207). The appearance of the abject in a first person self-disclosing narrative can have a significant impact on the reader. On one hand, it points to the blogger's corporality contributing to the collusion of referent and

phenomenon is associated by Lacan with the Oedipus complex. This represents a succinct overview of a much more complex discussion. For further reference, please see (Lacan 1978; Grosz 1990; Leader, Groves, and Appignanesi 2000; Muller, Richardson, and Lacan 1982; Žižek 2007)

signifier. On the other hand, it creates a safe space for the reader to feel accepted in her own abject humanity. The acceptance and open, perhaps even humorous, discussion of socially-taboo abject themes engenders a sense of intimacy and trust between those partaking in the conversation, reinforcing the readers' perception of belonging to an accepting community. The blogger's recognition of her own abject corporality encourages readers to vicariously experience a sense of liberation. It is important to note that a blogger is required to skilfully mitigate potential feelings of revulsion or disgust associated with this category. These feelings should always be superseded by a sense of attraction to and curiosity about the taboo nature of the blogger's self-disclosure. The abject can then successfully be employed to create interesting content, disturb a numbing, comfortable reading practice and interpellate the individual into a recurrent reader of the blog and a member of its virtual community.

The narrative and aesthetic frameworks outlined above are utilized throughout the study in conjunction with marketing and brand management theories, making this project an interdisciplinary study. The core marketing and branding principles utilized are: 'human brand' and 'brand communities'. While these theories will be employed throughout the study, they will primarily inform the analysis of chapters 4 and 5.

5. Bloggers can become human brands and garner the type of fervent followership hitherto restricted to celebrities.

The concept of 'human brand' describes any "well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts" (Thomson 2006, 104). Whilst the term has been primarily applied to celebrities (Lunardo, Gergaud, and Livat 2015; Loro and Braig 2015; Saboo, Kumar, and Ramani 2015; Seong Wook Chae and Kun Chang Lee 2013; Thomson 2006; Moulard, Garrity, and Rice 2015), there is a growing body of marketing literature devoted to analysing bloggers as human brands and the influence they exert in that capacity on consumer purchase decisions (Saboo, Kumar, and Ramani 2015; Seong Wook Chae and Kun Chang Lee 2013; Shih-Ju Wang et al. 2015; Yu-An Huang, Chad Lin, and Ian Phau 2015).

Technorati Media's (2013) *Digital Influence Report* positions bloggers as the third most influential digital resource (31%) informing consumer purchase decisions, surpassed only by retail sites (56%) and brand sites (34%). Poignantly, consumers rank blogs as the fifth most reliable source of information online (26%) and the third online service to most likely influence a purchase (31.1%), with Facebook ranked immediately below at 30.8% (Technorati Media 2013, 13–15). This is indicative of the increasingly important role bloggers play in shaping consumer decisions and the influence they can exert through their readership. It is precisely this type of purchase-decision influence that has prompted the assimilation of bloggers within the 'human brand' category. Current marketing literature points to the similarities between bloggers and celebrities in terms of fame (Trammell and Keshelashvili 2005; La Ferla 2010), revenue generation sources (Rein et al. 2005; Rindova, Pollock, and Hayward 2006) and narrative construction of their

celebrity personas (Escalas 2004; Dyer 2004; Parmentier, Fischer, and Reuber 2012). Marketing strategies involved in the management of a celebrity brand related to attention-seeking, followership engagement and retainment are now part of bloggers' repertoires (Rein et al. 2005). Similarly, bloggers fulfil their followers' needs for identification, fantasy, affiliation and attachment, much like their celebrity counterparts (Rindova, Pollock, and Hayward 2006). They also manage their personal brand, I would argue, by purposefully curating the characteristics of their online personas.

I employ literary studies theory on characters and marketing literature on human brands to support this argument and analyse the rise of bloggers as "new star[s]" (Rein et al. 2005, 98) in a mass media environment where technology and social networks allow for ordinary people to achieve stardom more easily than ever before (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013; Gamson 1994). As previously discussed, the blogger persona is a construct whose textual and visual components are purposefully chosen by the RL blogger to create the narrative of her online identity. The constant process of textual and visual configuration and re-configuration of this avatar identity is akin to the process of celebrity-creation, making the RL blogger's content choices a form of human brand management. The construction of a human brand involves attaining visibility and appeal, fostering audience attachment, and, maintaining brand authenticity and audience trust.

6. Sophistication, competence, sincerity, excitement, ruggedness and non-conformism represent personality traits conducive to visibility and appeal.

Brand personality literature suggests that a celebrity's perceived personality is a pivotal factor in achieving appeal and visibility (Aaker 1997). I use the term perceived personality to distinguish between a celebrity's RL character and the narrative construct of its persona, jointly encoded and decoded by its public relations team and its fans together with the larger audience. In marking this differentiation, I am drawing on a body of marketing literature which posits that narrative is what transforms an ordinary individual into a celebrity, narrative meaning carefully crafted stories publicised in mainstream media and reacted to by the audience (Escalas 2004). "Stardom is an image of the way stars live (...) that combines the spectacular with the everyday, the special with the ordinary" (Dyer and McDonald 1998, 35). This is valid not only for Hollywood-type celebrities but also for the new 'social stars'²³, namely bloggers, TED talkers, YouTube stars. Through the expansion of digital media, celebrity status has become much more attainable for ordinary individuals than movie stardom for example (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013), challenging thus the historic association of fame with uncommon physical qualities or talents (Gabler 1998) as it no longer seems to require any particular accomplishment, quality or merit (Gamson 1994). Whilst this observation stands true to a great extent,

²³ The term 'social star' is primarily used in mainstream media as a shortened version of 'social media star'. A *Washington Post* article on Arianna Huffington's controversial choice of guests for the White House Foreign Correspondent Dinner defines her invitees as 'social stars', "a new breed of celebrity", "the kind of folks who don't measure success in terms of box office takings or Nielsen ratings, but rather, in re-tweets. Huffington's slate of guests this year for her eponymous publication, the Huffington Post, is made up of people who are huge on YouTube. Or Vine. Instead of actress/model/dancer, the hyphenations go something like TED talker/author/media theorist — with 1.4 million Twitter followers." (Heil 2015)

especially when discussing the rise of 'social stars' compared to film or sports celebrities, it is nonetheless important to point out that the digital media landscape has changed quite dramatically from the mid-nineties when the above observation was made. The medium's versatility and fast development has allowed increasing numbers of ordinary individuals to seek stardom. This arguably resulted in higher consumption standards and increasing pressure on aspiring 'social stars' to differentiate themselves from the competition. Current blogging textbooks and monetisation guides advise aspiring bloggers to develop unique selling points such as an engaging writing style, originality or charisma in order to attract and retain digital followers (Rich 2014; Reardon and Reardon 2015; Coker 2016).

The blogger's perceived personality can represent a significant point of differentiation with direct implication for blog visibility and appeal. I extrapolate the brand personality dimensions developed by social psychologist and marketing professor Jennifer Aaker and apply them to bloggers (Aaker, Benet-Martínez, and Garolera 2001; Aaker 1997). Although her classification relates to celebrities, I believe her findings are relevant to bloggers given the similarities between the two groups as outlined above. Based on the 'Big Five' human personality structure (Norman 1963), Aaker's model outlines the character traits likely to engender consumer attachment to a human brand: sophistication, competence, sincerity, excitement and ruggedness.

Sophistication is related not only with the perception of the blogger as glamorous or charming, but also with his perceived physical attractiveness and positive personality traits such as friendliness and

general likeability. Marketing literature shows a positive correlation between beauty, socially desirable personality traits and human brand appeal and visibility (Cunningham, Barbee, and Pike 1990; Hamermesh and Biddle 1993; Kahle and Homer 1985; Aaker 1997; Dion, Berscheid, and Walster 1972; Gergaud, Ginsburgh, and Livat 2012; Andreoni and Petrie 2008; Baker and Churchill 1977). The second human brand personality trait, competence, encompasses the public's perception of the blogger as intelligent, reliable and successful (Aaker 1997; Maehle and Shneor 2010). Sincerity or the perception of the blogger as being honest and down-to-earth generates appeal (Barger and Grandey 2006; Aaker 1997; Judd et al. 2005) and is a definitive factor in promoting audience trust and attachment (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990). Given that digital followership demands engaging content, it is no surprise that excitement constitutes another brand personality trait. Excitement connotes notions of intense activity and energy (Aaker 1997) pointing to interesting and zany aesthetics. Studies of the public's perception of a human brand as exciting link this dimension to higher levels of appeal (Lunardo, Gergaud, and Livat 2015; Li et al. 2002). Aaker's fifth dimension is ruggedness, an indicator of strength and resilience (Maehle and Shneor 2010; Aaker 1997). Although Aaker's further studies challenged the validity of this dimension as it appeared not to be consistent cross-nationally (Aaker, Benet-Martínez, and Garolera 2001), I will refer to ruggedness in the present study as a vehicle to strengthen a blogger's competence in relation to specific content areas. I will base my assertions on the case study analysis and will provide examples of how Armstrong's perceived

ruggedness in relation to her mental health struggle greatly contributed to fostering her brand image as a knowledgeable speaker on post-partum depression.

Ruggedness has been replaced as brand personality dimension by rudeness in certain marketing studies (Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1986; Lunardo, Gergaud, and Livat 2015; O’Gorman, Wilson, and Miller 2005; C. M. Pearson and Porath 2005; Porath, MacInnis, and Folkes 2010; Porath and Erez 2007). This dimension refers to insensitive verbal or non-verbal behaviour which contravenes social norms or displays a general lack of regard for others (Porath, MacInnis, and Folkes 2010; C. M. Pearson and Porath 2005; Porath and Erez 2007). Rudeness has been shown to negatively impact human brand appeal (O’Gorman, Wilson, and Miller 2005; Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1986) and is particularly relevant for this study with respect to atoning potential conflict or audience animosity over controversial topics. Blog monetisation represents one such theme and the negative audience response it might generate needs to be managed diplomatically, given that perceived rudeness or lack of empathy on the part of the blogger can have damaging effects on consumer loyalty.

7. Consumer attachment supports audience engagement, reduces consumer defection and increases blog traffic. Autonomy, relatedness and competence facilitate the formation of strong consumer attachments to human brands.

Marketing literature defines attachment as the intensity of an individual’s emotional bond with a human brand (Thomson 2006;

Thomson, MacInnis, and Whan Park 2005; Ambler et al. 2002). Strong brand attachment has been shown to potentially prevent audience defection (Liljander and Strandvik 1995), foster audience loyalty (Thomson, MacInnis, and Whan Park 2005), intensify audience understanding in the face of negative information (Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001) and generally strengthen a consumer's relationship with a brand (Fournier 1998). Research on the relation between celebrity human brands and their fans acknowledged consumer perception of the celebrity as peer, friend or romantic partner (Loroza and Braig 2015; Lunardo, Gergaud, and Livat 2015; Thomson 2006; Turner 2013; Gamson 1994). The case study analysis of the readers' comments on dooce.com demonstrates that the audience perceives the blogger as a close friend and holds her accountable as such. It is the contention of this study that the interpersonal nature of the blogger-audience relationship represents the premise for the blog's monetisation. Increased trust and perceived intimacy translate into higher likelihood of product purchase, and results in greater blog revenue through advertising. In other words, the stronger the attachment, the more likely a reader is to return to the blog, click on advertised links or purchase the products endorsed.

Marketing scholar Matthew Thomson (2006) is the first theorist to extend attachment theory to human brands and to analyse the principles that underpin it. Attachment, defined as the experience of long-term psychological connectedness to another individual (Bowlby 1969, 1:194), is formed when the basic human needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness are satisfied as a result of the interaction

(La Guardia et al. 2000; Deci and Ryan 2000). Based on findings in psychology literature, Thomson elaborates the Autonomy-Relatedness-Competence (hereafter ARC) model of consumer attachment to celebrities. In this model, autonomy refers to consumers' need to experience a sense of self-determination and agency with respect to their choices, mode of expression, or behaviour. Human brands that facilitate this experience are more likely to engender stronger attachment in their audience (Thomson 2006, 106). I extrapolate this idea to blogging and contend that autonomy is related not only to the audience experiencing a sense of freedom of expression in their interactions with the blogger or other readers, but also to their perception of the blogger as having full authorial agency over the blog's content. In other words, the followers of a blog are more likely to develop attachment to the brand if they feel they can express themselves freely in a supportive, non-judgemental environment. Equally important is their perception of the blogger exhibiting a similar behaviour of honest and uncensored self-disclosure. This point is inherently related to the other two components of Thomson's model and to the third step in the creation of a human brand: engendering and maintaining audience trust in the authenticity of the brand.

Relatedness, the second ARC component, refers to the basic human need to experience closeness to others (Thomson 2006; Deci and Ryan 2000) and a sense of belonging to a group (Thomson 2006; Deci and Ryan 2000; Austin and Vancouver 1996a). When a consumer's need for relatedness is satisfied in her interactions with a human brand, she is likely to develop a stronger attachment to the brand (Thomson

2006). I argue that this point is even more poignant for bloggers, given the technological affordances of blogging platforms and social media channels whose core functionality is that of instant interaction²⁴. Bloggers have access to a much greater array of audience engagement tools than their celebrity counterparts, allowing them to potentially create stronger bonds faster. With greater potential, however, comes greater demand for interactivity; so much so, that for a blogger to become a human brand it is imperative that she create frequent opportunities for her followers to experience relatedness. Chapter 4 will exemplify the importance relatedness played in increasing the blog's audience and Armstrong's insightful use of consumer immaterial labour to create a brand community. The launch of the Dooce community, a separate tab on dooce.com which functions as an online chat room where readers can start conversation threads and engage with each other, bears testimony to Armstrong's profound insight into the importance of relatedness to brand attachment. By creating a safe space where the audience is encouraged to interact with each other, ask and offer mutual support and share opinions and experiences, Armstrong allowed her followers to feel connected with and cared for

²⁴ The modes of interaction between blogger and audience range from emails to comments or the pressing of a "Like" or "Follow" button. "Like" is a function available on most social media platforms from Facebook, to Instagram, Tumblr or Pinterest. The main function it serves is to show agreement with, support or admiration of the content viewed, whether it be a comment or a photograph. "Follow" is a function available primarily on Twitter. According to Mashable, a digital media blog described by the Huffington Post as "one stop shop" for social media (Huffington 2010), following someone on Twitter makes a "powerful statement about your interests and your influence", as long as the person is not a friend or a colleague, in which case "politeness dictates that you must follow him" (Hiscott 2013).

by other readers, increasing thus the opportunities for attachment to form and also, interestingly, monetizing consumer labour²⁵. Armstrong enabled readers to experience both a sense of relatedness and autonomy by creating an online space where audience contributions are monetised in the form of greater blog traffic, stronger reader engagement and consequently, greater attachment to the Dooce brand.

Competence, the third ARC component, refers to an individual's inherent need to experience recognition of skills, achievements (Deci and Ryan 2000), and effectiveness (Thomson 2006; La Guardia et al. 2000; Austin and Vancouver 1996a). Although Thomson concluded that competence is not a direct predictor of attachment strength, he pointed out that perceived degradation of consumer competence has a negative effect on brand attachment. In other words, whilst increased competence was not conclusively linked to heightened brand attachment, decreased competence was proven, however, to negatively affect consumer's loyalty to a brand (Thomson 2006). With respect to blogging, I argue that competence relates to two main aspects: demonstrated knowledge of the topics discussed on the blog; and text cohesion, coherence and relevance. The former relates to knowledge acquired both through formal and informal means of education or training, as well as through life experience. The latter refers to the blogger's writing skills with a particular focus on his ability to create a

²⁵ I employ here Arvidsson's idea that brands capitalize consumer immaterial labour to produce desirable outcomes for the brand. Consumers' immaterial labour refers to un-paid, generally autonomous labour expended in creating ethical surplus for a brand, such as social bonds, a sense of shared identity and experiences (Arvidsson 2005).

coherent and easily identifiable authorial voice. The case study draws on several examples from readers' comments to show how their perceptions of Armstrong as a good writer and a depression survivor have strengthened their attachment to the Dooce brand.

8. Consistency in writing style and self-disclosure can foster audience trust in the integrity and authenticity of the brand.

Marketing studies have highlighted the importance of authenticity as many consumers are seeking genuine and individualized consumption experiences (C. J. Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006; Stephen Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Napoli, Dickinson-Delaporte, and Beverland 2016; Napoli et al. 2014; Beverland 2014), with quantitative research showing a positive correlation between perceived authenticity and consumer responses to brand extensions such as purchase intention, willingness to recommend the brand or general positive brand attitude (Moulard et al. 2014; Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella 2012). Research into antecedents of brand authenticity identifies features such as quality commitment, softening commercial motives and stylistic consistency as conducive to the perception of a brand as authentic (Beverland 2006; Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink 2008; Beverland 2014; Moulard, Garrity, and Rice 2015; Shih-Ju Wang et al. 2015). Napoli et al. point out the subjective nature of consumers' evaluations of a brand's genuineness and claim that authenticity is a rationally constructed characteristic supporting an individual's subjective perception, rather than a feature intrinsic to the product (2014). Their arguments will be

used in Chapter 5 to discuss brand authenticity with respect to consumer subjectivity and brand antecedents. I argue that quality commitment represents a primary dimension of brand authenticity with respect to personal blogs. Quality commitment relates to the audience's perception of the blogger as invested in producing high quality content and it is linked to stylistic consistency, which refers to the development of a unique authorial voice. This voice must retain its core features irrespective of the content published, whether it be regular blog content or sponsored posts. This is so as to demonstrate that authorial autonomy is retained notwithstanding commercial motivations. Stylistic consistency can be framed as indicator of blogger integrity as it will be illustrated in the case study analysis in Chapter 5. This can soften audience negative perceptions of monetary drive and enhance blogger credibility. Trust needs to be carefully cultivated and managed, especially given that sponsored content²⁶ and product placement represent more lucrative revenue avenues than text or banner advertising (Reardon and Reardon 2015).

Audience reaction to blog monetisation is reported to have evolved from loss of trust in the blogger (R. D. Petty and Andrews 2008) to indifference (Lu, Chang, and Chang 2014). A potential explanation for this phenomenon could be the fact that many countries introduced laws that require sponsorship to be made visible in the post so as to avoid ethical concerns (Rotfeld 2008; K. D. Martin and Smith 2008). Some marketing studies suggest that this disclosure makes consumers feel

²⁶ Sponsored posts are a type of online consumer reviews, with the caveat that bloggers receive compensation in exchange for posting the review on their personal websites (Zhu and Tan 2007; Lu, Chang, and Chang 2014; Forrest and Cao 2010).

they are not being manipulated, relieving thus any negative attitudes towards the blogger's financial gains (Lu, Chang, and Chang 2014). Studies on this are however few to this date and further research is required.

The emergent field of magazine studies (Le Masurier and Johinke 2014) can however offer valuable insights on reader perceptions of monetisation given that magazines and personal blogs cover similar thematic areas and revenue channels. I extrapolate Le Masurier and Johinke's assertions about the invisibility of popular magazines as serious objects of study due to their content focus on the private, the everyday, light-hearted entertainment, popular culture and consumerism (2014) and argue that similar negative perceptions apply to personal blogs. Magazines' journalistic integrity is also questioned due to their financial reliance on advertising (Johinke 2014; Le Masurier and Johinke 2014). I argue that this is the case for personal blogs as well, particularly with respect to sponsored content. Chapter 5 will outline in detail public perceptions of blog monetisation as well as audience management strategies to mitigate consumer complaints and defection. The case study shows that even though negative public perceptions are prevalent, there is no direct correlation with a decrease in blog traffic. This is primarily related to product attributes and a pleasurable consumption experience. It is also the result of sustained and consistent brand communications targeted at reinforcing the blogger's credibility²⁷ and trust.

²⁷ The terms credibility is used here to refer to whether a consumer perceives a source of information as unbiased, trustworthy, factual and believable (Hass 1981)

Self-disclosure, the act of sharing private information with others in an intimate setting or on a large scale by conveying personal thoughts, feelings or experiences on a public platform (Derlega 1993), can soften commercial motives and generate consumer trust. Self-disclosure has been shown to enhance interpersonal relationships (Derlega 1993; Altman and Taylor 1973; Chickering and Reisser 1993). The most common theory associated with self-disclosure is social penetration, according to which relatedness to an individual is experienced by way of a gradual process of discovery from outer to inner personality layers (Baack, Fogliasso, and Harris 2000; Pennington 2015; Tang and Wang 2012; A. M. Olson 2013). I argue that this has implications for the narrative construction of blogger personas, more specifically for the creation of intimacy through gradual revelations of personal information. I employ market-psychology theories on uncertainty reduction (Berger and Calabrese 1975; Goldberg, Riordan, and Schaffer 2010; Bradac 2001) to argue that progressively increasing the amount of self-disclosure reduces uncertainty, increases trust and consequently strengthens the relationship between blogger and readers. Having access to multiple platforms, bloggers can structure the gradual release of personal information through different mediums, not only through their website. In this sense, having a public relation (hereafter PR) strategy, or at the very least, an awareness that any media presence can contribute to increasing audience trust can be valuable. Armstrong, in particular has been very successful at employing her cross-platform presence strategically, ensuring that all media communications uphold her brand values and image. Interestingly, she

discusses the challenges bloggers face, particularly regarding sponsored content, and by doing so through the narrative parameters of self-disclosure, she manages to retain consumer loyalty and trust even in the face of amounting product placement on dooce.com.

9. A strong online brand community has a positive correlation to blog traffic, consumer conversion and brand loyalty.

When reviewing current scholarship on brand communities (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005; Füller, Matzler, and Hoppe 2008; Lu, Chang, and Chang 2014; Martínez-López et al. 2016a; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Johinke 2014) it becomes apparent that the most widely used definition of the term is Muñiz and O'Guinn's. In what has clearly become a seminal paper, they define brand communities as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001, 412). Brand communities exhibit a series of features common to all communities: consciousness of kind, shared traditions and rituals and a sense of moral responsibility to the group and its members (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). The first relates to the connection its members feel and their collective differentiation from individuals who do not belong to the group (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006). The second refers to the joint enactment of processes, rules and actions, resulting in stronger group identity and know-how (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). The third indicates that members share a

commitment to each other and to the community (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001).

A significant point of differentiation of brand communities is that they are positioned within a mass-media, consumption ethos (Johinke 2014; Arvidsson 2005). Their members are fully aware of the discourse practices they engage in and are self-reflexive about issues of identity and authenticity (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Johinke 2014). They engage in relationship building with the brand and with each other (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001) and can perform different roles from consumers to producers (Chalmers Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013).

Brand communities have been shown to positively influence members' perceptions and purchase decisions (Muñiz and Schau 2005; Johinke 2014). Brands have used them as vehicles to disseminate information quickly (Stephen Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003), run market research tests (Franke and Shah 2003) or capitalise consumer creativity for product development (Verona, Prandelli, and Sawhney 2006; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002).

The expansion of the Internet in the nineties resulted in the emergence of online brand communities. Web 2.0 allowed consumers to utilise websites as cyber loci of congregation (A. M. Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Chapter 4 will discuss the Dooce brand community, the factors contributing to its success and the strategies Armstrong used to encourage active reader participation.

Chapter 2

Dooce.com - a "piece of self-loathing, self-indulgent, narcissistic crap"²⁸

The first section of the chapter positions the key terms used in the study in the context of current scholarship with the aim of highlighting existing debates on blogging and motherhood. The purpose of this section is not to offer a comprehensive review of existing literature, which would be far beyond the scope of this dissertation, but rather to highlight the most relevant scholarship for the proposed topic. This section endeavours to frame the context which underpins the fourth research question of the study regarding the influence that stereotypes about stay-at-home mothers, pregnancy and motherhood have on the brand creation process of a female author. Methodologically, the section relies on feminist discourse analysis, narrative and literary studies approaches to genre construction.

The second section of Chapter 2 will present an in-depth analysis of the content published in the first two years of dooce.com's existence with the purpose of identifying the core aesthetic and rhetorical features of Armstrong's writing style. This chronological delineation is motivated by the change in thematic content following Armstrong's pregnancy announcement and the blog's subsequent re-categorisation

²⁸ Full quote below:

How to Annoy Me

2003/08/05

Call this website a "diary" or a "journal." I prefer "piece of self-loathing, self-indulgent, narcissistic crap," thank you very much.

(Armstrong 2003r)

from personal blog to mommy blog. The examples used aim to demonstrate that Armstrong managed to build a recognizable voice and image and a loyal audience as a personal blogger. Armstrong's development as a mommy blogger, including her ambivalent relation to the term, will be discussed in the following chapter. This section relates to the study's first research question regarding the narrative and aesthetic features underpinning the conversion of a personal blog into a brand and makes use of the aesthetic and narrative theories outlined within Chapter 1's thesis statements 1 and 2.

2.1 A definition of key terms: blog, personal blog, mommy blog

a) Blogs

Linguistics professor Greg Myers defines blogs as discussion sites published online consisting of individual entries, called 'posts', usually arranged in reversed chronological order, with the most recent one at the top. He notes nevertheless that a definition of blogs should transcend a mere discussion of form and content and look at the rhetorical and social function they serve (Myers 2010, 2, 15). Blogs have been defined as an emergent genre based on structural and narrative features, including constant addition of original content, linking to other websites and allowing reader comments (Droge, Stanko, and Pollitte 2010, 66). Readers approach the genre with the expectation that novel content would be frequently added to the blog, with "[m]ost bloggers mak[ing] a point of giving their readers something new to read every day" (Blood 2002, 9). Including links to other websites and having a

comment feature points to the genre's community-building potential (Cavanaugh 2002). Comments foster social interactivity and generate greater blog traffic, particularly when controversial topics are discussed (Halavais 2002; Krishnamurthy 2002).

Blogs are a work in progress, inherently indefinite, their open-endedness, rejection of closed structures in favour of indeterminacy, ambiguity and incompleteness pointing to postmodernist texts (Hutcheon 2003; Best and Kellner 1997). As a genre, blogs represent the aftermath of the clash between the old and the new, the old scientific theories of causality and order and the new theories of quantum physics, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist lessons on semantic indeterminacy, Pynchon, Robbe-Grillet and Calvino's break with narrative structure.

The versatility and open form of the medium has been a source of optimism that cross-cultural communication would be facilitated. Blood proclaimed in 2000 her belief in blogs' ability to transform readers from passive receivers to active creators. Evan Williams, one of the founders of *Blogger*²⁹, labelled blogging as a bastion of resistance against the commercialization of the Internet (Kornblum 2001). Blogging received, however, an initial mixed welcome, with critics questioning the motivation for writing and reading the content posted. Blogs received criticism for having "elements of Hyde Park corner blather, besides blatant exhibitionism and obvious self-indulgence. ...People can't resist updating the diary and apologize if they don't do it – as if

²⁹ Blogger is a blog-publishing service. The platform was developed by Pyra Labs, which was acquired by Google in 2003 (google.com 2012).

anyone really cares" (Dvorak 2002, para. 4). Dvorak attributes blogging motivation to a variety of reasons ranging from ego gratification to venting or purging one's frustrations (Dvorak 2002). His contentions do not represent the result of a study but rather his personal opinion.

According to the 2006 *Pew Internet & American Life Report*, three in four bloggers admitted that their main writing motivation was the desire to express themselves creatively. Almost the same percentage of respondents (76%) looked at blogging as a way of documenting and sharing their life experiences (Griffith 2007). This motivation was particularly prominent among younger users, while bloggers aged 50-60 reported the sharing of knowledge and skills with others as a determining writing factor. 60% of bloggers, primarily women and young adults, considered blogging a means of cultivating relationships with their family and friends, whilst 50% of respondents viewed it as a networking opportunity. Less than half of the bloggers interviewed (48%) use their blogs as online repositories or storage systems. Bloggers over the age of 50 are more prone to declare that storing information vital for them is their main reason for publishing online (Fox and Lenhart 2006). Other studies have identified similar motivations: the desire to document one's life, become part of or create a community, express personal views on topics of interest, or stimulate creative life and share artistic output (Nardi et al. 2004). Guernsey states in 2002 that blogging is a convenient genre especially for mothers who struggle to juggle a career and family life. Their fragmentariness allows for schedule flexibility which makes them particularly amenable to busy women (Guernsey 2002).

Blogger demographics have been of interest especially for market research purposes. The early blogosphere seemed dominated by male authors³⁰ of index blogs focused on political issues (Millett 2004; Herring et al. 2004). Indeed, the early blogosphere seemed to be governed by the hitherto disproven perception that women were almost absent from the online conversation (Guernsey 2002). *Pew Internet & American Life* report analysed the make-up of American bloggers in 2006 and found that 54% of bloggers were male and 46% female (Fox and Lenhart 2006). By 2009, the number of female bloggers in the United States reached an estimated 8 million (Wright and Camahort Page 2009).

b) Personal Blogs

Blood identifies the prototypical blog as a webpage built around links to other websites (Blood 2002). This type of blog was called filter or index blog and it represented originally the antithetical category to personal blogs (Wei 2009; Cenite et al. 2009). Index blogs are aimed at filtering web content (Herring and Paolillo 2006) by providing some information at the exclusion of other. They are repositories of links to other websites and tend to be dedicated to news or political discussion (Wei 2009, 533).

³⁰ This statement has been made with the underlying awareness that the gender of an online author cannot be truly ascertained. There are writers who re-invent themselves in a different sex; therefore caution should be used when equating a male or female-resounding name with a male or female author. Gender is already constructed and de-constructed in everyday life in a variety of forms. Given the anonymous quality of cyberspace, the Internet becomes a space where the rules governing gender construction can be more easily subverted.

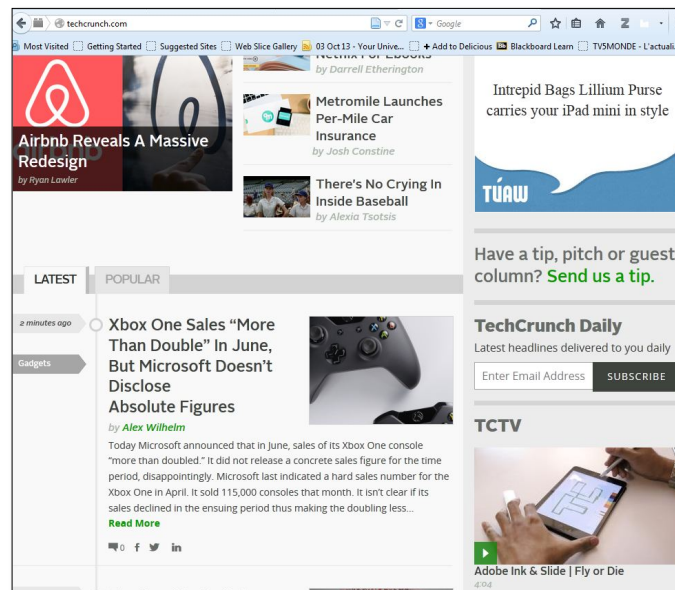


Figure 1. Example of filter blog
Source: ("TechCrunch" 2014)³¹

Personal blogs contain their authors' personal musings and opinions, links to other websites, as well as photographic and video material (Chen 2013; Wei 2009; Herring and Paolillo 2006).

In the first years of the web, search engines were highly restricted in their capabilities, which meant that users struggled to find information. This resulted in a preference towards blogs built around links to interesting articles. Bloggers functioned as search engines, indexing content related to particular topics. Index blogs therefore not only outnumbered personal blogs, but initially challenged the very assumption that they were blogs in the first place (Fleming 2008).

Blogs in general, and personal ones in particular, received a hostile welcome by the mass media. An article published in 2003 on the *A Register*, an online forum dealing with IT topics, discusses the problem of online search engines being 'clogged' by blogs and refers

³¹ Techcrunch is one of the most influential news blogs on the technology industry.

to blogs as a “pest” and a “pollutant” of the online environment (Orlowski 2003). The *Village Voice’s Online Column* features a dismissal of blogs as nothing more than “tedious navel gazing” whose confessional content appeals to an increasingly voyeuristic readership (Taormino 2003).

Criticism of personal blogs is arguably grounded in the historical dismissal of media forms associated with the private sphere and ‘women’s business’ (Le Masurier and Johinke 2014). Discussion of feelings, personal thoughts and experiences falls in the category Van Zoonen defines as ‘feminine’ and therefore low status (van Zoonen 1998a, 125 in Le Masurier and Johinke 2014). Le Masurier and Johinke’s argument that magazines’ association with the feminine is what underpins their lower status with respect to “‘hard masculine’ news reporting” (2014, 5), can therefore be extrapolated to personal blogs. In a sense, we can argue that personal blogs receive a double dismissal both by comparison to newspaper journalism and also, ironically, to index blogs. The fact that both scholars and the media tend to give more attention and praise to filter blogs as opposed to personal ones (Harp and Tremayne 2006; Herring et al. 2005; Herring et al. 2007; Lopez 2009) speaks to the persistence of normative discourses around masculinity versus femininity, high-brow versus low-brow culture.



Figure 2. Example of personal blog

Source: (Carmen 2014) This blog is called *50 Shades of Unemployment* and it is authored by Carmen Neutral (pen name). It covers the writers' adventures while being unemployed.

A different taxonomy proposes four basic blog types categorized on two dimensions: individual vs. community and topical vs. personal (Krishnamurthy 2002 in Susan C. Herring, Scheidt, et al. 2005). Figure 3 below offers a visual representation of this classification.

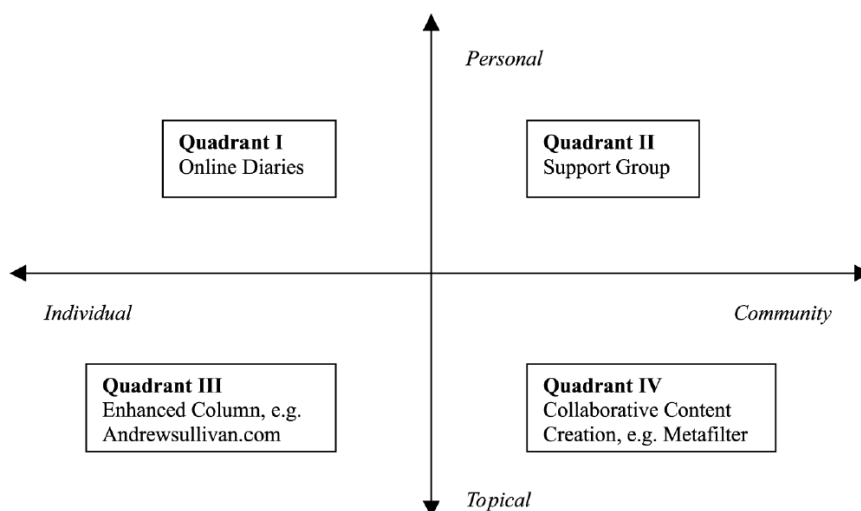


Figure 3. Blog Taxonomy

Source: (Krishnamurthy 2002 in Herring et al. 2005)

The unavailability of an in-depth explanation of Krishnamurthy's taxonomy in the literature has prompted me to elaborate one; hence, what follows is my own interpretation of the figure above. Quadrant IV contains blogs built around users sharing information or posting questions to the community. These blogs are usually moderated by a few, often anonymous individuals, being primarily sustained by readers' interactions. Examples of such blogs are *Metafilter* or *Reddit*³² and a cursory look at their homepages reveals a striking similarity to the early Internet bulletin board systems.

An example of a blog pertaining to Quadrant II would be a collaboration blog in which a group of friends blog together about personal matters (Herring et al. 2005). Parenting community blogs such as *Mothersnet* or *BlogHer* also fall in Quadrant II as they feature content posted by parent bloggers as well as questions and answers on a variety of topics related to parenting.

Individual blogs fall within two large categories: personal blogs or 'online diaries' (Quadrant I) to use Krishnamurthy's terminology, and 'enhanced columns' (Quadrant III). The latter refers to blogs that have evolved from being the creation of a sole author to being maintained by an editorial team. Even if the blog has multiple authors contributing to it, it is different from a community blog in that the original blogger's voice and tone are preserved even when other authors create the content. *Andrewsullivan.com* is one such example. Founded in 2000, it

³² Metafilter is a community blog founded in 1999 in the US. It primarily features links to content posted online and since 2003, it introduced a question and answer function ("About | MetaFilter" 2015). Reddit is a self-described entertainment, social networking and news website, whose format and content is very similar to Metafilter and to early bulletin board systems ("Reddit.com: About Reddit" 2015).

started as a political blog featuring its eponymous author's personal opinions. By 2006, the blog attracted so much traffic that Sullivan employed interns and by 2011, he revamped the blog as a "24/7 news and opinion site" with an editorial board of five ("About Us" 2015).

The term 'online diaries' is used in this taxonomy to refer to a blog authored by an individual discussing her personal experiences. I believe however that the term and its inherent association with the print genres of diary, autobiography or life writing, does not fully take into account the features which make blogs emergent genres or the great variety of topics personal blogs address. Therefore I employ the term 'personal blog' instead to refer to single-authored blogs covering topics pertaining to the spheres of leisure, consumerism, popular culture, the everyday and the private. Example topics can include photography, fashion, politics, art, gardening or parenting (Jost and Hipolit 2006).

Most of the initial critical attention personal bloggers received focused on comparing them to journalists. This is understandable given that historically, both index and personal blogs dedicated to politics tended to attract the greatest numbers of readers. With only 34% of bloggers considering their webpage to be a form of journalism and 64% openly stating the opposite (Fox and Lenhart 2006), research shifted towards a type of personal blog that gained increased popularity particularly with marketers, the mommy blog.

c) Mommy blogs

I am what is known as a professional blogger. Some people call me a blopper, others call me a blooger, doesn't matter because it all sounds like an unfortunate, disfiguring disease. What do I do? Why, I just sit in my pajamas all day long writing about my feelings! At least, that's what my lawyer thinks I do, and I don't think he cares as long as I pay his ridiculous hourly fee.

(Armstrong 2013d)

I really think it's still a new social experiment, to be a stay-at-home dad, and it almost seems like the stay-at-home dad creature needs to justify his existence with a blog.

(Al Nowatzki in "Dads Join the Parenting Blog Ranks" 2014)

A definition of the term mommy blog must consider its etymology and the normative discourses underpinning it. Douglas and Michael lament the inherent infantilisation the word 'mommy' as opposed to 'mother' entails (Douglas and Michaels 2004, 19–20). Their critique points to the trivialisation and marginalisation of women's life writing noted by many feminist scholars, in particular Friedman and Morrison in relation to mommy blogs (Friedman 2011; Friedman 2010a; Friedman 2013; Friedman 2009a; Morrison 2010; Morrison 2014) or Johinke and La Masurier with respect to magazines (Le Masurier and Johinke 2014; Johinke 2014). Friedman states that mommy bloggers have embraced the term as an ironic repossession and an attempt to challenge the presupposition that mothering represents the only content point discussed on their blogs (Friedman 2013, 9–10). She defines mommy blogging as a critical practice which enables women to construct a more nuanced maternal subject, become part of a community and find thus an antidote to maternal isolation (Friedman 2013, 10–11). Both Morrison and Friedman identify as key characteristics

of mommy blogs their diversity in terms of social location and maternal experience, their relationship-building focus through cross-blog interactivity, and their performative function of challenging normative expert discourses by showcasing mothers' lived experiences (Friedman 2013; Morrison 2010).

Marketing literature has also sought to define mommy blogs, although their focus differs from the above rhetorical and performative perspective. Consumer research company, *Scarborough*, described mommy bloggers as "women who have at least one child in their household and read or contributed to a blog in the past 30 days" in their 2011 report on mommy bloggers' impact on social and political trends in the US (Scarborough 2011). Competitor company, *eMarketer* designated mommy bloggers as "adult female internet users with children under 18 in the household who write blogs about any subject; includes personal and professional blogs" (eMarketer 2014).

I employ Friedman and Morrison's assertions together with *eMarketer's* definition and claim that dooce.com is a mommy blog that addresses diverse themes such as popular culture, photography or racism, with the majority of content being nonetheless related to childrearing and 'the everyday' aspects of family life.

I use the term 'everyday' as it was first introduced by Georg Lukács to refer to the mundane or routine instances of daily life (Lukács 1971) and argue that a mommy blog such as dooce.com consists of narrativised snippets of childrearing quotidian instances. These instances exist in four types of spaces described as loci of 'the everyday', namely the workspace, the living space, the urban or social

space and the non-space or the space in between, such as train stops or any location which is occupied only in transition to another set location (Moran 2005). Often times the working and living space become superimposed for mommy bloggers when they become working from home professionals whose business is the blog itself. Blog posts in most mommy blogs deal with moments in the ordinary lives of ordinary parents and the authors' ensuing musings or questions about parenting. They also refer to another aspect of 'the everyday', an aspect more recently acknowledged as constitutive of the subject matter of 'the everyday', the uses of technology as part of daily existence (Silva and Bennett 2004). Mommy blogs not only refer to instances when technology is integrated into the practice of everyday life, but are also a product of such integration. Many blogs feature photos or videos of real life moments and many are linked to Facebook, Instagram or other social media sites.

The argument that mommy blogs are a type of personal blogs and thus an emergent genre is premised on the belief that recurrent communication practices in cyberspace can be classified as genres. Yates and Orlikowski first introduced this idea in their analysis of emails as a new genre whose similarity to memorandums was overwritten by their different norms of use and technical format (1992). Rhetorical genre analysis, especially the work of Carolyn Miller, supports the argument that it is the rhetorical function of a text, rather than its structure or content which make it a genre. "A rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish" (1984, 151). The

main ensuing assumption is that “genre, in this way, becomes more than a formal entity; it becomes pragmatic, fully rhetorical, a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of social action” (Miller 1984, 153). Thus, a genre is constituted by rhetorical actions grounded in recurrent contexts. This definition could be expanded to incorporate the idea that what constitutes a genre is a group of communicative events which share a communicative purpose and certain similar features, structures, content items and target audiences (Swales 1990). A particular relevant point for the discussion of personal blogs in general, and mommy blogs in particular, is the argument that it is the members of the community in which it is found who name and recognize the genre (Swales 1990). Accordingly, mommy blogs qualify as an emergent genre given that the public and the media have granted them their name and have recognized a series of common traits in terms of rhetorical function, structure and content. Mommy blogs, like any personal blog, have set format structures, such as reverse chronological order and the capacity for posting comments. They do however go beyond this and answer a “social exigency”, as Morrison puts it. The rhetorical aspect of mommy blogs is forging a community where the practice of modern motherhood with its encompassing joys and sorrows can be celebrated (Morrison 2010).

The assertion that mommy blogs are an emergent genre needs to address the similarities and differences to their print antecedents: journals, diaries and autobiographies. Mommy blogs and life writing share similarities in terms of form, content and even rhetorical function to some extent, given that often times the print antecedents were

circulated among friends and family members (Rosenwald 1988). It is however important to acknowledge that the community-building rhetorical function performed by personal blogs in general, and mommy blogs in particular, is much more developed, primarily due to the technical affordances of the medium. Connectivity over vast geographical expanses and seamless interactivity through the comment functionality of blogs are two of the main features which render blogs an emergent genre. Podnieks praises the hitherto unknown capacity of personal blogs to connect individuals and welcomes it as a paradigm shift from the Cartesian *Cogito Ergo Sum*: "In online diaries, each mouse-click and each entry generates the text, the graphics and even the sound that says 'I communicate, therefore I am'" (Podnieks 2004, 144). Similarly, the capacity for multi-modal content distinguishes blogs from their print antecedents and offers readers a multi-sensory experience of pictures, text, video and audio bits (Warley 2005; Friedman 2013). While it is true that autobiographies and diaries also showcase the unremarkable everyday of ordinary individuals in text and pictures, becoming at times vehicles for stardom as "books published by men and women interested in becoming famous" rather than "intimate guides to famous men and women" (Rosenwald 1988, 11), the fact remains that the technological affordances of blogs make the breadth and depth of these features not replicable in other mediums.

Another feature mommy blogs share with their print antecedents is the therapeutic motivation and resulting psychological relief gained through writing about one's experiences. Scriptotherapy or the deliberate use of writing with the purpose of enhancing counselling

outcomes (Riordan 1996), particularly in the form of journaling, has long been part of counselling practice. Writing can offer a way for negative emotions to be expressed rather than internalized and a way of circumventing obsessive thought processes (Pennebaker, Colder, and Sharp 1990; Buck 1984). The Progoff counselling method, for example, is centred around journaling as a valuable therapeutical technique which offers the patient a healing creative experience (Progoff 1977). In discussing this method, scriptotherapy scholar, Richard Riordan points to feedback as an essential component for the success of journaling as therapy because it is through feedback that self-reflection is facilitated (Riordan 1996). This point is extremely relevant for mommy blogs given that it establishes a genre differentiation from their print antecedents. The affordances of the online medium allow for that feedback to transpire seamlessly and to potentially solidify in the form of community support. One such example is Matt Logelin, a dad blogger who lost his wife after the birth of their daughter. In an interview, he confesses:

What happened was when I started writing, I started feeling better.
(...)

When the Web first began becoming widespread, people were worried that it would be isolating, that we would just sit in our houses and talk on the computer and never have the human connection we used to have. I've experienced the opposite. There is a huge online community looking out for me ... people underestimate the big difference that makes in my day. I just asked advice for flying with an infant, and I got 134 comments in a couple of hours.

("Dads Join the Parenting Blog Ranks" 2014)

It is precisely this immediacy and volume of feedback that marks the clear differentiation between mommy (and daddy) blogs and their print antecedents. Whilst a journal might have been circulated in a close

circle of friends, it would by no means provide the type of instant support or connection with other individuals, whether friends or strangers, co-habitants of the same geographical location or not. Bloggers write to “get out what is going on inside” (Skip Crust in “Dads Join the Parenting Blog Ranks” 2014), to reclaim some adult time, to share and be listened to, but most importantly to create a support system, a big virtual playground where they can swap stories of parenting, learn how to cope with different scenarios and avoid isolation. The current generation of parents faces an absence of support given that in recent times the nuclear family is more likely to live geographically remote from the extended family. The “socialization and support that once occurred within extended families may not be as readily available for new mothers” (Skip Crust in “Dads Join the Parenting Blog Ranks” 2014) or fathers. In response to that, many young parents “may seek to find ‘replacement support’ from other, non-familial sources” (Heisler and Ellis 2008, 446) and it is to this social exigency that mommy blogs respond. This rhetorical function of support and community building is featured as one of the prominent motivations for blogging. Childrearing, both for stay-at-home and working parents, is an extremely time-consuming endeavour that often leaves them with little or no energy to connect with friends, family members or other parents. The vast majority of bloggers confess that they started a blog because it seemed like the easiest way to keep friends and family in touch with what was going on in their new lives as parents.

Another feature of personal blogs as emergent genre is the perceived RL events' temporal proximity to their online narrative rendition. This represents one of the main triggers of the cyber referential illusion and of blogs' rhetorical community-building function. This temporal proximity extends to the chronological space occupied by readers and blogger with a resulting juxtaposition of the two. "The online diary, in which the writing and the written subject seem to occupy the same moment as each other and as the reader, already creates a sense of congruency between the lived and the written" (McNeill 2003, 40). The most notable effect of this juxtaposition can be seen in mommy blogs and their evolution from distinct websites scattered in an emergent online environment to a cyber-community called the mamasphere. According to *eMarketer's* report on mommy bloggers in 2010, 3.9 million women with children in the US write a blog, while 32 million mothers are reported to read mommy blogs (eMarketer 2014). A 2014 survey by *Hubspot* reveals that approximately 1 in 3 bloggers have children (Klara 2014).

Mommy blogs received a mixed welcome in the media, with a number of journalists questioning their value and purpose. In 2005, the *New York Times* qualifies mommy blogs as "online shrines to parental self-absorption", the products of "a generation of parents ever more in need of validation" and decries their allegedly indiscriminate choice of subject matter "...it seems that there is not a tale from the crib (no matter how mundane or scatological) that is unworthy of narration" (Hochman 2005).

The same year, the first *BlogHer* conference took place in San Jose, California, USA. What began as a conference soon became an online community where women bloggers discuss issues related to parenting, family life and relationships. From the first conference, which gathered around 300 women, *BlogHer* grew in popularity so much so that their 2012 conference registered 5,000 attendees and featured keynote sessions with celebrities such as Martha Stewart and Katie Couric. The very first *BlogHer* conference was heavily focused on the debate around the privacy of bloggers' children. Concern was expressed about children who had no agency over their lives being made public and the ensuing consequences this lack of privacy might have. Just a year before the conference, the issue of privacy was dismissed by some as part of an overall disavowal of mommy blogs as merely an ephemeral online phenomena (P. Pearson 2004). With the conference's strong push for the acceptance of mommy blogging as legitimately monetized labour, the privacy debate was re-opened with vehement criticism. A comparison was drawn between mommy blogs and print texts on parenting, such as Erma Bombeck's fifteen books covering different aspects of motherhood with real accounts and pictures of the author's children. Whilst not unanimously agreed upon, this comparison aimed to reveal that different standards were being applied to writers and bloggers. Similarly, a 2008 debate around privacy online versus on television attempted to showcase a difference in standards between the two mediums³³. Morrison points to a *Globe and*

³³ In 2008, the *Today Show* featured several famous mommy bloggers including Heather Armstrong. During the interview, Kathie Lee Gifford, the program host,

Mail article on whether blogging made individuals worse parents (Morrison 2010). The article focuses on bloggers who had decided to stop blogging because their children were getting older and they were too concerned with privacy issues. The journalist refers specifically to Catherine Connors'³⁴ blog, *Her Bad Mother*, and wonders how much therapy would the blogger's daughters require if their classmates were to find and read their mother's blog.

A recent post about her nearly potty-trained daughter urinating in a cup and carefully emptying it into the toilet was humorous, charming even. But critics and fellow soul-searching parent bloggers have asked: Does Ms. Connors, 37, have the right to share it with a potential audience of millions? And how much family therapy will be in order if her daughter's future schoolmates discover her mom's blogging adventures?

(Pearce 2008)

The article generated hundreds of comments and Catherine Connor cites some of them on her blog. They range from calling her an irresponsible parent, to deploring her daughter's bleak future that only intensive therapy might brighten, to calling the blogger a "pimp". Connor's response to her detractors pinpoints the disparity in standards applied to virtual media as opposed to print media.

And in any case – even if one does regard my personal blog as simply one long exercise in narcissistic storytelling about life with Wonderbaby – what of it? As this blogger pointed out to me in a private conversation, why does so-called lifestyle writing in *print* not prompt people to generalize those writers as narcissistic nutbars or neglectful parents or – most pleasantly – *pimps*? Memoirs,

expressed her opinion that posting photos of one's child online is endangering them. As a response to her remark, many bloggers highlighted that the host is renowned for showing pictures of her children on public television.

³⁴ Catherine Connors is, alongside Heather Armstrong, one of the first individuals to write blogs on parenting.

autobiography, lifestyle op-ed columns – these have been around for a very long time, and while some such writers, I'm sure, are called narcissists, most of them have probably not had the unique pleasure of being called crazy, zombified pimps. (Most of them, however, have – from Rousseau to Sedaris – historically been men. There's something about so-called lifestyle writing or memoir by women – online or off – that inevitably provokes hysterical name-calling and foretellings of the decline of civilization. This has everything to do with the historical consignment of women and family to the private sphere, I think.” (Connors 2008)

The criticism Connor received is indicative of a prevalent type of abusive commentary directed at mommy bloggers. The origins and underpinnings of such criticism are multi-layered. Connor relates them to a historical dismissive attitude towards lifestyle writing by women, an attitude well-documented in gender studies literature (Anderson 1997; Buss 1998; N. K. Miller 1988). Criticism of mommy blogs is also arguably grounded in their 'radicalness', or, in other words, in the fact that they challenge normative discourses of motherhood (Friedman 2009a). Maternal experiences have historically been marginalised (Ruddick 2009; Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010), with mothering practices being inscribed within a patriarchal discourse (Friedman 2013, 14). Motherhood has traditionally been constructed as natural and biological (Ruddick 2009; Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010; Friedman 2013), representations of mothers in the Western image repertoire depicting women as self-sacrificing angelic figures, happy to fulfil their children's every need (Schwartz 1994, 240–256; Lakoff 2012, 74). Mommy blogs attempt to re-define these cultural metaphors and are therefore met with resistance (Lopez 2009; Haines 2011; Friedman 2013).

As discussed above, dismissal of mommy blogs can also be inscribed within a broader rejection of media forms enjoyed by women as trivial and uninteresting (Le Masurier and Johinke 2014). Whilst an in-depth analysis of mommy blog criticism falls beyond the scope of the present study, it is important to acknowledge the current competing discourses around motherhood and blogging. Feminist critics agree that mommy blogging represents an empowering act, yet they bemoan the term's underlying reinforcement of women's normative role as nurturers (Chen 2013; Friedman 2009a). Armstrong's ambivalent position with regards to the term is likely grounded in this ambivalence, as it will be contended in Chapter 3.

2.2 Dooce.com – the blog's early stages

The first blog entry registered in the dooce.com archive dates from 6th May 2001. It is a short entry entitled 'Thinking':

I should probably shoplift something before I die.
Why do I daydream about Rod Stewart in inappropriate positions?
(Armstrong 2001h)

It is in 2015, 14 years later, that the audience finds out the real birthday of dooce.com. In a post published on 25th February 2015, Heather Armstrong shares a picture of her former residence in Los Angeles, USA and writes the following:

This is the building on Stanley Avenue between Melrose and Beverly that I called home for four years. Inside apartment #5 there on the upper left is where I registered this domain name and published the first post to this site on February 27th, 2001. That means this Friday is the 14th birthday of this blog.

I have been blogging for fourteen years. In the beginning I had to hand code each page and use an FTP client to upload the files to a server. Essentially I was engaged in cave painting.

(...)

Happy birthday to this typo of dude.³⁵

(Armstrong 2015f)

Armstrong creates a poignant metaphor in her post when she compares the exigencies of coding knowledge and skill demanded of early bloggers to the primitive practice of cave painting. Her metaphor not only alerts the readers to the incredible advancement of technology registered over a 14 year-period, but also to the aesthetic attributes of blogging. Much like cave paintings, blogs render stories of reality and act as repositories of collective memories of past and present events.

In the first months of the blog, Armstrong published primarily short posts and classified them into seven main categories: *Thinking*, *Reading*, *Listening*, *Enjoying*, *Feeling Guilty*, *How to Annoy Me* and *How to Charm Me*. *Thinking* contains 230 posts from 6th May 2001 until 11th January 2006. This category has the largest number of posts. Closely behind, *How to Annoy Me* registers 201 posts spanning over 4 years from 23rd May 2001 until 13th March 2007. The opposite category, *How to Charm Me* boasts 193 posts over 3 years (1st June 2001-23rd August 2006). *Reading*, *Listening*, *Enjoying* and *Feeling Guilty* have approximately 130 posts each spanning from 2001 until 2006. All the entries are under 200 words, with some even less than a sentence. The example below could be considered typical.

³⁵ "this typo of dude" is a reference to the word "dooce". Under the Frequently Asked Questions tab on the blog, Armstrong explains that the word "dooce" is a "typo of dude, or doooooode!", one that she repeated frequently in the Instant Message conversations she was having with her co-workers (Armstrong 2013e).

What **does** it feel like for a girl?
(Armstrong 2001b)³⁶

The format and content of these posts make them comparable to contemporary Tweets³⁷ or Facebook status updates³⁸. These pithy entries were part of the blog daily feed until 2007, the year when the blogger joined Twitter on 22nd April (Armstrong 2007b). On 25th January 2015, Armstrong's twitter profile featured 4,196 tweets and 1.5 million followers. The blogger's presence on Facebook took longer to emerge, with her first post dating back to 20th December 2008. An in-depth close reading of Armstrong's Facebook page is not the object of this study but it appears that the blogger is inclined to re-utilise the Twitter content in her Facebook feed, with the primary purpose of broadcasting new entries on the blog.

If we are to critically engage with the early entries on the blog and compare them to her later Twitter and Facebook posts, several

³⁶ Although the text might initially appear cryptic, the bold formatting of the auxiliary verb offers a key to unlocking the meaning of the text. Understanding the cultural reference in this entry would have been fairly easy for most contemporary readers of the blog given that one of the blogger's professed initial motivations for writing was to share her thoughts on pop culture. The post alludes to American singer-songwriter Madonna's song "What it feels like for a girl." Part of the artist's eighth studio album called *Music*, the song was released as the third single from it on 17th April 2001. While the song achieved commercial success in most music charts around the world, it was not particularly well received in the US and it did not become part of the US Top 20 list (Promis n.a.). Dooce's entry above was posted approximately five weeks after the song's release. Based on this and on the similarity in structure and lexis, one could assume that the emphasis on the auxiliary 'does' in the example above, is meant to express a certain reticence towards the song on the part of the blogger.

³⁷ Entries on social network Twitter, tweets are usually 140-character long.

³⁸ Status updates usually relate to the user's state of mind, opinions, current activities or location.

similarities emerge, alongside narrative traits particular to Armstrong's writing style.

The first excerpt is a post from the *How to Annoy Me* category:

Crank up the air conditioner in the office so high that every woman's chest is its own PowerPoint presentation.
(Armstrong 2001c)

The post is representative of Dooce's signature humorous style: a mix of sarcasm and deliberately unconventional juxtapositions meant to shock the reader out of a comfortable reading practice. A comparison between the previous example from *Thinking* and one of Armstrong's recent tweets reveals similarities in format and style:

Hit every single red light on the way home? There's a 100% chance that there is a small child in your backseat who needs to go pee.
(Armstrong 2015b)

The brevity of both entries, their ability to encapsulate an entire narrative world in a snippet of text is reminiscent of flash fiction or micro-fiction. Albeit not defined in narratology scholarship, micro fiction is a term popularly used to defined short-stories from 100 words to a page-long text (Shapard 2012, 47–48). This fiction genre has gained increasing popularity especially with the advent of technology and social media's growing popularity (Jain and Slaney 2013, 86, 89–90). The success of a micro story relies entirely on its punch line. The brevity of text, forces an imminent revelation of the end. The author is not given much space to develop the status quo, which the punch line is required to disrupt in a surprising and/or humorous way, making thus the interplay between the title and the text fraught with narrative meaning.

Most of Armstrong's entries in the early categories reiterate this structure.

Thinking

My doctor said I have veins perfect for heroin injection. Isn't that, like, illegal or something?

(Armstrong 2001h)

How to Charm Me

Resist the urge to giggle when I slam my forehead into the dresser and temporarily blackout.

(Armstrong 2001g)

How to Annoy Me

Run inside the next door neighbor's house, eat all of their dogs' dog food, and then proceed to poop seven times in the next ten hours.

(Armstrong 2003r)

Boasting a compressed Bakhtinian chronotope, these pithy entries have been a constant presence in the blogger's writing. They could be considered part of Dooce's signature style, which is very much akin to the exemplary zany writing style of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, especially the aphorisms of the latter part of book 3. Nietzsche's style is the zany par excellence because of its assailing effect on the reader, or in other words, the fact that "his prose often lapsed into a shrieking intensity, the occasional hysteria, the drift into the maudlin and sentimental, the hatred venting through some passages" (Pippin 2010, 11; Ngai 2012, 186). As an aesthetic of action, marked by extreme physical and affective effort, zaniness finds its best representation in a prose marked by performative speech acts and markers of affective vehemence such as capital letters, exclamation points, italics and

dashes. Armstrong's post, entitled *I Have Something To Say*, is representative of this.

Everyone says, "I'm so easy to work with. I don't see what the problem is, really." And if you're saying such a stupid thing you're most likely the wickedest mucker in the entire office. Thing is, you don't have to work with or around yourself. So you really have no idea just how despicable you are.

(....)

I hate that the Tech Producer doesn't know how to use email. He's the goddamn TECH Producer, for crying out loud. Dude just wanders all over the office, on foot, asking for updates and fixes to bugs only he can replicate. He's a sweet thing, with an adorable pair of glasses and a smile that says, "Hey! Let's fix bugs together!" but he needs to learn, and learn quickly, that co-workers don't need to talk, ever. It's not like it's 1993 or anything.

I hate that one of the 10 vice-presidents in this 30-person company wasn't born with an "indoor" voice, but with a shrill, monotone, speaking-over-a-passing-F16 outdoor voice. And he loves to hear himself speak, even if just to himself. He loves to use authoritative expressions such as "NO! NO! NO! IT'S LIKE THIS!" and "DUDE, NO! YOU SHOOT IT LIKE THIS!" because, well, he's a VP and must be an authority on something, right? Lately he's been an authority on patently grotesque facial hair patterns.

(Armstrong 2002b)

Armstrong's style has an aggressive edge; it pokes its tongue out at the reader in cheeky defiance and provocation. Lexis such as "stupid thing", "wickedest mucker", "how despicable you are", "miserable corporate wankers", is reminiscent of the Nietzschean text's assailing effect. The aggressive intensity of Dooce's posts is atoned however by the audience's perception of the zany character's fretting as ultimately impotent. The incessant display of the zany's fruitless affective labour can be seen in the emotionally-charged repetition of the phrase "I hate the...". It is important to note here the audience's ability to distance

itself from the character and perceive the futility and powerlessness that underlie this affective display. Zaniness entails precisely this simultaneous identification and distancing on the part of the audience. Readers come to dooce.com to read the adventures of this zany web designer, probably because they identify with and rejoice in her frustrations, but most definitely because the blogger goes a long way to ensure the prose builds an addictive character. This is done through the use of specific lexis, as shown above, as well as zany discursive markers, capitals and exclamation points or the hyphenation of nouns into adjective-type structures.

In the initial stages of the blog, the zany character took over the blogger persona almost entirely. The early-days Dooce performs different zany roles under conditions of intense affective labour.

I figured that three whole days worth of love was much more than most people could claim about their employment, and so I didn't mind lugging my hungover body into the office most of the week to deal with Account People Who Wear Pantyhose Even Though No Dresscode Requires Them To Do So. For three days every month I got to work on an original design, and then I would spend the next four weeks redesigning and tearing apart that design, all to the specifications of those Account People and clients who thought that the internet was a person who lived inside their computers.

(...) I actually worked for a client once who asked me to program their homepage so that when a user brought it up on a browser it would disable the printing function on their computer. They didn't want anyone printing out their website because they were worried that someone would steal their great ideas, the great ideas that they were putting on the PUBLIC internet for THOUSANDS of people to read. I asked them if they also wanted me to include a piece of code that would break a user's fingers, thus preventing anyone from printing or even writing down their great ideas, and they asked me if they could get in trouble for that.

Some of my friends at the time said that they were envious of my job, that I got to work with big name clients and that I got to surf the

internet all day long, and from the perspective of someone who was washing dishes and waiting tables for hours on end, I can see how my job would have seemed alluring. But the reality was much less glamorous than the idea of it, because there's nothing fancy or prestigious about spending 40 hours on one background color because some fat ego-drunk executive who thinks his own shit smells good can't decide if he likes purple or dark purple.
(Armstrong 2004i)

The excerpt above summarizes Armstrong's musings over the nature of her web designer job and showcases the signature Dooce stylistic markers of zany writing: use of capitals, potentially aggressive or offensive lexis, and surprising semantic and conceptual juxtapositions. Dooce's zaniness goes beyond semantic and discourse markers, however, and points to a deeper underlying connection between the modern aesthetic category and changing labour conditions. The zany character is a product of a shift in paradigm, which places the pursuit of happiness in all fields of human existence as the ultimate goal for any individual, with job satisfaction being its instantiation in the field of labour production (Ngai 2012, 200–210). In this respect, Dooce's reference to "love" in relation to her job mirrors the paradigm shift to a post-Fordist workplace where job satisfaction and emotional labour become the new norm. The zany character speaks to these changing labour conditions and the new expectations of workers to develop their social skills, to network and communicate well with team members and clients. Always in pursuit of a new experience, of an illusory gratification, the zany deploys vast expanses of physical and emotional labour, being thus perceived by the audience as both comic and tragic, both easily identifiable with and, simultaneously, rejected and disdained (Ngai

2012, 197–207). Dooce the emergent blogger utilizes hyperbole extensively to bemoan her labour conditions, especially with regard to her social interactions with co-workers and clients, and, sometimes to reveal her clients' lack of technical understanding of the Internet. The tongue-in-cheek offer to program a client's webpage to "break" a user's "fingers" if they were to replicate it in any way, is a typical zany action, rhetorically rendered through sarcasm and hyperbole. The audience arguably identifies with Dooce's frustrations and vicariously relishes mocking a demanding client. Simultaneously, however, the audience experiences a sense of detachment due to the zany's underlying aggressiveness.

The zany is not only funny but also angry, living in a perpetual mode of frustration and depleting emotional and physical exertion with the resulting anger fuelling her *modus operandi* (Ngai 2012, 218). In writing, this anger underpins Dooce's abrasive stylistic features such as extended use of terminology expressing feelings of rage and frustration: "some fat ego-drunk executive who thinks his own shit smells good" (Armstrong 2004i), "wickedest mucker" (Armstrong 2002b), "So you really have no idea just how despicable you are" (Armstrong 2002b). This anger paradoxically underpins both the audience's identification with and detachment from the zany.

Referring to the zany as a character is to some extent erroneous, given that she is entirely defined by her occupational and social performance. In the emergent stages of the blog, Dooce appears as the prototypical zany, identified entirely with her performative roles of web designer, single woman in LA, gym goer or music critic. The tone and

writing style is dominated by zany discourse markers, albeit the cute, the abject and second-person narration appear as part of the blogger's repertoire of narrative tools.

The powerless fretting of the zany is well complemented by the use of second person narration. Its main function is to position the reader in the chronotope of the blog, and create thus a sense of interconnectedness between blogger and audience. In the above examples, however, 'you' serves an additional function. It represents an 'imagined-reader', consumer of the zany's labour, and receiver of her anger. He does not identify with the zany or the text, but rather keeps a distance, ostensibly feeling at once attraction and repulsion. This imagined-reader is an avid consumer of the blogger's stories, voyeuristically enthralled by the character's humorous, embarrassing or simply cruel misfortunes. At the same time, though, the imagined reader exudes relief at not being in her precarious position and exhibits an attitude of superiority towards her. Occupying the rhetorical position of this interlocutor offers readers guiltless enjoyment and precludes empathetic responses.

The zany aesthetic features of the text are intertwined with the cute and the abject resulting in the interesting as overarching aesthetic quality and product attribute. The cute is less prevalent in the emerging stages of the blog, being first featured more than six months after the blog's inception, in a post discussing Dooce's maternal inclinations.

I think I'm stricken with a more violent case of the maternal instinct than most other women my age. While other 26 year old [sic] single women are out being single and psychiatrically sound, I'm stopping complete strangers at the grocery store to see if I can fit the entire head of their bald baby into my mouth.

It's hard to describe what it feels like, this instinctual appetite to give birth to a new life and nag it until it leaves home in a flurry of flannel rebellion. It's hard not to burst into spontaneous snuggles when the VP of Marketing brings in his three month old elfin snickerbooms, smelling of Johnson's Baby Powder and lactose-free spit-up. The tiny, furry head! The itty-bitty fingers shaped like mushroom stubs just screaming to be dipped in ranch dressing and gobbled up to the palm! (...)
(Armstrong 2001f)

The cute's main discourse marker is the infantilized language used by the aesthetic subject to refer to or address the cute object. Lexis such as "snuggles", "elfin snickerbooms", "tiny, furry head", "itty-bitty fingers shaped like mushroom stubs", "punkin" are examples of cutified language and, in this case, of neolexia. Although a dictionary definition of "snickerbooms" is absent, the reader instinctively understands that the word refers to something small and adorable. There is perhaps a connotation of something 'sweet' if we are to relate the first part of the word, 'snicker', to the popular *Snickers* chocolate bar. This interpretation seems to hold ground if considered together with the other instances when the cute object, the baby, is compared to something edible. The cute object has the potential to incite cruelty, its diminutive size arousing an aggressive desire in the aesthetic object to master it or to ingest it (Ngai 2012, 79–86). In the example above, verbs such as "screaming" or "gobbled up" point to an underlying aggressive and lustful consumption. The urgent and almost sadistic craving to master the cute object seems enhanced by its dormant state, with Dooce ending the post by bemoaning the restraint she needs to exercise not to awaken the baby.

Apart from the example above, babies, the “prototypical cute object” (Ngai 2012, 87) are seldom mentioned in the early stages of the blog, being only featured in a collection of photos of Armstrong’s nephews, *Babies in Utah* (Armstrong 2002a), and in a tweet-like post in which zany aesthetics take precedence over the cute:

Feeling Guilty
For thinking that his baby is just uglier than sin.
(Armstrong 2002c)

Although the zany is the first and most prevalent product attribute in the early stages of the blog, cute aesthetics gain more traction with the adoption of the couple’s first pet dog, Chuck. The other “prototypical cute object” (Ngai 2012, 87), Chuck the puppy, is introduced on the blog in April 2002, with the post below being the first one entirely dedicated to him.

Various Instances When Chuckles is Neither Representing Nor Keeping it Real

2:32 AM – crying like a little sissy dog when he should be asleep.

4:16 AM – forgetting that only an hour and a half earlier he was crying like a little sissy dog; crying like a little sissy dog again.

5:00 AM – thinking it’s time to play.

5:02 AM – trying to convince Mama and Papa that it’s time to play.

(...)

5:05 AM – deciding that he likes to bite Mama’s fingers better because of that wonderful yelping sound they make.

7:10 AM – refusing to eat prescribed puppy food, calling it “dry and hideously insipid”.

7:11 AM – begging for a small piece of peanut butter toast with a small banana “cut to look like a flower” on top.

7:35 AM – chasing every moving object on the sidewalk instead of pooping or peeing.

7:36 AM – biting Papa’s ankles instead of pooping or peeing.

7:50 AM – pooping in the most remote and out-of-reach spot in the bushes so that Mama has to crawl around in the dirt to find it, bag it and toss it.

(...)

12 Noon – wondering whether or not I heard him the first time when he said, “I’m not going to eat that shit food. Forget about it.”

3:30 PM – watching and loving Carson Daly.

4:00 PM – sleeping through Oprah.

6:36 PM – refusing to drink Schlitz malt liquor.

10:02 PM – pretending to be interested in The Real World so that Mama and Papa won’t think he’s tired and put him to bed.

10:03 PM – failing miserably at pretending to be interested in The Real World.

12:44 AM – crying like a little sissy dog when he should be asleep.
(Armstrong 2002e)

The cute object, Chuck, is simultaneously anthropomorphised and cutified, being “Papa” and “Mama[’s]” baby. He exhibits infant behaviour and he is endowed with language. Much like a baby, he refuses to go to sleep and tries, unsuccessfully, to ward tiredness off by engaging with different stimuli. Unlike a baby, however, Chuck is endowed with ‘grown-up’ language and pop culture interests. He has

agency over food choices and the linguistic prowess of an adult. The comic effect of this personification resides in the contrast between the cute object's assumed weakened syntax and Chuck's sarcasm. Rhetorical devices such as hyperbole, sarcasm, contrast, juxtaposition and personification are utilised to contradict common assumptions. This contradiction follows a re-occurring narrative pattern, the reader being first encouraged to access common tropes, build narrative anticipation based on them and then have her assumptions contradicted by surprising or novel juxtapositions of ideas and images. This will later evolve into Armstrong's signature style, as it will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Cuteness as an aesthetic of vulnerability, smallness, dependency and helplessness activates simultaneously and, perhaps paradoxically, the subjects' empathy and aversion. "Given how the prototypically cute object evokes the same kind of soft squishy form associated with gelatinous matter, we can see how our desire to cuddle with the commodity might often be shadowed by a tiny feeling of repugnance" (Ngai 2012, 67). In the example above, Dooce repeatedly refers to Chuck as a "sissy". The negative gendered connotation of the word transpires from its definition as "a boy who is weak or who likes things that girls usually like", "a person who is weak and fearful", "an effeminate man or boy", "a timid or cowardly person" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2015b). Dooce uses the term with its in-built stereotypical assumptions that crying is a feminine behaviour and that males who engage in this behaviour should be ridiculed, exemplifying

thus the aesthetic subject's detachment from the cute object and rejection of it.

The same pattern of detachment and endowment with language of the cute object for comic effects can be traced in other posts about Chuck. One example from 2003, aptly entitled *Chuck Talk*, consists of four distinct monologues in which Chuck expresses his distress at being ignored by the blogger or not being fed "beef jerky":

You respond to whimpering. If I were to start crying, which is a notch louder than whimpering, you might yell at me in that annoying accent, and I **hate** it when you do that. That may shut me up for a couple minutes, tops, but I know you can't resist my forlorn, almost imperceptible whimpers, especially when I arrange them in groups of three with an emphasis on the last syllable: whihhh, whihhh, whihhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.... [dramatic pause]whihhh, whihhh, whihhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. I can go louder if I have to.

I know you've got work to do, and I can totally sense the fact that you could bend a lead pipe with the force of your tightened sphincter, but I need some "me" time. I'm bored, and I need you to entertain me. No, I don't want that bone, that bone just sits there. And that ball doesn't throw itself, now does it.

I've been patient all morning, and I'm at a point where I'm either going to start pacing or whimpering, and I might try a combination of both. You don't believe me? Are you kidding? Just for that I'm going to pace, whimper, **and** intermittently rest my pathetic head on your leg, all in the same cycle.
(Armstrong 2003d)

The cute object is a homodiegetic narrator in this post and the locus of narrative focalization. The four monologues are addressed to the blogger, the 'you', and are meant to reveal the narrator's perspective on his interaction with his owner. The cute object's

manipulation of discourse has humorous effects precisely because it contradicts the assumptions related to the power relationship between the aesthetic subject and the cute object. Not only is the cute object endowed with adult speech but it also harbours negative feelings towards the aesthetic subject. Chuck is annoyed by the blogger's accent when she tells him off and he is frustrated not to receive the attention he deems as appropriate reward for his good behaviour. This role reversal points to the aesthetic subject's subconscious fear that the cute object might become menacing. Both Sianne Ngai and Daniel Harris note the particular ease with which the cute object could reverse into its opposite. Harris uses the example of Gremlins, cute little fur balls who turn into aliens when they are given water, to talk about how cute objects "often seem more in control of us than we are of them" (Harris 2001, 15). This "phantasmatic investment in the narrative of a cute object's "revenge"" (Ngai 2012, 85–86), stems perhaps from the aesthetic subject's sadistic consumption or aggressive manipulation of it and it is arguably the cause of the subject's simultaneous desire for and detachment from the cute object.

The last sentence of the excerpt contains a lexical dissonance and marks a shift in focalization from Chuck, the homodiegetic narrator, to Dooce, the aesthetic subject detached from the cute object. The words "whimper" and "pathetic"³⁹ express a negative value judgement about the homodiegetic narrator. The adjective "pathetic" and the verb

³⁹ "Whimper" = "to complain in a weak or annoying way" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2015c); "Pathetic" = "having a capacity to move one to either compassionate or contemptuous pity", "pitifully inferior or inadequate", "absurd, laughable" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2015a)

“whimper” allude to the aesthetic subject’s feelings of repulsion and contempt at the cute object’s pitiful attempt to elicit an affective response from her. This paradoxical relationship between the cute object and the aesthetic subject is an inherent component of the blogger’s writing style and one of the core brand attributes.

Chuck, as cute aesthetic object, is one of the narrative hooks of the blog being featured in a fifteen-year long portrait series of him wearing various costumes and head adornments, from jewellery to pasta or sunglasses and wigs. The premiere post, *Because the Jennifer Beals Costume Would Have Been Too Cute and the World Isn’t Ready for that Much Cuteness, Plus this Costume*, featured 4 photographs of Chuck wearing red head gear and a cape and was published on 1st November 2002.



(Armstrong 2002f)

The series generally features Chuck portraits accompanied by short narrative snippets akin to the blogger’s tweet-like posts. These textual nuclei direct the viewers’ perception of the photographs, often

for humorous effects. The interplay between text and image is conducive to meaning-generation through a causal logical connection between given elements. The blogger thus guides her readers to desired hermeneutical interpretations. The absence of text in the example above, except for the title, points to the latter's significance and, by doing so, it challenges the audience to decode the in-joke. The readers' attention, curiosity and meaning construction mechanism is thus activated: What would a Jennifer Beals costume look like? Why Jennifer Beals and not another celebrity? How would Chuck look in a *Flashdance* costume? Finding the answer to such questions provides readers with an engaging reading experience. It disrupts a comfortable reading practice by making the audience actively engaged with the textual and visual content of the blog. Achieving narrative closure, namely experiencing an understanding of the post and its humorous undertones, allows the audience to feel part of in-group, the select group of individuals who understand the blogger's wit and sense of humour. This narrative strategy is used frequently in the early stages of the blog when Armstrong built her brand image as a non-conformist and "hip"⁴⁰ zany character who adamantly and openly chastised readers who misconstrued her authorial intentions. From a marketing perspective, this not only contributed to positioning integrity as a brand value, but also the blog as a niche product whose full attributes were only accessible to the select few. Armstrong's arguably unwitting strategy did however incentivize readers to demonstrate their

⁴⁰ The word "hip" belongs to one of the readers of the blog. The perception of Dooce as a "cool" blogger will be discussed in more detail at the end of this chapter.

belonging to the in-crowd by posting supportive comments and engaging with other readers.

Another core component of Armstrong's writing style and narrative voice is the abject. Topics such as constipation, defecation and bodily functions formed part of the blog's thematic repertoire from the very beginning. *Pack the Flask* for example, enumerates abject scenarios the blogger is likely to encounter during an upcoming weekend family reunion.

Granny will fall sleep on the toilet. Use the one in the basement.

The three year old nephew will announce to everyone his inconvenient state of poopiness.

(...)

Pack pantyhose, the safeguard of vaginal integrity, to humor my mother.

(Armstrong 2001d)

As aesthetic category, the abject simulates an eruption of the Real, strengthening thus the online reality effect. The open discussion of socially-taboo abject topics such as family members' toilet idiosyncrasies or the definition of pantyhose as safeguards of "vaginal integrity", attest, through a referential illusion, to the blogger's corporality. As aesthetic objects, they represent common human encounters with the abject, and as such they can establish a point of identification between reader and blogger. Abject encounters, particularly in the sphere of the domestic, are part of the representation of everyday private life. They can act as mnemonic triggers encouraging the audience to dialogically engage with the text by accessing their personal abject narratives. Potential resistance or dislike of this aesthetic category is mitigated by humour, whose rhetorical function is to offer comic relief.

Armstrong is adept at utilising this rhetorical device and frequently resorts to it. In *The Great Poop Debate*, for example, the blogger compares the bathroom rituals of women and men, presented as two contrasting lists of sequential steps undertaken by stereotypical individuals of each gender when defecating.

The man's ritual goes something like this:

1. A man enters the bathroom thinking, "I don't necessarily need to take a shit, but I'm sure that if I sit in here long enough, it just might happen."

(...)

4. Upon entering the stall, a small dark cave completely covered in dried piss stains, he tries to figure out how he's going to unzip his pants without setting the reading material on any disease-infested surface. It takes him seven minutes to determine an acceptable solution.

5. Placing his hairy ass on the uncovered toilet seat, he immediately turns to the table of contents, takes a deep breath, and settles in for a long winter's nap. By page 6 he begins grunting.

(...)

9. Groaning interspersed with exaggerated sighing continues until the end of the magazine, which in most cases is 112 pages long.

(...)

11. After one last, hard-earned sigh he reaches over to grab a fistful of toilet paper, only to discover that the dispenser is empty, devastatingly empty.

12. A full 17 minutes after mopping up his mess with 22 pages of PC Magazine, he leaves the stall, passes two other men waiting their turn and warns, "Dude, I wouldn't go in there just yet."

(Armstrong 2002d)

The abject permeates both the thematic and the lexical level of the text. Defecation is a quintessentially abject bodily function and social norms restrict its discussion to the private sphere, if at all. The encounter with the abject, especially in such an in-depth rendition, harbours great potential for disgust. Armstrong is able to mitigate the

risk of averting the audience by employing humour so that revulsion morphs into an atoned snigger and perhaps a chuckle at the character's ineptness. Hyperbole and sarcasm are the main rhetorical devices underpinning the blogger's humour strategies. The "long winter's nap", "grunting", "groaning", the 17-minute "mopping up" with "22 pages of PC magazine" are examples of how hyperbole juxtaposed to sarcasm can relieve potential feelings of disgust by making the character the object of ridicule, allowing thus the reader to distance himself from the text and perhaps self-congratulate for having a superior defecation routine. Humour prompts the audience to acknowledge human corporality with its intrinsic abjection and engenders an affective response to the text. Abject confessions point to the intimacy of the private sphere, given that their historically taboo status excluded them from public discourse. Their presence on a public domain blog is thus likely to engender not only surprise but also perhaps a sense of mischievous enjoyment.

Confessional undertones endow Armstrong's abject narratives with community-building potential given that they encourage the audience to identify with the narrator and to accept their own abject corporality. Armstrong's seemingly uncensored self-disclosure replicates intimate scenarios of information sharing with close friends or family members. In *My Comrade in Carmen and Constipation*, the blogger reproduces a text message exchange with her "best friend in Utah":

(...)

ME: Yesterday was terrible, mainly because, as usual, I was totally constipated. I walked around for several hours with a chunk of

GRANITE in my lower intestine. Jon just doesn't seem to understand constipation at all. He was like, "Don't push! Just sit there and let it happen." And I'm like, YOU try letting a kitchen countertop just squeeze through your sphincter ALL BY ITSELF. IT AIN'T GONNA HAPPEN.

(...)

(Armstrong 2003f)

Constipation is a recurrent trope, part of the blog's abject repertoire alongside bowel movements, flatulence, menstruation and, occasionally, infected wounds. Hyperbole, humour and zany discourse markers underpin the vivid description of the constipated blogger. The abject, presented as aesthetic object through these rhetorical and discursive strategies, is what will become Armstrong's signature style. Its uncanny presence on a public platform prompts fascination and criticism, both resulting in increased blog traffic. Whether shocking or entertaining, Armstrong's abject and zany aesthetics elicit a reaction, from voyeuristic consumption of text or reiterated encounters with the blog to supportive comments or acerbic emails.

In the example above, the reader's position in the text's chronotope is that of recipient of the blogger's confession. The second person pronoun places the reader in the same topographical position as Armstrong's friend, the addressee. This superimposition is likely to trigger in readers a subconscious empathetic attitude towards the blogger. Armstrong makes recurrent use of this narrative strategy, especially when she aims to ensure a sympathetic response in the face of potentially contentious revelations.

The years 2001-2003 represent the early stages of dooce.com, stages when the core features of Armstrong's style emerged and the

foundations of the brand were set. The chronological delineation is grounded on a thematic change in blog content following Armstrong's pregnancy announcement. By that stage, the image of the Dooce brand revolved primarily around zany and abject aesthetics, interesting and novel reading experiences, and non-conformism. The blog was already attracting a fervent audience, as shown by the negative comments Armstrong received following her pregnancy disclosure.

(...)

"Dooce, babe, I'm sorry but you've totally lost it. I remember when you were a hip young thing in LA rubbing elbows with celebrities and getting drunk and shit. You've totally lost your edge. It can't be marriage, because I'm married and I'm still the coolest person ever. I'm totally bored with you now. Bye, bye."

(...)

"Congrats, but I must say – I've found I'm pretty much done with this site. Nothing personal, but we're a long way from the shit talkin, booze drinking, running into stars, getting fired from her job, Dooce. Now it's just puppies, babies, and Martha Stewart. Hello LifetimeTV. Don't say, 'well don't read it then!' Because I won't – it's just that it was at one time exciting, hip and cutting edge. I wish you the best Dooce and Blurb, but I think it's time I sailed into the sunset. Yeah I know, you're saying 'good riddance.'"

The thing is, I'm totally not saying good riddance. I'm saying, BELIEVE ME, MOTHERFUCKER, YOU DON'T WANT TO MESS WITH HORMONAL PREGNANT LADY.

(Armstrong 2003k)

The comments showcase the audience's perception of the early Dooce brand attributes, "exciting, hip and cutting edge" writing. The zany character's antiques of "booze drinking, running into stars, getting fired from her job" together with the abject aesthetics of "shit talkin" are prominent aesthetic features, and will remain so for the most part of the blog's existence. Ironically, it is the very mention of the word

“poop” more than 300 times on the blog and Armstrong’s open refusal to desist using it, that solidified one of the brand’s core values, honesty.

The vehemence of reader complaints points to the demands bloggers operate under. The constant production of new and interesting content is shown as having a direct correlation to audience loyalty, and failure to offer novel reading experiences results in consumer defection. The readers above attribute their defection to a negative aesthetic evaluation of future blog content. Armstrong’s pregnancy and mothering are said to impact her writing style and engender a surge in mainstream representations of the cute and the everyday. Reader apprehensions are arguably supported by the prevalence of traditional discourses of motherhood in popular press and culture. American 1950s and 1960s comedies depict motherhood as felicitous submission to domestic life (Kutulas 1998, 15). In the 1970s and 1980s, television series explored feminism and motherhood (Kutulas 1998, 19), mainly the emergence of the “Super-Mom”, who retains her job after birth “but whose energies are largely directed to furthering the progress of the baby from the moment it is born” (E. A. Kaplan 1992, 188). Representations of mothers as “domestic angels” permeate mass-media media (Faludi 1992; Wolf 2003; van Zoonen 1994; Tropp 2006) and arguably justify the above readers’ apprehensions.

Armstrong’s response aims to assuage reader fears by declaring her commitment to the integrity of her writing style. Permeated by zany and abject aesthetics, Armstrong’s warning reads as an avowal to her readers. As a “HORMONAL PREGNANT LADY” she promises to deliver the same entertaining reading experience. This speaks to the

importance of the interesting as aesthetic valuation and to its volatility. Requiring constant re-affirmation, the interesting relies on a text deemed novel and different by comparison to mainstream counterparts. Attributing their brand defection to fears related to style integrity bears testimonial to the audience's strong attachment to the product attributes and the brand. Rather than silently abandoning the blog, readers chose to warn the blogger of their defection. Whilst Armstrong outlined the emotional toll these types of negative comments took on her (Armstrong 2015i), it is worth considering that they could potentially showcase consumers so involved with the brand that their defection, although self-imposed, is bemoaned. The strong emotive lexis used points to feelings akin to frustration and disappointment, which suggest a strong emotional attachment to the blog.

Armstrong's pregnancy announcement did not however generate only negative comments. They were indeed statistically insignificant compared to positive responses from the audience, as recorded in the blog archive ⁴¹. These responses point to an emergent fervent followership, well aware of the brand's attributes and confident in

⁴¹ The first comments recorded on the blog archive date back to 2nd January 2003, although Dooce's direct responses to readers' comments suggests that the comment function was active much earlier than that date. Initially, comments appeared only underneath main blog entries, by which I mean content-heavy posts as opposed to tweet-like posts or photographic series like Chuck's portraits. Between 2003 and 2013, Armstrong posted an average of 4 main posts per week supplemented by shorter ones on an almost daily basis. It is only the main posts that show readers' comments and only 26 are recorded in inverse chronological order from the last published to the first.

Armstrong's capability to recreate them irrespective of the change in narrative content.

(...) Vera

I feel the exact opposite from that insensitive anonymous poster. The first thing that came to my mind when I found out you were pregnant was "Just think of all the scandalous new fodder for blogging!" I personally CANNOT wait to read your lengthy, overly exaggerated posts with titles such as "20 reasons why I think a pregnancy should last three months instead of nine," "And this is why I will never allow my stepfather to come within five feet of the offspring again," "Sometimes babies stink," etc. Because yes, as others have pointed out, it is the writing and the wit we come here for. We all have seen that no matter how quotidian the subject, Dooce can make it oh-so-fun.

TS

(...) It's not your surroundings that made you cool in the blog world. It's your fantastic writing style. It's your incredible wit. It's your outstanding grasp of the english [sic] language.

Only you could make Utah look cool and hip. (...)

Fox

The thing is, it's the writing, not the subject matter, that keeps me (and most others, I would guess) coming back. (Which isn't to say that reading about Hollywood fools, and lesbian sex isn't fun.)

(Armstrong 2003k)

Readers enlist Armstrong's "writing style", "wit", ability to make quotidian subjects fun and "outstanding grasp of the english [sic] language" (Armstrong 2003k) as the factors supporting their loyalty to the brand. These factors relate to the aesthetic categories and the rhetorical devices discussed above. The next chapter will trace their development into product attributes with a focus on Armstrong's narrative finesse and brand management acumen.

In the span of two years, Armstrong succeeded in engaging the audience's curiosity about her quotidian life, her opinions and musings on popular culture and office work. In an age of social media, where

fads and fashions are as easily created as they are discarded in favour of the next best thing, Armstrong managed to maintain her trendsetter status for 15 years. From humble beginnings in 2001 to the present day, dooce.com evolved from personal blog to mommy blog to a brand with a cross—platform presence. The blogger's pregnancy announcement represented a pivotal moment in the blog's history, marking the shift from Dooce, the zany web designer, to Dooce, the mommy blogger.

Chapter 3

“But they didn't have to hire me. I hired myself.”

Chapter 3 traces a pivotal stage in the transformation of a personal blog into a business. This stage involves a shift in paradigm that, albeit subtle to a reader, is critical for the blogger because it affects all decisions related to content choice, writing style, monetisation strategies and media exposure. The paradigm shift relates to the blog becoming a product, rather than a hobby, and the blogger, a human brand. This shift can be a lengthy and potentially risk-fraught process, with readers' perception of financial motivation as noteworthy anathema. In order for a personal blog to generate revenue, it is necessary for the blogger to adopt the role of entrepreneur whose product and online persona become the main touchpoints⁴² of the brand. Thus, the narrative and aesthetic features become brand attributes and their strategic reiteration on the blog supports the creation of the brand identity. Brand identity refers to stakeholder⁴³ perceptions of the brand at every touchpoint and becomes intrinsic to the development of the blog into a business, being a symbol of its core values and its history (Wheeler 2009, 10).

⁴² A touchpoint is point of contact between a brand and consumers, it is the interface of the products with different stakeholders at different stages of consumption (Wheeler 2009, 2)

⁴³ I employ the term stakeholder here to mean not only the readers of the blog, but also media channels, industry experts, government regulators, competitors and community organisations both online and offline, among many others.

This change in paradigm has been documented by blogger Jen Lawrence, author of *MUBAR: Mothered Up Beyond All Recognition*.

The interesting thing for me was that (...) the more marketers viewed my blog as a potential marketing tool, the more I started to view my blog as a potential business. I started to wonder if I should be considering blog ads. I started to track how many people were reading me and started to think about how I could increase my readership. For example, if I were going to be away, I'd pre-write posts so that I did not go for too long without writing. I started to feel pressured to write posts even when I had nothing to say.

(Lawrence 2009, 130)

Lawrence joined the mamasphere in 2004 as a means to find solace from her post-partum depression. She cites Armstrong's blog as a source of inspiration and strength, "I was not alone – Heather and I were on the same real-time, white-knuckle ride together" (Lawrence 2009, 129). Whilst Lawrence's blog attracted substantially less followers than dooce.com, her experience is nonetheless representative for this study given that her blog's most successful years, 2005-2006, coincided with a peak in marketer interest in the medium (Lawrence 2009). Lawrence attributes a negative connotation to the different way she approached her blog after being contacted by marketers and questions whether marketing has a negative influence on the mamasphere as a whole. I employ Lawrence's assertions without adhering to the overall argument, but rather as an example of the shift in paradigm that a blogger is required to undergo if she wishes to successfully monetise her blog.

I argue that it is essential for the blogger to have a clear vision of what her brand identity is, so that she can embed its core values in

every post she generates. I opt for a change in nomenclature from blog to product in order to reflect the shift in paradigm from writing for pleasure to writing with a concrete purpose and within specified parameters. Similarly, the usage of the term human brand to refer to the blogger points to her transformation from common individual to exceptional author. Bloggers do not have to become celebrities, and, indeed, retaining a point of identification with their audience is crucial. They do however need to exhibit certain qualities that differentiate them from their competitors and entice consumers to become followers.

Chapter 3 will address two of the study's research questions, namely what narrative and aesthetic features underpin the conversion of a blog into a brand, and how the representation of the everyday supports the transformation of a blogger into a human brand. Theoretical frameworks related to aesthetic categories, interpellation, the blog reality effect and human brands will inform the analysis of example blog posts, as outlined in Chapter 1's thesis statements 1, 2 and 3. Chapter 3 will analyse the evolution of Armstrong's narrative techniques of interpellation, second person narration and the aesthetic categories of the zany, cute, interesting and abject into product attributes, and the rise of Armstrong as a human brand.

Chapter 2 outlined the initial years of the blog when Armstrong was experimenting with different stylistic elements and working towards developing an authentic writing style. Armstrong acknowledged her writing style was heavily influenced by Joshua Allen, author of *House of*

*Wigs*⁴⁴. Allen waxed humorously about his Kafkaesque workplace on what was in 2003 an anonymous blog. In 2015 some of the blog content was published as an eBook and Allen invited Armstrong to write the *Foreword*. Armstrong praised Allen's humour and writing style, pointing to the very rhetorical and discursive devices that would later become her brand's trademarks.

... its author was writing the most magnificently disturbing observations about his/her workplace, nicknaming co-workers with a chorus of phrases that made me nod and groan at the memory of the halfwits who had shared my cubicle. And it made me think this, "If only my fireable content had been this solid." To this day I sit down to write a post on my website with the hope that I will make my audience feel as unsettled as those words made me.

(H.B. Armstrong in Allen 2015)

Armstrong has arguably achieved her intended audience reaction of "unsettled" nodding and groaning through her zany and abject aesthetics. The last chapter discussed the emergent use of Armstrong's aesthetic and narrative devices, while this chapter will address their further development and strategic use to create a brand identity centred on reading as event. By reading as event, I mean consuming content not as a passive reading comprehension exercise but rather as an experiential encounter with narrative. Interacting with the blog becomes an event fraught with emotional undertones and it is precisely such a consumption experience that fosters audience engagement and loyalty. Armstrong uses the interesting, zany, cute and abject to create revolting, humorous, curious, furious, sarcastic, surprising consumer experiences. Whatever the reaction, Armstrong's readers seem

⁴⁴ The blog is no longer available online.

anything but uninterested, with both fervent followers and bitter detractors being vociferous about it. The next chapters will discuss in greater detail Armstrong's skilful management of both types of consumers and capitalization of their immaterial labour.

Armstrong's case study is particularly relevant not only due to the blogger's artful mastery of her brand identity's creation, but also because dooce.com helped, perhaps inadvertently, establish and define a whole new product category, mommy blogs. Defining dooce.com as a mommy blog reflects by and large both the general public and mass media's categorization of it. It is however critical to acknowledge Armstrong's misgivings about the term, due arguably to its negative connotations. Following a 2008 adverse feature of mommy bloggers on American TV program the *Today Show* and ensuing mamasphere heated retort, Armstrong, who was a guest on the program, positions her blog as follows:

(...)

When the producer for NBC called me and asked if I'd be interested in flying to New York to be on a live segment of the Today show to talk about the business of mommy-blogging " [sic] okay, wait a minute, I think I should address this right here, right now, this label MOMMY BLOG. Do I consider my website a mommy blog? Not really, no. When I sit down to update my website I don't think to myself, "What will I say today on my mommy blog?" The first thing I think is, how can I give my father a heart attack? And then I back up a second and go, nah, I'd miss him too much, I will just have to write this story about Jon's Brazilian wax in my personal diary. Dad, are you paying attention? It's because of you that the world does not get to hear about Jon's genitals. I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY.

But I also don't get offended when people call this website a mommy blog. Not at all. Because even though some people use that label to belittle the fact that there are women out there writing about their

experiences as mothers, how dare they? Who do they think they are? NO ONE WANTS TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR KID, YOU MOMMY BLOGGER! Yeah, that. Turns out lots of people want to hear about your kid. Oh, and did you hear? All this writing about motherhood is bringing people together and changing lives. So you go ahead and wrinkle your nose and dismiss those mommy blogs. And I'm going to sit over here at my laptop and be totally flattered that someone thinks I'm worthy to be among their ranks. Hell yes, I'm a mommy blogger. (...)
(Armstrong 2008c)

Armstrong exhibits great insight in terms of positioning her brand both outside and within the category. This strategy ensures that both categorizations of the blog are validated and the loyalty of the audience is maintained. Interestingly, the first paragraph reveals Armstrong's brand identity: a reading event meant to unsettle the reader. Her husband's Brazilian wax and her father's dismay at reading about it point to zany and abject aesthetics as prevalent brand attributes.

The second paragraph represents Armstrong's attempt to mitigate her brand's association with a negative term by re-signifying mommy blogging to denote a feminist agenda and a community building endeavour. Similarly, in a 2015 interview for *Cosmopolitan*, the blogger addresses the derogative undertones of the term and attempts to redefine it as a "radical act" (Friedman 2009a) by which the immaterial labour of mothering claims its due recognition. Mommy blogging represents for Armstrong an empowering pursuit as it gives voice to a socially dismissed group and offers them an opportunity to monetize their unacknowledged labour.

I think the term "mommy blogger" is a little dismissive. But that label is not something I can get rid of. I've embraced it because what we did — a lot of women who were in the first guard of bloggers — was

created [sic] a community in which to feel safe. We helped raise each other's kids, we comforted each other, and we gave voice to women who are so easily dismissed as "just a stay-at-home mom." We supported each other and stood up to say our stories were important. I mean, who the hell is going to hire a mom in Salt Lake City to write stories about parenthood and pay her a lot of money? But they didn't have to hire me. I hired myself. (...)
(Rudolph 2015)

In what can perhaps be construed as Armstrong's mommy blogging manifesto, she succinctly highlights the ethos of this product category: the creation of a community, of a safe space where individuals can freely share their everyday parenting experiences. Whilst product category might arguably be not the best suited eponym for mommy blogs, this synonymic relationship is a choice deliberately made. I employ terminology from the field of marketing rather than literary studies to argue that whilst dooce.com did fundamentally influence the whole genre and contributed to challenging patriarchal discourses, Armstrong's above attempt to re-signify the term is underpinned by the need to associate her brand with a positive image.

I build my argument on Friedman's assertions that Armstrong, together with Catherine Connors, Alice Bradley and Eden Marriott Kennedy⁴⁵, represent "star mommybloggers", who have in common not only demographic characteristics, but also similar hybrid subjectivities and public impact on normative motherhood discourses (Friedman 2013, 71–110). Friedman however notes that "Heather is arguably one of the most powerful personal bloggers of all time" (Friedman 2013, 97),

⁴⁵ Catherine Connors is the author of *Her Bad Mother*, Alice Bradley writes *Finslippy* and Eden Marriott Kennedy *Fussy*.

but does not provide an argument as to why that is. This question has not yet been answered in existing scholarship on mommy blogging, to my knowledge. My contention is that Armstrong's success is due to her branding and audience management insights, as well as dooce.com's product attributes and this study aims to offer concrete examples to support that.

I employ the verb re-signify to mean the reterritorialization of an injurious name as defined by Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power*⁴⁶. The term "mommy blogger" has, due to its portrayal in various mass media forums, acquired the status of "injurious" name. Mommy blogs were called "online shrine[s] to parental self-absorption" (Hochman 2005) and bloggers were presented as individuals seeking attention at the expense of their children's privacy and future wellbeing (Hochman 2005). Armstrong refutes the negative connotations of the

⁴⁶ Butler contends at the very core of subject formation resides the possibility of resistance through the re-signification of the very terms that call the subject into being in the first place (Butler 1997, 63–83). If the term is an injurious name, namely a name that reduces the subject it designates to an oppressed, diminished or disdained group, then the subject, albeit forced to inhabit the term so as to come into subjecthood, does have the power to resist by attempting to change its meaning.

"Consider the force of this dynamic of interpellation and misrecognition when the name is not a proper name but a social category, and hence a signifier capable of being interpreted in a number of divergent and conflictual ways. To be hailed as a "woman" or "Jew" or "queer" or "Black" or "Chicana" may be heard or interpreted as an affirmation or an insult, depending on the context in which the hailing occurs. (...) Consider the inversions of "woman" and "woman" depending on the staging and address of their performance, of "queer" and "queer", depending on pathologizing or contestatory modes. Both examples concern, not an opposition between reactionary and progressive usage, but rather a progressive usage that requires and repeats the reactionary in order to effect a subversive reterritorialization. (...) Called by an injurious name, I come into social being, and because I have a certain inevitable attachment to my existence, because a certain narcissism takes hold of any term that confers existence, I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially. (...) ...only by occupying – being occupied by – that injurious term can I resist and oppose it." (Butler 1997, 96, 99, 100, 104)

term and attempts to re-signify it as a positive and empowering pursuit. She declares herself to be a mommy blogger if mommy blogging is understood to mean the act of giving women authorial power to challenge traditional narratives of mothering, a tool to monetize their immaterial labour and an online space to congregate and offer each other support. Armstrong accepts thus being called into subjecthood by an injurious name and proceeds to re-territorialize it. I argue that this re-territorialisation, however, forms part of Armstrong's brand identity as a discourse marker of integrity and honesty. Armstrong capitalised the effect of her motherhood narrative to position specific values as fundamental to her human brand. The transgression of normative discourses around motherhood represented the foundation on which Armstrong built her image as sincere and nonconformist author. These brand attributes are prevalent in media features on Armstrong, with most journalists reiterating in different words McNichol's assertions that 'unflinching honesty' represents Armstrong's emblematic value (McNichol 2009; Belkin 2011; Belkin 2009; McCracken 2011; Canham 2006). I argue that this honesty is constructed both on a discursive and on an ideological level.

Friedman contends that Armstrong did not approach her writing with a feminist agenda, but rather transferred her "trademark irreverence" to her mothering experience (Friedman 2013, 4). I subscribe to this claim but also argue that Armstrong purposefully capitalised her readers' reaction to her irreverence in order to grow her blog's popularity. Not only did she strategically employ zany, abject, cute and interesting aesthetics, interpellation and the online reality

effect to grow her market visibility, but also she utilised her motherhood narrative with its normative transgressions as testament to her honesty. Chapter 3 will discuss this in greater depth with a focus on Armstrong's market positioning as a human brand and as a mommy blogger.

3.1 Interpellation and second-person narration: from writing technique to product attribute

Second-person narration is employed as a technique to interpellate readers into followers, with specific rhetorical devices such as apostrophe, hypophora and direct questions utilised to stimulate audience interaction and curiosity.

As Real As It May Seem, offers an example of an inverse hypophora, in which Armstrong recounts a strange dream and ends by asking her audience:

Have you ever had weird pregnancy dreams?
(Armstrong 2003n)

The post is followed by comments of both male and female readers who share their pregnancy dreams or express a desire to have them. What is noticeable is that readers respond not only to the blogger's question but also to other readers, extending thus the dialogic nature of the narrative beyond an indexical exchange, to a complex pattern of interaction encompassing other texts or visual narratives, and, most importantly, other readers. The consumer of text becomes thus a producer and the act of negotiating meaning with others and producing a personal narrative for them becomes an

engaging experience. The text is not passively consumed, but rather the text is experienced as an encounter with multiple actants and an invitation to become one of them. This not only fosters a sense of autonomy and relatedness, but also of competence. Readers are given the choice of interacting with the text, of feeling listened to by a community of like-minded consumers and also an opportunity to showcase their own storytelling prowess. Some readers capitalise on this opportunity and produce narrative bits which emulate the blogger's style.

robin (...)

I promise they will only get weirder. I had one where my skin was white and translucent and you could see EVERY SINGLE vien [sic] in my body, throbbing in colors that veins shouldn't be throbbing in. And then my baby looked up at me thru [sic] this thin skin and I just couldn't look at it.

Also had some really good ones where my baby was made out of plastic and poo'd [sic] macaroni and cheese. Don't ask me!
(Armstrong 2003n)

Robin's comment exemplifies a re-enactment of Dooce zany and abject aesthetics. The use of capitals and exclamation marks for emphasis, the potentially grotesque image of a foetus peering at its mother through her translucent skin or the reference to the unusual defecating habits of a plastic infant emulate Armstrong's depictions of abject motherhood. This familiarity with the Dooce brand attributes is seen in most reader comments.

eddeaux (...)

Wow! Women have all the fun. If you have a sex change can you get pregnant? It would be worth it for the vivid psycho dreams, the

bloating, the cramps, the morning sickness, the swollen joints, the constipation, the menstreul [sic] cycles, sitting when I have to pee... (Armstrong 2003n)

Eddeaux's observations are directed both at the blogger and at readers who shared their pregnancy experiences on the blog. He utilises humour and succinctly enlists abject manifestations of the pregnant body. He is engaged in an exchange with multiple actants and his immaterial labour contributes to reinforcing reader perceptions of interconnectedness. Interestingly, he also showcases how Armstrong's non-normative representation of the pregnant body is permeating public discourse. From Kristeva's conceptualisation of it as an object of fear due to its fluidity and problematic transcendence of the self/other boundary (1982) to Longhurst's notes on its normative control and confinement (2001), the pregnant body has been cast to the sphere of the private due to its threatening abjection. The discourse of mommy blogs in general (Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan 1994; Friedman 2013; Haines 2011), and dooce.com in particular, bring the material reality of the pregnant body to a public medium and challenge its repudiation. I argue that the unapologetic display of abject pregnancy on dooce.com reveals the contriteness of normative discourses whereby the messy body is ignored. Grounded in the masculine/feminine binary, with the feminine being the fluid, emotional and abject body (Creed 1993; Boak 2015), these discourses underpin its dismissal as Other. Eddeaux's comment points to this body and acknowledges its existence in its full abjection and, whether ironic or

not, this acknowledgement arguably signals a change in public pregnancy discourses.

The second common rhetorical role performed by the pronoun 'you' is that of apostrophe, a figure of speech which allows the author to address an imagined reader as if she were present. Armstrong utilises this device frequently to infuse her text with the sense of immediacy and interactivity generally attributed to dialogue. In *West by Northwest*, Armstrong expresses her gratitude for her readers' loyalty and positive comments.

Thank you for reading during this whole stressful relocation. I really hope you like these [a collection of pictures of her move to Utah], you who read this website and you who make viable, useful and sometimes frequent comments. I read every comment left on this site, even the ones where you call me a xenophobic whore-bitch and tell me to bite your ass. Don't think that I'm so cold that it doesn't hurt or make me cry on occasion. Usually, however, you all make me giggle. Thank God for you.

(Armstrong 2002h)

This example illustrates the blogger's narrative hail into active readership. Laudatory epithets such as "viable", "useful" or "frequent" strengthen apostrophe's interpellative undertones by positively reinforcing desired behaviour, appropriate commenting. The imagined addressee is the reader who, through her constructive and reverent contribution to the blog, transforms her passive consumption of text into an experiential reading event. This reader takes charge of her reading experience and autonomously chooses to engage with the blogger and other consumers within mutually-agreeable terms. Armstrong's gratitude represents a positive reinforcement of her

behaviour and an attempt to instil its reproduction in both existing and new consumers. Similarly to Althusser's policeman's hail, the blogger projects an interpellative call: 'thank you for being an active reader'. The act of reading the text places every consumer in the topographical position of subject called into being, or, more specifically, into active and engaged readership. Any ensuing action on the part of the reader, such as returning to the blog, browsing its archive for older posts, adding a dooce.com RSS feed, or posting a comment represent her acceptance of the active reader identity. This acceptance acts as a catalyst for the construction of an online community and foreruns the establishment of the Dooce brand community.

The success of Armstrong's interpellative calls resides in their strategic reiteration on the blog. In *Dear Reader and Occasional Commenter*, the blogger dedicates a whole post to discussing the social etiquette readers should abide by when interacting with her and other commenters. Written in epistolary second-person narration, the post starts by outlining the reason for writing:

So it's time I sit down and write about the comments on this website, because I really feel like it's a conversation that we need to have.
(Armstrong 2003a)

Armstrong expresses woeful surprise at receiving negative comments on a personal blog. Interestingly, she accepts "massive (...) vilification" as a possible consequence for expressing opinions on a community blog such as *Metafilter*. She clearly demarcates comments that contain opposing viewpoints, denouncing only those aimed at causing distress. She praises commenters who are "funny, sympathetic and wonderfully, refreshingly frank" (Armstrong 2003a) about their own

lives, outlining in the process desirable discursive tropes of engagement such as humour, honesty and empathy. It is important to notice that she demands these strategies be used not only when addressing her but also other commenters. Through phrases such as “it’s hard to abide comments that attack me or other people who make viable comments” or “think the majority of my readers, (...), find it annoying that they have to sift through all that noise to get to the comments from people who have something legitimate to say” (Armstrong 2003a), the blogger establishes a shared perspective between her and her loyal followership. She also delineates a shared virtual space in which readers and blogger enjoy positive interactions and suffer together from aggravating comments. This sets the foundation of a shared virtual community who understand the brand attributes and jointly enjoy their reading experience. *Dear Reader and Occasional Commenter* summarises these rules of engagement in epistolary form.

And so I guess I should establish some guidelines for commenting on this website, even though I know they will be totally disregarded and that the 13-yr olds in Wisconsin are going to try and break my site like they did on Friday, but maybe things would be better if we all tried the following three things:

1. Please read all of the comments before you make a comment, if only to prevent yourself from repeating something that has already been said. I think I can safely say that we all fucking know that Avril is French for April, please don’t point it out **again**.

2. Please do not use any HTML tags in your comments, as I have turned that option off and your comments will not look like you thought they would. If you’d like to post a URL, just paste the address into your comment. I’m sorry, but that picture of your sore red anus will not show up if you call an image tag.

3. If you're going to bash Britney, at least say you're sorry afterward.

Happy commenting.

Love,
Dooce
(Armstrong 2003a)

Zany and abject aesthetics underpin Armstrong's interpellative call into responsible readership. The deliberate choice of coarse language, the imagery of an inflamed anus or the reference to Britney Spears showcase the subtle process by which Armstrong guides the transformation of her writing style into a product attribute. It is consistency of use that facilitates this transformation and fosters reader trust in the authenticity and integrity of the brand. The example above showcases Armstrong educating her audience on the rules of engagement with others. Blogging handbooks advise aspiring authors to invest monetary resources in moderating comments on their blogs given that community building is a delicate endeavour, yet an extremely fruitful investment (Rich 2014; Rowse and Garrett 2012). Their argument is supported by marketing studies, which demonstrate the benefits of brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005; Füller, Matzler, and Hoppe 2008; Martínez-López et al. 2016b). The ARC model outlined in Chapter 1 offers a useful framework to analyse Armstrong's post and inscribe it within an overarching audience engagement strategy.

I argue that Armstrong consistently employs discursive devices to promote reader autonomy, competence and relatedness to herself and

to other consumers. The example above positions readers as active agents in determining whether the comment function represents a liability, with Wisconsin teenagers as the antithesis of desired engagement. In other words, readers are given a sense of autonomy in their commenting practice and, equally important, they are re-assured that the safe environment they are creating will be safeguarded through authorial intervention. Secondly, readers are educated into becoming competent contributors. Zany aesthetics ensure that the blogger's tone is not condescending, but rather instructive and entertaining. Thirdly, Armstrong's interpellative strategies target consumer relatedness both to her and to other readers. Relatedness has been shown to be a decisive factor in brand attachment, having a direct positive correlation to it (Austin and Vancouver 1996b; Thomson 2006; Deci and Ryan 2000; Loro and Braig 2015). By educating her readers to demonstrate humour, empathy and frankness when interacting with each other, Armstrong promotes the construction of a social sphere, a safe and open online environment. Inclusion in a group, a sense of closeness to others and of care facilitate the development of strong feelings of relatedness (La Guardia et al. 2000; Deci and Ryan 2000; Thomson 2006).

Interpellation into engaged consumer behaviour is also orchestrated in narratively complex posts such as *Happy Birthday Peanut Butter!* Published on Armstrong's husband's birthday, the post is constructed as a Chaucerian frame-story.

(...)

Jon's older sister recently found my website and sent me this in an email (I thought it was appropriate to reprint here given today's significance):

- - - - -

SUBJECT: Untold Stories – Family Insider!

MESSAGE: As Heather's sister-in-law, I thought I'd let everyone know that, while late, we did fulfill at least several of Heather's B-Day requests. These included a meal that didn't revisit her all afternoon and a new purse! (Women need larger and larger purses.) While family members may not respond to these epistles, we do know some of the inside details.

For those of you who follow this twosome, I played with "Blurbo" while young. Memory: his favorite toy at 6 months was a ping-pong ball he spit out of his mouth on cue. (Most of you maybe horrified that he was allowed to play with anything smaller than an elbow. Kids raised in his generation by people in my generation were on their own.)

We danced with him daily. (...) While most "Moes" (mormons[sic]) were listening to AM canned radio in Utah in the 1960s, Blurbo was listening to anything his older brother and sister could find that even appeared revolutionary. (...)

Okay Heather—I'm outting you! Readers, demand the real story of "Heather's Wedding Dress" or "The Day I Bought My Wedding Dress in a Store I'd Never Visit While Living in Los Angeles."

- - - - -

Since my birthday and Jon's birthday fall in such close succession, we get to celebrate Christmas in July with lots of presents and bacon. This year I'm getting Jon a ping-pong ball so that he can practice that trick and perform it the next time we have dinner at my mom's house. (Armstrong 2003o)

The post is particularly illustrative of a double interpellation into engaged readership. Armstrong's text, demarcated by the dotted lines

and by Dooce zany aesthetics, represents the outer frame of the story. The blogger stages an indirect interpellation in this frame, embodied in the sentence "Jon's older sister recently found my website and sent me this in an email" (Armstrong 2003o). Here Armstrong points to a desired scenario of interaction with the blog: a reader, in this case the sister-in-law, encounters the website accidentally and becomes a loyal follower who engages with the blogger through email.

The second frame of the post is the email itself, which makes extensive use of apostrophe and, surprisingly, does not address the blogger, but rather the audience, in particular the regular readers of the blog. The author begins by introducing herself as "Heather's sister-in-law" and reveals that several of the blogger's birthday wishes were fulfilled. The meal is a reference to previous posts in which Armstrong bemoaned the acid reflux caused by her pregnancy. Phrases such as "for those of you who follow this twosome" or the name she uses in inverted commas to refer to her brother represent in-group references accessible only to loyal followers of the blog. She engages in a process of brand construction akin to what regular readers perform when they utilise Dooce to refer to the RL Armstrong. This anthropomorphism is applied to blurbomat.com, Jon's personal blog, with the resulting appellative Blurbo.

Armstrong's sister-in-law becomes an active reader by responding to the blogger's hail and proceeds to occupy the topographical position of author casting her own interpellating hail. She ends her email with an imperative command. Emulating Dooce zany aesthetics of using long sentences for dramatic effect, she invites

readers to “demand the real story of “Heather’s Wedding Dress” or “The Day I Bought My Wedding Dress in a Store I’d Never Visit While Living in Los Angeles”” (Armstrong 2003o). The reader performs thus a call for action and engagement with the brand whilst carefully abiding by the rules of community engagement. She exhibits empathy, honesty and humour, explains that “Moes” means Mormons and is careful to justify the irresponsible behaviour of allowing a six-month baby to play with a table-tennis ball as a common misadventure when parenting was entrusted to older siblings.

The outer frame of the post is built around narrative elements present in the story: the ping-pong ball and Jon/Blurbo. This serves the double purpose of engendering a sense of narrative closure and symmetry, whilst simultaneously re-affirming desired reader behaviours.

3.2 Zany, abject, interesting and cute aesthetics: from writing style to product attribute

Personal blog narrative techniques and aesthetics morph into product attributes by way of two main processes. The first relates to their strategic and consistent reiteration both on the blog and on social media. Armstrong’s trademark rhetorical and aesthetic features retain their narrative integrity in all blog chronotopes and media channels. They inform the representation of the everyday and confer the text its aesthetically interesting valuation. Through their reiteration and consistency across time and across various platforms, these features

come to be perceived as indicative of the Dooce brand, with consumers expecting them to underpin every reading experience.

The second process by which these features become brand attributes is their linkage to the brand values of honesty and authenticity. The abject, for example, engenders, through its taboo nature, a sense of intimacy between blogger and audience. By sharing information deemed private, Armstrong creates the illusion of genuine self-disclosure, catalysing the audience's perception of her as a close friend, and also as an honest and rugged individual. Similarly, zany aesthetics position the blogger as an unbridled commentator of the everyday, casting an unforgiving light on motherhood and her transition to it. The development of aesthetic features into brand attributes both informs and strengthens the construction of the brand identity, with the affirmation of brand values being a quintessential part of the process.

The abject, particularly its representation in relation to defecation, constipation and flatulence, is an intrinsic part of the blog's textual fabric, so much so that it becomes inherent to the brand image. From the creation of a 'Poop' tag for easy access to posts related to the topic, Armstrong's proclivity for open discussion of excretory functions is well documented in the blog archive. This proclivity represents one of Armstrong's points of differentiation from other popular mommy bloggers, given that none of them, to my knowledge, features abject aesthetics so prominently. I argue therefore that Armstrong utilised this aesthetic category both to offer an interesting and novel reading experience but also to underpin her claim to authenticity and brand integrity. In what follows, four examples will be reproduced in order to

highlight the consistent use of what will become Dooce trademark aesthetics in distinct blog chronotopes spanning from 2005 to 2015, with specific links to branding considerations being further elaborated in Chapters 4 and 5.

Someone just told me that he remembered one very specific line from a post I wrote when Leta was a year old, and he calls upon it in his life quite frequently. And I thought to myself, if “when you become a parent there is no such thing as a leisurely poop” is my legacy, then fuck yeah!

(Armstrong 2015k)

If I could give you any useful advice this month it would be to choose a partner in life who isn’t afraid to say FART out loud. Life is too short to be uptight about something so small, and I doubt anyone who would overreact about such a thing would survive a single holiday in this house let alone be willing to pick up a box of tampons for you on the way home from work. Your father farted loudly during the first ten minutes of our first date, and after an awkward moment of silence between us when we were both trying to figure out whether or not the other one would run I said “Awesome!” I knew right then that your father was the man of my dreams.

(Armstrong 2005c)

Happy birthday number two! To celebrate we gave you an enema! I can’t think of a more appropriate way to celebrate a birthday in the Armstrong Family except for maybe a colonoscopy. We thought we had cured your constipation a few months ago when we reduced the amount of milk in your diet, but then all of a sudden you decided you no longer liked to go poop, and that is your right as an American.

(Armstrong 2006c)

Hi, my name is Heather and I used to have a career and make lots of money. Now I poop while my daughter sits at my feet and plays with Tampax, and that’s what I consider a successful morning.

(Armstrong 2005b)

In the examples above the abject is represented both on a lexical and narrative level through scenes depicting bowel movements or

flatulence. Constipation seems to be extended from blogger to her offspring, with clysters offered as birthday presents. In the chronotope of the blog, the abject represents an eruption of the Real, pointing to the materiality of human bodies. This eruption of the Real endows the characters with a false materiality and creates the online reality effect. As an aesthetic object, the abject precipitates a traumatic encounter with the viewer's own materiality. Its aesthetic valuation resides in a simultaneous rejection and attraction experienced by the onlooking subject. Readers might find the many posts about constipation, flatulence, haemorrhoids or the particularly difficult task of urination during the final months of pregnancy, potentially distressing to read. Yet, their aesthetic judgement is likely to supersede revulsion and become sublimated as voyeuristic fascination and, perhaps, relatedness to a group. Readers are enticed to share their own stories of abjection and by doing so they contribute to the formation of an in-group. The complex valuation of this category is particularly important because it differentiates Armstrong's aesthetics from instantiations of the abject in different art forms, making it more palatable and, most importantly, allowing it to evolve into a brand attribute. This reaction is orchestrated through the skilful combination of the abject with zany and occasionally cute aesthetics with the outcome of irreverent, humorous and overall entertaining reading experiences.

I argue that Armstrong strategically established a correlation between abject/zany aesthetics, self-disclosure and honesty, with the purposes of presenting stylistic consistency as testament of her sincerity. This link has emerged gradually through a discreet thematic

move from sharing her constipation story for humorous and community-building effect, to discussing the effects of pregnancy and birth on the female body in ways that challenge the social and normative Western discourse and its idealized versions of womanhood.

Armstrong's abject and zany aesthetics precipitate in the reader an encounter with the materiality of the female body, an encounter that reveals the contrite and restrictive nature of idealized femininity, and points to the inherent fear and abhorrence of the female body deeply embedded in Western culture (Creed 1993; Ussher 2006). I utilise the term Western femininity to refer to the idealised version of women portrayed in Western art. I employ feminist theories on the monstrous feminine⁴⁷ and the connection between femaleness and the abject to outline the parameters of this idealised representation and discuss its implications in the Dooce brand creation process.

⁴⁷ Feminist critic, Barbara Creed utilizes Kristeva's theories to define the concept of monstrous feminine as what is considered abject, repulsive, and gruesome about women. "All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (Creed 1993, 1). The etymology of the phrase she coins indicates the pivotal role gender plays in the representations of the female abject. Creed notes that she used

"the term 'monstrous-feminine [because] the term 'female monster' implies a simple reversal of 'male monster'. The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience. (...) The phrase 'monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity." (Creed 1993, 3)

I subscribe to Creed's argument that femininity itself has been traditionally perceived as monstrous, that the signifier women has been equated with " 'biological freaks' whose bodies represent a fearful and threatening form of sexuality" (Creed 1993, 6). Ussher traces the concept of the monstrous feminine back to Aristotle and his assertion that "Woman is literally a monster: a failed and botched male who is only born female due to an excess of moisture and of coldness during the process of conception" (Ussher 2006, 1). Female monstrosity is thus linked directly to an absence of the phallus, an idea that has underpinned the historical Western representation of womanhood, including but not restricted to the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan (Ussher 2006).

The iconic visual representation of the Western idealized woman is the nude devoid of any abject reminders of human mortality.

“The female nude, icon of idealised feminine sexuality, most clearly transforms the base nature of woman’s nakedness into culture, into ‘art’, all abhorrent reminders of her fecund corporeality removed – secretions, pubic hair, genitals, and disfiguring veins or blemishes all left out of the frame”.

(Ussher 2006, 3)

This idealised version of womanhood is constructed on the historical dichotomy between the female archetypal roles of idealized angel and vilified whore (Rooney 2006). Narrative and visual representations of these roles have evolved into contemporary metaphors of womanhood, into social expectations and rules. Discourses of ‘appropriate’ feminine behaviour and of the female body converge in the pregnant woman and become perhaps more obvious given the absence of a self/child boundary in pregnancy. Kristeva points to the ambivalence caused by this absence (Kristeva 1982), while Tyler conceptualises it as a form of ‘transitional subjectivity’, as the woman negotiates her identity moving from pregnancy, through birth, to becoming a mother (Tyler 2001, 124). Armstrong positions her narrative both within and outside normative discourses. The textual and visual rendition of her pregnancy both re-affirms and challenges existing norms, as it will be illustrated in the excerpts below.



(Armstrong 2009f)



(Armstrong 2009h)

Both images belong to the *Photo Collection* series that document Armstrong's second pregnancy. The first example captures

Armstrong in a common maternal pose, with one hand supporting her back while the other is affectionately protecting her belly. Her facial expression looks serene and content. The pose and expression embodied in this image is replicated in all the other photographs in the collection. This visual representation of the pregnant body upholds disciplinary discourses of appropriate behaviour, clothing and attitude. Armstrong positions herself as angelic, wrapped in maternal halo and exuding serenity. Even though in writing she is vocal about the physical toll of pregnancy, her countenance does not reveal any sign of exhaustion. In this respect, she perpetuates a normative image repertoire wherein representations of maternal stress, fatigue or isolation are absent (Matthews and Wexler 2000). Western media rarely features images of everyday pregnant women, resulting in a gap between public representations of pregnancy and the lived experience of common women (Nash 2014; Nash 2012). The pregnant body was altogether absent in mainstream media until the 1990s when Demi Moore's iconic image on the cover of *Vanity Fair* engendered a tradition of photographic documentation of the sexy 'celebrity baby bumps' (Boak 2015, 296; Nash 2014, 243). Although Tyler claims that Moore's photograph challenged dominant discourses of female sexuality (Tyler 2001), I contend that her representation is directed at a male viewer and it therefore operates within the binary opposition angel/whore intrinsic to the male gaze⁴⁸. Current mass media messages

⁴⁸ I employ the term male gaze to mean a manner of treating women's bodies as objects to be desired and surveyed. I utilise Mulvey's assertions regarding hegemonic masculinity and narrative cinematic conventions, according to which the film spectator oscillates between two forms of looking at the female image:

regarding the sexualisation of the pregnant body arguably support this view. On one hand there has been a proliferation of visual representations of 'yummy mummies', sexualised pregnant celebrities (Nash 2012; Nash 2014). On the other, however, their public performance in revealing clothing elicits heavy criticism (Boak 2015). Maternity combined with sexuality seems to be both fetishised and disdained, pregnant celebrities being reprimanded for attempting to please the very gaze that sexualised them. Armstrong's photograph represents the antithesis of this pose. The 'appropriateness' of her demeanour inscribes Armstrong's visual representation within normative discourses of the pregnant body as a non-sexual body. Despite being an obvious symbol of human reproduction, the 'good' maternal body was traditionally relegated outside the realm of sexuality (Longhurst 2012; Davis-Floyd 2003).

The second picture however surprises the reader with a representation of pregnancy that contravenes social and medical norms. Cigarette in mouth, package rolled up her T-shirt sleeve, can in jeans and doughnuts in hand, Armstrong appears the embodiment of quintessential vilified mothering. Her appearance carries visual cues pertaining to the image repertoire of 'white trash' America⁴⁹. Her

voyeuristic looking underpinned by a controlling gaze and fetishistic looking supported by an obsessive focus on erotic details (Mulvey 1975).

⁴⁹ I employ the term white trash to mean "the visible form of whiteness – viewed from a distance and degraded by dominant whiteness" as defined by Wray and Newitz in their seminal work *White Trash – Race and Class in America* (1997, 5). By employing this term I am mindful that as a cultural category it serves a two-fold function: "it is way of naming actually existing white people who occupy the economic and social margins of American life, and it is a set of myths and stereotypes that justify their continued marginalization" (Wray and Newitz 1997, 172).

hairstyle, makeup and tattoo reinforce the belligerent pose of a disgruntled pregnant woman. The position of the cigarette in the corner of her mouth and her overall countenance constitute iconographic identifiers of bad mothering by way of their association with prevalent white trash imagery in American pop culture. This imagery stems from a long literary tradition (Docka 2002, 24) and, through tropes of the grotesque or humour, it identifies the underprivileged whites in the rural South as lascivious, uneducated, prone to violence, possessing crude manners and low moral standards (Wray and Newitz 1997; Docka 2002; Hartigan 1997). On a cursory glance, most viewers would assume the can neatly tucked in Armstrong's trousers is an alcoholic beverage, likely due to the above-mentioned iconographic associations. The fact that it is in effect a soft drink arguably serves a three-fold function: it offers comic relief and thus mitigates against audience disapproval; it reinforces the brand aesthetics, particularly the zany; and lastly, it challenges current normative discourses on nutrition and fitness in pregnancy.

Magazine studies offer useful insights into the current scrutiny of the pregnant body with respect to health and fitness in Western discourse (Machin and Thornborrow 2003; D. D. Johnston and Swanson 2003; Kim and Ward 2004; Sha and Kirkman 2009; Nash 2011). The 'yummy mummy' iconography has penetrated the realm of the everyday, reinforcing dominant beauty imperatives. Nash notes that "a disciplined and objectified pregnant body is equated with freedom or liberation for middle-class women" (Nash 2011, 50), its biomedical surveillance entailing not only fitness regimes but also nutritional

control. Feminist scholars have pointed to the medicalization of women's bodies in the West, especially with regards to pregnancy and childbirth (Davis-Floyd 2003; Ussher 2006; Nash 2011; E. Martin 2001). While they did not reflect specifically on discourses around nutrition, I argue that current pregnancy dietary norms reinforce the social control of the female body.

The focal position high-sugar food occupies in Armstrong's staged photograph points to a specific authorial intent. The blogger is arguably over-imposing the moral and social negative valuations of the cultural category onto nutritional choices that transgress current normative standards in order to challenge prevalent healthism discourses. A cursory survey of medical literature reveals that the pregnant body is heavily regulated in terms of diet and fitness requirements (Bravo and Noya 2014; J. Jones, Housman, and McAleese 2010; Derbyshire et al. 2006; Siega-Riz, Bodnar, and Savitz 2002). Women's magazines reinforce these disciplinary ideologies and, regardless of their readers' compliance with or resistance to their messages, they perpetuate normative ideologies and myths (Sha and Kirkman 2009; Nash 2011; D. D. Johnston and Swanson 2003). Armstrong admittedly positions her photograph in response to these discourses. The text accompanying the image supports this claim and through humour, as the trope of quiet subversion, points to the pressures women face as part of their body's institutionalised surveillance.

I can't believe I'm going to go ahead and admit this but, Internet, I've been eating powdered doughnuts THIS WHOLE TIME: (...) Just think about all those empty calories screwing with the baby's brain

development. I know, I know. YOU'VE REALLY CROSSED THE LINE THIS TIME, ARMSTRONG!
(Armstrong 2009h)

Hyperbole and apostrophe, underpinned by zany discourse markers, reveal the medical vilification of sugar. Consumption of "empty calories" is presented as the ultimate transgression, humour and hyperbole functioning here as tropes of subversion. Armstrong exposes contemporary narratives of healthism whilst ensuring her readers' experience remains pleasurable. The consumption of her text is not passive, yet the narrative is not directly prescriptive or militant. It is up to readers to decide if their reading experience remains in the realm of entertainment or if it enters that of reflection. In this respect, we could deduce that Armstrong aims to stimulate reader autonomy and competence. By subtly educating her audience through laughter, she creates an environment where conversations around normative discourses can be started.

Although the photographic representation of pregnancy on dooce.com largely supports traditional motherhood iconography, her narrative represents a departure from paternalistic ideologies. The text that accompanies the above image of angelic pregnant Armstrong stands testament to that.

First of all, how much does that photo look like a recreation of the new Pepsi logo? Seriously, go look at the new Pepsi logo and tell me it doesn't look like the belly of a pregnant woman who refuses to buy maternity clothes. Or maybe the profile of a someone [sic] who had a serious run-in with a beef burrito.

Yesterday I wore a set of ridiculously tight work-out clothes when I picked up Leta from school, and as I walked in the door one of the kids in her class who was pretending to nap on a tiny cot sat up straight,

pointed in horror at my belly and screamed, "YOU'RE HUGE!" I guess I hadn't seen this particular kid in several weeks because of my book tour, so I can understand how the growth of my torso might have jarred her a bit. And because this kid has at times been aggressive with Leta I sort of fell prey to my more sinister instincts. Meaning I instantly contorted my hands and arms to look like bear claws, snarled my upper lip and then ROARED. WHILE LUNGING AT HER. I don't know what came over me, it just seemed like the right thing to do. I'll admit, that wasn't one of my finer moments. But there is only so much fun you can have with all this extra body just hanging around, and scaring the living shit out of kids just happens to be at the top of that list. (Armstrong 2009f)

By constructing a visual simile between her picture, the Pepsi logo and the body of a 'bad' pregnant woman who transgresses the norms of 'appropriate' attire, Armstrong admittedly aims to ensure her brand image of non-conformist female author remains intact. Taken out of context, the photograph upholds normative discourses of the 'good' pregnant body, as discussed above. The text's aim is clearly to disturb this interpretation, however, this disruption is primarily motivated by branding considerations, rather than a feminist agenda. I argue that Armstrong's iconographic representations of pregnancy are underpinned by a strategic image decision to present herself as physically attractive. Armstrong's attractiveness responds to an aesthetic pre-requisite of human brands to portray themselves as visually appealing. I argue that Armstrong's visual representation of pregnancy fails to render her experience of fatigue or physical discomfort, which was otherwise extensively documented in writing, as it will be further discussed below.

The text displays the angelic pregnant woman morphing into an aggressive monster who succumbs to "sinister instincts, has "bear

claws", snarls, roars, lunges at a little girl and is not only unapologetic about it but feels entitled to it. Her representation as belligerent creature seemingly devoid of maternal instincts shocks the reader. In a sense it can be seen as a depiction of the female monstrous, of the potential violence and strength harboured by pregnant women. This shocking realisation contravenes the metaphors of fecund femininity, pure, angelic and mothering of all living things, particularly of small creatures. It disturbs a comfortable reading practice and creates the interesting by making the reader voyeuristically enjoy a behaviour forbidden by social norms. It simultaneously precipitates in the reader an encounter with the metaphors of pregnancy and womanhood he harbours, potentially revealing their contrived nature. Depicting a behaviour socially and culturally unacceptable, yet not really harmful in its consequences, the blogger creates a space in which the reader can both identify with a taboo desire to scare a child, particularly a naughty one, and distance himself from the scene to either reflect upon the fabricated nature of social norms or feel righteous indignation toward the blogger's behaviour. The use of humour and hyperbole as rhetorical marks of the zany enables Armstrong to create a safe space of self disclosure in which traditional metaphors can be challenged and readers can discuss taboo topics, under the proviso of fun and exaggeration for comic effects.

This proviso applies to Armstrong's rendition of her first pregnancy narrative as well. The following example illustrates the same rhetorical tropes underpinned this time by abject aesthetics.

(...) but at least now I can smell shampoo without taking a shower in my own vomit, (...)

Another inconvenient side-effect of having a six-plus pound critter fighting for space in my belly is being constantly reunited with the taste and texture of things I've just eaten. (...) A horizontal esophagus [sic] seems to exacerbate the heartburn, so while I'm trying to relax and sleep, a chunk of the bagel I had yesterday morning is dancing on my back teeth with the red onion from the stew I had for dinner earlier in the evening. My dog is constantly smelling my breath and licking my face, searching for bits of the Baja Fresh burrito I ate last week.

You can now understand just how wonderfully magical it is to be a ripe pregnant woman, belly widening inches per day, grumpy and irritable from sleep deprivation, burping acidic salsa into her dog's face. Don't let anyone ever tell you this isn't an exquisitely beautiful experience.

(Armstrong 2004a)

The image of a critter, a creature resembling a violent hairy gremlin, inhabiting a pregnant woman's body arguably forms part of the horror image repertoire embedded in Western culture. Creed enlists imagery of fetuses as heterochthonous life forms or of maternal bodies exuding biological fluids within the monstrous-feminine iconography (1993). Armstrong creates an abject aesthetic object in which normative visual metaphors are challenged by the depiction of pregnancy as the colonisation of the female body by an alien creature causing sleep deprivation, gastroesophageal reflux and eructation. The blogger utilizes phrases traditionally associated with the sublimated vision of pregnancy, such as "wonderfully magical", "ripe pregnant woman", "exquisitely beautiful experience", and, by contrasting them to the abject pregnant body and its secretions, challenges their validity. Armstrong's post is reflective of the ambivalence women feel regarding

motherhood. Writing in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir described these conflicted feelings as

... a drama that is acted out within the woman herself. She feels it as at once an enrichment and an injury; the fetus is a part of her body, and it is a parasite that feeds on it; she possesses it, and she is possessed by it; it represents the future and, carrying it, she feels herself vast as the world; but this very opulence annihilates her, she feels that she herself is no longer anything.
(de Beauvoir 1949, 495)

Armstrong clearly challenges traditional discourses of motherhood and brings to the public sphere the hitherto private ambivalence that many pregnant women face. This does not however differentiate Armstrong, given that, as Friedman notes, the four star mommy bloggers have all persistently decried patriarchal motherhood and through their influence have paved the way for women across the mamasphere to denounce systemic inequalities and be met with recognition. Catherine Connors, for example, disputed discriminatory airline policies, which required her to conceal her breastfeeding practice (Friedman 2013, 71–110). Friedman identifies a positive correlation between unmasking patriarchal discourses and popularity, readers actively seeking accounts that demystify traditional motherhood. She notes that what the four star bloggers have in common is the fact they did not achieve their fame by becoming experts, but rather by openly discussing their contradictions and fears of being “bad” mothers (Friedman 2013, 73–74).

I support Friedman’s assertions but argue that Armstrong utilises both types of narratives primarily as brand awareness tools, rather than feminist radical acts. Out of the four star bloggers, Armstrong’s prose is

the one least straightforwardly feminist. Whilst her text does expose patriarchal conventions, being a radical act with respect to discussing post-partum depression, it never veers from its primary function, which is to offer a pleasurable reading event. An enjoyable consumption practice is consistently offered as part of the brand's promise to shock, but most of all, to entertain. In the excerpt above, for example, the norm-challenging narrative exists under the disclaimer of exaggeration for humorous effects. The abject is always underpinned by zany rhetorical strategies such as hyperbole, humour, or sarcasm, ensuring thus that it produces a pleasurable reading experience. Armstrong's content and image choices consistently demonstrate that she is acutely aware of her brand positioning and that maintaining a positive brand image is her foremost priority.

3.3 Constructing a human brand: the representation of the everyday and the online reality effect

The reality effect of personal blogs entails a collusion between referent and signifier by which the blogger persona, the online avatar of the RL blog author, is bestowed ontological weight. The audience's perception of avatar personality traits as RL characteristics represents the referential illusion, which allows a personal blogger to become a human brand. Through a process of semantic and visual encoding, the blogger constructs a narrative avatar whose traits appeal to her audience. This sub-chapter will analyse the narrative strategies involved in the creation of a reality effect on dooce.com and the role it played in

the human brand creation process, particularly in the representation of Dooce as a sophisticated, sincere, exciting and rugged individual.

Photographs and videos, as visual instantiations of that-has-been (Barthes 1981), are instrumental in generating the online reality effect, given that, combined with appropriate narrative cues, they can extend their power of authentication to all blog avatars. Photographs perform a visual trick by which the reader is led to equate the physical existence of the body with its narrative representation. In *The Lovely Glow Effect*, for example, Armstrong employs photographs alongside interpellative strategies, abject and zany aesthetics to offer readers a representation of the everyday in which referent and signifier collude to bestow the text with ontological weight.

Many have asked about how I get certain photos to look fuzzy or warm and mashed potato-y [sic]. And perhaps it's time that I come clean and admit that it has nothing to do with the camera or how I take pictures.

It's all about cheating in Photoshop.

(...) Here's a photograph of me at age three, and I'm so irritatingly sweet that you just want to slap me, don't you?

Before



1. Open your photograph in Photoshop.

(...)

6. The result will be a little dark and you can play around with curves or lightness or whatever technique you want to use to lighten the photo.

7. Extraordinary!

After



One hour after this photo was taken I swallowed that gold chain around my neck. Thus began my ongoing, illustrious relationship with constipation.

(Armstrong 2003b)

Written as a response to recurrent readers who expressed a desire to emulate the Dooce photographic style, the post features a technique for “taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary” (Armstrong 2003b). Rhetorically, the text is underpinned by apostrophe, whilst on a discourse level it reproduces the conventions of instruction manuals. This entry is not only illustrative of how interpellation into active readerhood functions, but also of the online reality effect. The

image of the younger Armstrong is simultaneously presented as an example of visual enhancement made possible by photographic software, and as proof of the 'realness' of the blogger and her story. By claiming to reveal a visual trick, the blogger actually uses said trick to further solidify her narrative's claim to truth and lifelikeness. The caption establishes a connection between the image and the content published on the blog since its inception, given that constipation represents a primary narrative hook, symbolically superimposing thus the photograph's power of authentication to the blog's entire narrative fabric.

As with the transformation of writing techniques into product attributes, it is repetition and consistency across different chronotopes that allow the referential illusion to become a brand feature. Through repeated and consistent exposure to it, readers expect to encounter the referential illusion in every consumption experience. This opens the opportunity for the blogger to orchestrate the narrative creation of her online persona and build a human brand around her desired core values of honesty and non-conformism. The photographic collection documenting her first pregnancy provides an illustrative example of this. Three excerpts will be reproduced and analysed below, the first one belonging to the series' inaugural post, *Getting off My Soon-to-be Stretch Marked Ass: 15 Weeks, Photo Collection*, published on the 7th of August 2003.

The past three months have been a creative nightmare here at Dooce Headquarters, primarily because the parasite in my body has made it so that the definition of a good day is one in which I get up and actually brush my hair. Days when I actually take a shower or break out a tube of mascara are classified as really good, and on the rare

occasion that I take a shower **and** brush my hair, I award myself gold stars of excellence.

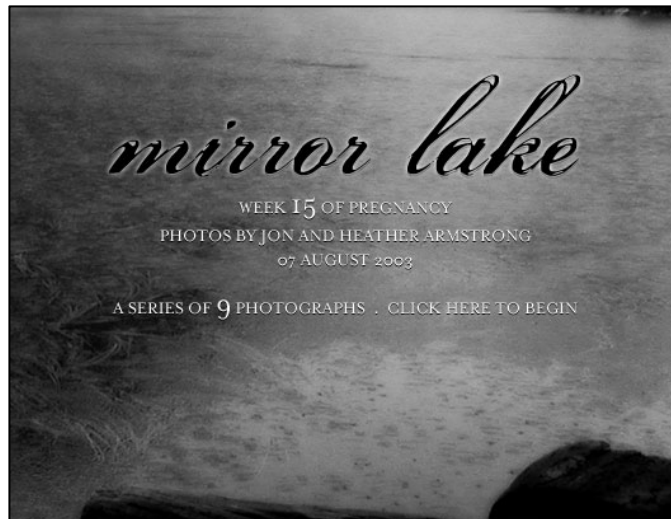
(...)

I've decided that as a means of self-motivation I'm going to try and publish a weekly set of photos that will include a status snapshot of my growing belly. This may or may not work, and in a couple weeks I may abandon the whole idea because I'm lazy like that. But I keep thinking that it would be fantastic at the end of this pregnancy to have a weekly collection of photos that shows me getting bigger and bigger and slower and slower on the hiking trail, if only to be able to show it to the baby when he/she is old enough to respond to guilt and manipulation.

(...)

Launch Mirror Lake⁵⁰

⁵⁰ This text is hyperlinked and it opens a pop-up window which features photos of the couple's hike at Mirror Lake, Utah, with the last picture being of Armstrong's belly at fifteen weeks. There are a total of nine photographs, three of which are reproduced here. There are two types of photographs published on the blog: photographs inserted immediately after or before text and photographs published as special collections. The latter ones are not inserted in the post body but open in a separate custom-size window, which aims to replicate the effect of a scrapbook. The photos are presented on a background designed by the blogger. Underneath the photographs there are usually hyperlinked numbers allowing the reader the option to both view the photographs in the pre-arranged order or to skip ahead. Most collections feature captions for each photo. The text usually describes the visual content and, in true zany fashion, end with a punch line aimed to disrupt the reader's passive consumption of content through humour or surprising, often irreverent, comments. This particular collection, Mirror Lake, does not have any captions under the photographs.



(Armstrong 2003p)

Armstrong employs scriptotherapy, or writing for therapeutic effects, as professed impetus for self-disclosing narratives. Her commitment to keeping a photographic record of her pregnancy is presented as a motivational strategy and a creativity enhancement tool. From a branding perspective, this pledge has two significant consequences: it generates audience engagement and it positions Dooce as a rugged and sincere individual. By making herself accountable to her readers, Armstrong bestows the audience with the responsibility of a support network summoned to aid her at a difficult time. The serial release of the photographic documentary stimulates consumer intrinsic curiosity and aims to foster their loyalty. Zany and abject commentary supports the imagery and ensures the reading experience is positive and readers remain engaged. The seemingly uncensored self-disclosure encourages the audience to perceive Dooce as a rugged and sincere individual, a non-conformist who is unafraid of revealing the 'truth' about pregnancy. The text reiterates the abject simile of the foetus as parasite ensuring stylistic and aesthetic consistency is retained throughout.

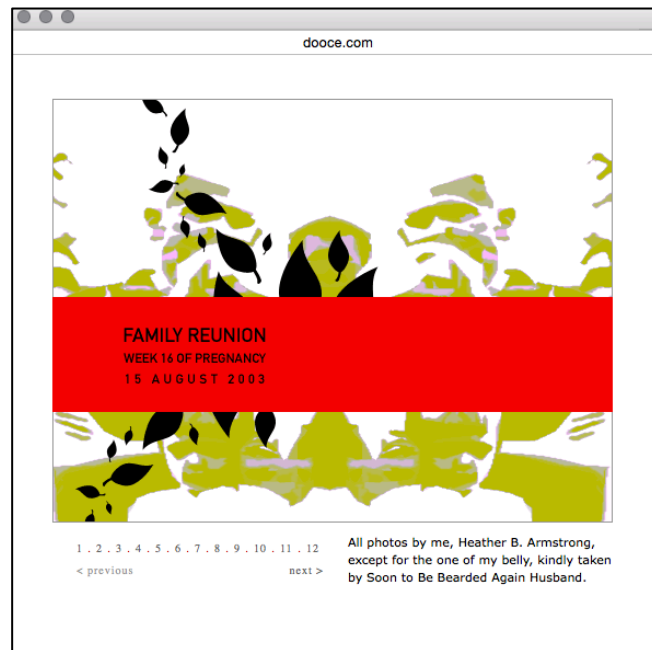
Photographs both support the narrative and establish a point of differentiation. Images capture aspects of the loci of the everyday inhabited by the blogger, the act of looking involving thus the audience in an exchange whereby the 'private' becomes 'public' and the boundaries between individual and collective memory are blurred. What differentiates Armstrong from other mommy blogs resides not in the presence of a visual documentation of the everyday, but rather in its aesthetically pleasing display. Armstrong curates her photographs with

the same care for stylistic consistency as she does her texts. She is arguably aware of changing consumption imperatives dictated by the proliferation of photographic instantiations of the everyday and wants to ensure her images offer the same interesting aesthetic experience as her writing does. All the photographs published on the blog reveal, even on a cursory glance, clear design parameters, an awareness of camera positioning, framing, light and shadow, exposure and composition (Armstrong 2014a; Armstrong 2013g; Armstrong 2015d; Armstrong 2015e; Armstrong 2003q; Armstrong 2009h). This became even more important as Armstrong began authoring sponsored blog posts featuring several products grouped under a thematic category called *Daily Style* in November 2007 (Armstrong 2007c; Armstrong 2007e; Armstrong 2008b; Armstrong 2015n). While this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, it is worth acknowledging here that Armstrong was mindful of her brand's visual identity from the very early stages of the blog.

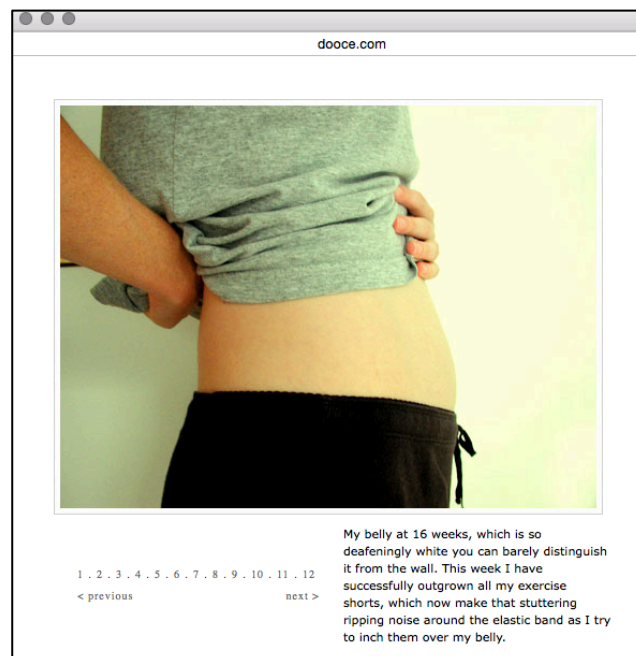
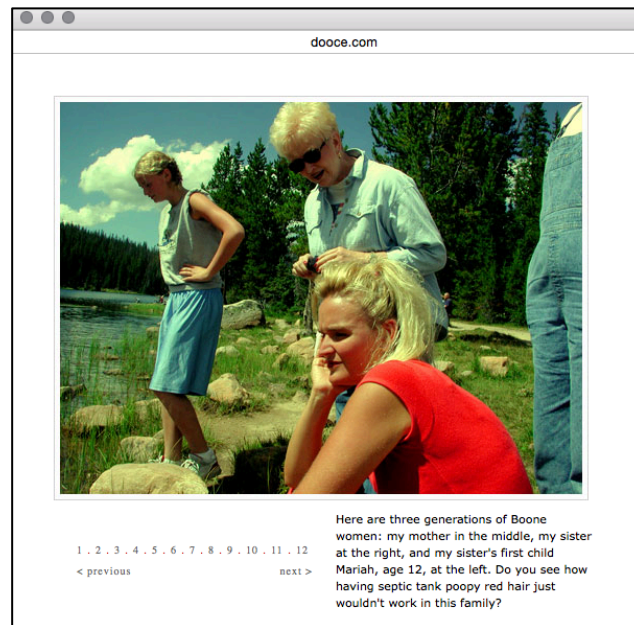
The second example comes from *16 Weeks, Photo Collection: Boone Family Reunion*.

This week's photo collection features a few snapshots from a recent family reunion involving six of my mother's nine brothers and sisters and all their children and all their children's children. (...) You won't be surprised to find out that all of my mother's siblings like to sit around and talk about bodily functions, including but not confined to pooping, farting, burping, and the way their panties (pronounced "PAIN-ees") get stuck up their butt crack. It even gets too much for me to handle. Shocking, I know. These are also the type of people who instead of buying handi-wipes to clean up jellied faces and sticky hands after a meal opt for anti-bacterial SURFACE CLEANER wipes to sterilize their children, because they were on sale. My niece walked around the last half of the reunion with half of her face eaten off by chemicals. Most of these photos are of my immediate family (...)

This week's photos also feature my belly at 16 weeks. (...) We heard the baby's heartbeat again this week, 10 beats faster than at our last check-up, at 176 beats per minute. The doctor said that if he had to make an educated guess based on the heartbeat, he would bet that it is a girl. I think a girl would be totally cool, especially dressed in itty bitty Adidas trainers and a onesie that says "Motherfucking Festive."
Launch Family Reunion⁵¹



⁵¹ This text is hyperlinked. The photos open in a separate window. There are a total of 12 photographs in the collection. The one featuring the blogger's belly at sixteen weeks is the last one. Every photograph has a caption underneath. Only two photographs are reproduced, together with the initial image, the 'scrapbook cover'.



(Armstrong 2003q)

The Boone family's propensity for uncensored discussion of flatulence, eructation and defecation alludes to the blog's primary narrative hook and its abject aesthetics. Open disclosure of bowel movements is legitimized as hereditary, with Dooce being portrayed as a sincere zany misfit overwhelmed by her own family's abjection.

Being an outsider and a nonconformist is a brand image that Armstrong carefully constructed, admittedly due to the maverick's appeal in American culture. From presidential campaigns (Pietryka and Boydstun 2012) to marketing promotions (Dempsey 2009), the figure of the maverick is extensively utilized because it appeals to mass audiences. Armstrong capitalizes on this appeal whilst simultaneously challenging the category by transposing its features to a woman and a mother as opposed to a traditionally male entrepreneurial figure. In this sense, Armstrong challenges once again normative discourses and constructs a new metaphor: the mother blogger as intrepid businessperson. This metaphor becomes more prevalent in Armstrong's media communications after 2011 and it will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

The power of authentication of photographs in this collection is particularly noteworthy as readers have the opportunity to evaluate the blogger's physical resemblance to other family members. Any similarity would likely contribute to the collusion between referent and signifier and the audience's perception of Dooce as an ordinary RL individual. This lifelike representation of the everyday encourages the audience to establish points of identification with the blogger's persona, facilitating thus the emergence of a human brand simultaneously admired and trusted but also perceived as a relatable individual.

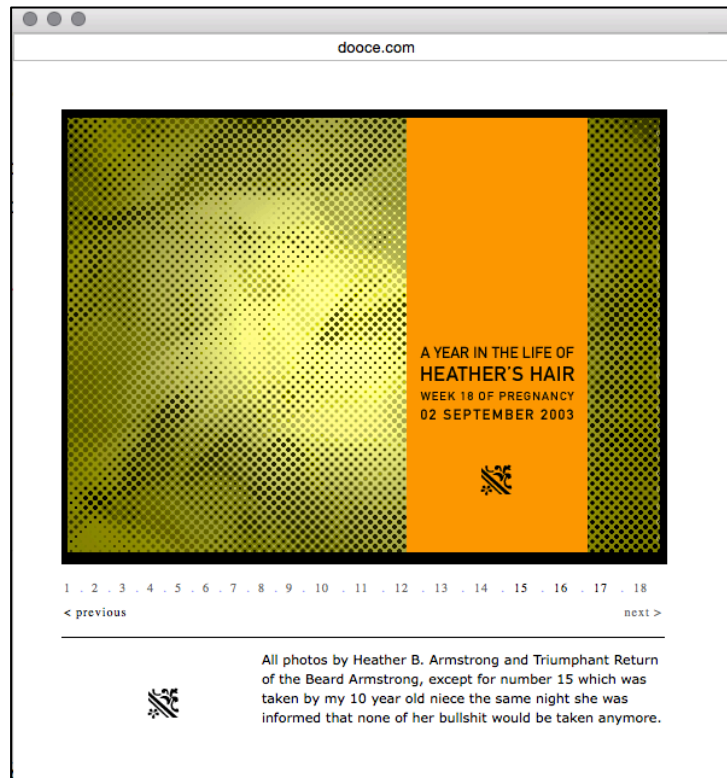
The final example comes from *18 Weeks, Photo Collection: A Year in the Life of Heather's Hair* published on 2nd September 2003.

While organizing our digital photo library last week — a collection of over 4,000 photos taken since Jon and I have been together — I was reminded of what a terrible year in hair I've had.

(...)

This week's photo collection showcases the metamorphosis of my hair in the last year, a trip to hell and back, and proves that I so wasn't kidding about that one time with the septic and the tank and the poopy red.

Launch A Year in the Life of Heather's Hair.⁵²



⁵² The text is hyperlinked and opens the photo collection in a new window. There are a total of 18 photographs, with the belly shot at the very end.

dooce.com

1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 . 11 . 12 . 13 . 14 . 15 . 16 . 17 . 18
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next >

3

AUGUST 23, 2002

And just in case the last shot didn't drive it home, this is my perfectly acceptable hairdo the night before we got married, as seen in the mirror over the hottub in the cozy bed and breakfast we stayed in at Oakhurst, California.

dooce.com

1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 . 11 . 12 . 13 . 14 . 15 . 16 . 17 . 18
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4

AUGUST 24, 2002

Attack of the Bride Hair. This photo was taken about an hour after we exchanged vows on top of Glacier Point. We were having dinner at the historic Ahwahnee Hotel in the middle of Yosemite, and I'm doing my best impersonation of a sober person, having just drunk an entire bottle of champagne and two Maker's Marks on the rocks.

dooce.com



1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 . 11 . 12 . 13 . 14 . 15 . 16 . 17 . 18
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8

NOVEMBER 16, 2002

This is me grieving the tragic accident otherwise known as Septic Tank Poopy Red as I sat in the passenger seat of the Nissan on Fairfax Avenue in Los Angeles. In that early evening light you can almost feel the heat from the acidic lava flows of putrescence encircling each hair follicle.

dooce.com



1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 . 6 . 7 . 8 . 9 . 10 . 11 . 12 . 13 . 14 . 15 . 16 . 17 . 18
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13

FEBRUARY 14, 2003

Moments before Jon and I went out for sushi on Valentine's Day this year. I'm sitting in front of my clunky Dell machine in our temporary quarters in my mother's basement. There's something about the red sweater that I'm wearing that totally brings out the radioactive quality of my hair. I should have been wearing protective goggles.



(Armstrong 2003s)

In the *18 Week, Photo Collection*, the blogger declares she is reproducing several photographs taken in the course of the previous year, which illustrate her hair misadventures in that period. The reader is presented with 18 images of everyday settings: a bathroom, a car, in front of the computer in her mother's living room, a restaurant. The actions the blogger is engaged in pertain to the domain of the everyday as well. She is using the computer before going for Valentine's Day dinner with her husband, looking out of the passenger seat window, having dinner with her husband on their wedding day, photographing herself in the bathroom window of a hotel suite. Most readers, irrespective of their cultural background, would recognize both the commonplace and the special-occasion settings above as belonging to the repertoire of everyday interactions and practices of

family life. This recognition adds ontological weight to the power of authentication photographs already possess due to their indexical nature.

The medium's authentication capabilities are transferred to the blog itself through the use of narrative details reiterated at distinct times in the blog's history. These details, arguably the online equivalent of Barthes' insignificant notation, become narrative hooks, whose function is to establish cohesion and coherence in a narrative serially published over a great time span. For example, constipation and Mormonism are two such narrative hooks, and so is the "septic red tank poop red" hair. This detail is mentioned in eleven posts over four years, being first introduced in *Because a Set of Highlights From a Certified Professional Costs \$140* on 15th November 2002. The post features the story of the blogger's hair dying misadventure and a custom-designed colour palette of reds from a conventional red to the septic tank poop red.



(Armstrong 2002g)

The 'septic tank poop red' is alluded to both in the *18 Week, Photo Collection* and the *16 Week* one. What this narrative detail achieves is the creation of a sense of cohesion between different posts. While it is true that a reader does not hold the expectation of posts being inscribable within a unifying totalizing hermeneutical narrative,

continuity between disparate narrative snippets and congruity in brand image is nonetheless paramount. Narrative hooks such as the 'septic tank poopy red' or constipation respond to this readerly expectation. While it is true that the hermeneutical decoding of narrative hooks is accessible only to recurrent readers of the blog, the fact that a detail represents a hook is rhetorically marked through the use of the definite article and, often, by it being hyperlinked to older posts. In this sense, hooks can be said to be part of the blogger's interpellative call, enticing the reader to engage with the blog archive and gain a better understanding of the text. Narrative hooks are also markers of the signified as their existence points to an underlying authorial intent and ideology.

Armstrong's digital portraits position the blogger amidst competing discourses of femininity. Her photographic collection both upholds and challenges social regulatory discourses of attractiveness. Even though the text refers to 'hair disasters', Armstrong's digital portraits are flattering. All eighteen photographs are pleasing to view with the angle and light enhancing her appeal and slenderness. Armstrong's normative performance of femininity is likely ideologically underpinned by branding motivations. In order to attain visibility and appeal, Armstrong conforms to certain naturalised discourses of female aesthetic appeal. Feminist research points to current unachievable standards of feminine beauty, with slenderness, fitness and sexiness being central to the performance of normative femininity (Tiggemann 2014; López-Guimerà et al. 2010; Hawkins et al. 2004; Sha and Kirkman 2009; Nash 2011; Machin and Thornborrow 2003; Kim and Ward 2004).

Armstrong does not employ tropes related to sexual appeal, but her visual representation does emphasise her slimness. Even though in a 2003 post she reveals her struggle with eating disorders (Armstrong 2003j), her prevalent brand image is that of a tall woman who is genetically slim and, also, a fitness enthusiast. In this respect, Armstrong embodies current healthism discourses both in her nutrition⁵³ and in her fitness training⁵⁴. Both Johinke and Nash discuss fitness as intrinsic to a successful performance of female selfhood (Johinke 2014; Nash 2011), while Glassner argues that working out represents a critical aspect of self-identity for Anglo women in the US (1990).

Armstrong's acceptance of healthism normative discourses and rejection of sexualised imagery is admittedly both a brand positioning exercise and a feminist act. Her portraits subvert current iconographies of sexiness by presenting female attractiveness in non-sexualised contexts. By portraying herself in non-seductive poses, Armstrong arguably responds to the lack of media representations of female beauty outside of the sexualising male gaze.

From a branding perspective, her choices are undeniably underpinned by a two-fold intent. Firstly, Armstrong's construction of Dooce as slim, fit and attractive aims to generate appeal and position herself as a sophisticated⁵⁵ human brand. A note should be made here

⁵³ See for example posts on the Paleo diet (Armstrong 2016f; Armstrong 2015e; Armstrong 2014b)

⁵⁴ See for example her posts about running (Armstrong 2016e; Armstrong 2016b; Armstrong 2015m)

⁵⁵ I use sophisticated to mean charming and physically attractive, not necessarily in a sexual way (Aaker 1997).

highlighting the difference between Armstrong and Instagram influencers, for example, who rely entirely on their image appeal to generate followers. Armstrong's brand approach, while upholding Western norms of physical appeal, does, however, position narrative prowess and authenticity as core unique selling points, rather than mere attractiveness. Secondly, establishing the everyday as background to her photographic performance ensures that consumers perceive a point of identification with her. Attaining a balance between sophistication and relatedness represents a core strategy to secure audience loyalty and differentiate the brand from competitors. Armstrong achieves this balance in her textual and visual performance of the everyday, with dooce.com's popularity and longevity as undeniable proof.

Chapter 4

“Thank you for catching me, Internet”

Chapter 4 outlines Armstrong’s brand management strategies in relation to core values, brand image and product attributes in the period 2003 - 2009. By 2009, dooce.com had become a successful business and the only income source for the Armstrong household. Case studies will illustrate how honesty became a core value of the Armstrong human brand and, by extension, of the Dooce trademark.

The first sub-chapter analyses Armstrong’s depression narrative and its role in solidifying her perception as an honest, rugged and competent human brand. This section addresses points pertaining to all the four research questions of the study and is underpinned by theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 1’s thesis statements 4, 5 and 6.

The second section examines the development of the Dooce logo, masthead and taglines, as elements of the brand’s visual identity and discusses Armstrong’s audience engagement strategies in the specified period: the introduction of a postal address, of video and sound components to the website and the creation of the Dooce community. This section is related specifically to the second and third research questions and utilises theories on consumer attachment, audience trust, and online brand communities as defined in Chapter 1’s thesis statements 7 and 9.

4.1 *The Dooce brand core value: honesty*

My website is very much about me and I suppose it's very selfish that way. But it's also very personal and real and honest. I really try to be up front about everything.

(Peterson 2004)

Her writing – from client work to personal pursuits to “mommy blogging” – reads with an unmistakable honesty that resonates with real people in the real world.

(Armstrong 2016a)

Armstrong maintains consistent public communication regarding honesty being her core brand value as exemplified in her 2004 interview with Leah Peterson for the *Bio* section of her new business website, HBA Media. Honesty becomes an intrinsic element of the Armstrong human brand and permeates all brand products and touchpoints. Chapter 3 discussed the importance of abject and zany aesthetics in creating a self-disclosing non-conformist narrative that strengthened the blogger's perception as rugged and truthful author, unafraid to openly discuss her digestive tract problems or her pregnancy bodily misadventures. This chapter will address Armstrong's public confession regarding her mental health struggle and the documentation of her post partum depression (hereafter PPD). This represents a pivotal moment in the history of the blog and the Dooce brand, as it resulted in an increase in blog traffic and Armstrong's validation as honest non-conformist author.

On 24th October 2002, Armstrong confessed she was experiencing severe withdrawal symptoms from her depression medication. This was the first time the blogger disclosed her life-long

mental health affliction, marking the beginning of Armstrong's campaign to educate her audience about the disease. The tag *Depression* was not used on the blog until almost a year later, although the blogger alluded to her decaying mental condition in the interim period.

How to Charm Me

Love me even though my entire face is so horrifyingly splotchy from incessant crying that I look like a walking pepperoni pizza.

(Armstrong 2003e)

Maybe it's because I only ate a rice krispie treat (...) or maybe it's because I'm just in a really weepy way, but I couldn't have been more giddy to watch an episode of "American Idol" last night (...).

(Armstrong 2003h)

Drama is the second post under the *Depression* tag and it features a lengthy justification of her decision to return a golden retriever to an animal shelter. What stands out is the fact that the news is related in the middle of a lengthy post, being framed by elaborate descriptions of Armstrong's depression symptoms and medical history. This example is illustrative of the narrative strategies underpinning Armstrong's brand image. The depression narrative showcases the blogger contravening normative discourses on mental health and the stigma associated with it. This contravention is presented as proof of sincerity and authenticity, ensuring the two become perceived as prevalent brand values.

The post starts by attributing her decision to discontinue taking depression medication to debilitating physical side effects and to her desire to become pregnant. In this respect, Armstrong's narrative is

ground-breaking not only in that it openly addresses depression at a time when the disease carried public stigma, but also in that it documents the failure of antidepressants to provide sustainable long-term solutions. Recent medical studies on depression reveal the lingering presence of stigma associated with the disease, as well as the unspoken failure of medication to provide long-term relief (Westerbeek and Mutsaers 2008; Westall and Liamputtong 2011). Westerbeek and Mutsaers refer to the 'banal' image of depression that stigmatises because it designates the sufferer as weak-willed or oversensitive (Westerbeek and Mutsaers 2008, 27). Meanwhile Schreiber and Hartrick (2002) as well as Wolpert (2001) demonstrate that public perception relegates it as typical of "housewives", with female patients reporting being defined as weak mental types. The publication of these studies coincides with Armstrong's account, making them instrumental in setting the background against which the blogger made her struggle public.

About a year ago I wrote a post on this website about what it was like go off a depression medication. I'd been on a specific medication for over seven years, and it took over three and a half months to go from 100 milligrams/day of the drug to 0 milligrams/per day, a painful, often traumatic trip through nausea, dizziness, numb hands, and temporary blackouts.

I went off the medication specifically because the side-effects of the drug had become more debilitating than the disease of depression itself, and because I knew that my husband and I were going to try to have a baby within the next year. While several clinical studies have shown that most of the popular depression medications don't have adverse effects on developing babies, it just wasn't something I wanted to take a chance with. (...) The drug may have nothing to do with the child's change in mood, but I have a hard enough time justifying a Diet Coke these days. There is no way I'm going to risk having my child

become chemically or physiologically dependent on a drug she doesn't need.
(Armstrong 2003u)

From a branding perspective, Armstrong constructs her image as rugged, having had first-hand experience of discontinuing depression medication and of its side effects on the human physiology. She also positions herself as an informed individual who has read "several clinical studies" and whose decision to discontinue the medication, whilst not supported by medical evidence, is based on anecdotal examples and her own traumatic withdrawal symptoms. "I had a hard enough time coming off the medication as a healthy 27-yr old, and I can't imagine the terror a drug like that might wreak on the delicate system of an infant" (Armstrong 2003u). This rhetoric inscribes Armstrong within a contemporary popular culture discourse of acceptable mothering practices. Interestingly, the blogger will have to contravene this very rhetoric in a future post, *Is Going to be OK*, when she announces that she is going back on depression medication. Armstrong will use the same narrative strategies to mitigate potential negative reactions and ensure readers remain empathetic and loyal.

Armstrong solidifies her image as rugged by relating her family's medical history and adding "raw" honesty to the account by alluding to financial struggles and suicidal thoughts. Her text is emblematic of depression narratives with respect to lexical repertoire and authorial intent, patients often attempting to explain the origins of their disease.

Chemical depression runs in my family: six of my mother's eight brothers and sisters have it, my grandmother had it, my brother suffers from it daily. (...)

After successfully coming off the drug last year (I knew I had finally made it through the nightmare when I could close my eyes without feeling like the room was going to spin out of Earth's orbit), Jon and I moved to Utah and lived in my mother's basement (...). Those five months in suburban Salt Lake City will go down in my personal history as five of the darkest months of my life. It would be hard for anyone to have to live with their parents as an adult, and I was dealing with the loss of identity and freedom and financial stability without the aid of my seven-year SSRI companion. At one point this past February, after contemplating ways in which I could permanently hurt myself, Jon and I decided that I should go back on the medication, if only temporarily. I took the drug for two weeks, to see me over the hump, and then went directly back off because the side-effects came back stronger than ever. Only through the love and unconditional understanding of my husband — someone who had never really known anyone with this disease, let alone had to live and share space with someone so inconsolably upset — did I make it through that darkness. He is the reason I am alive today.

(Armstrong 2003u)

The biomedical explanation of depression has been a dominant model in medical literature (Beck 2002) and Armstrong's enumeration of relatives afflicted by the disease represents an example of it. The blogger utilises this explanation throughout her narrative, arguably as a form of resistance to popular stigma. The example above both supports this explanation and points to its limitations. Several studies conducted in the past decade aim to demonstrate that biological theories and treatments should be complemented by psychosocial approaches (Beck 2002; Buist 2006; Westall and Liamputtong 2011). Lexical choices such as "loss" of "identity", "freedom", "financial stability" indicate external factors contributing to Armstrong's debilitating mental condition, with financial insecurity and unemployment being shown to have a direct correlation with depression (WHO 2000). The self-

disclosing first person narration and the reference to suicidal thoughts imbue the text with a sense of urgency, unease and suffering. The text urges an empathetic reaction and reads as stream of consciousness, with Armstrong being arguably perceived as someone who transgresses yet again the norm and chooses to make herself vulnerable to an online audience. The potential surprise caused by the influx of personal detail is likely replaced by empathy and perhaps commiseration.

Armstrong is careful throughout to ensure the audience's reading experience remains skewed towards a pleasurable consumption even when the topics tackled are controversial or complex. She mitigates the audience's potential disengagement from a text too unpleasant to read, by offering emotional relief mid-way through the post. The hitherto debilitating effects of her depression are counteracted by the pregnancy, which restored her will to perform basic hygiene rituals. "During my first trimester I was very frustrated with the nausea and inability to perform normal activities, like brushing my teeth and getting out of bed. But I **wanted** to brush my teeth and get out of bed, a marked difference from what I feel when I'm depressed" (Armstrong 2003u).

It is only in the sixth section of a ten-paragraph post, that the main piece of information is introduced: Sadie, the golden retriever Armstrong had previously rescued, was returned to a shelter. On the surface of it, the banality of the news might question the need for such an emotionally fraught introduction or for the blogger to justify her decision altogether. The lengths to which Armstrong goes to construct the narrative frame of the post and to orchestrate the reality effect of an

uncensored self-disclosing account, demonstrate her commitment to ensuring her brand image is associated with specific qualities such as competence, sincerity and ruggedness.

Two weeks ago we brought home a new dog, and two weeks ago I stepped into what would be the fastest, most gripping spiral of a depression I've felt since I was 16 years old. I was completely unprepared for the types of problems affecting Sadie, and was unequipped both physically and emotionally for the demands of an 80lb dog with chronic separation anxiety. (...) I read everything I could online (...), and I talked to several golden retriever enthusiasts (...). Everything I read and heard, however, suggested that it would take several months to break her of the anxiety, if it could be broken at all.

(...) For the past two weeks I've been a virtual prisoner in my own home, unable to sit down in a chair or walk from room to room without a gigantic dog trying to crawl into my ever-disappearing lap. She demands every second of my attention, and in three and a half months when another member of our family arrives, I'll be lucky if I can give Sadie even half of the attention she requires. While I understand that any attention is better than the no attention she received in the past, I know that I can't possibly give this dog the life she deserves, and that is devastating to me.

(...) While I know that the best thing for me, for my baby, and for Sadie is to find her a new home, I can't help but feel like I'm giving up on this dog. The weight of failure is overwhelming, almost suffocating, and my mood has formed a volatile environment for everyone in my home.

(...) I'm struggling to forgive myself, for giving up, for thinking that I was strong enough to try this in the first place, for being emotionally inept to handle what normal people should be emotionally capable of handling.

(Armstrong 2003u)

Armstrong constructs her image as competent and responsible dog owner by describing at length the dog's separation anxiety symptoms, as well as the steps she undertook to alleviate the problem, from consulting online websites to contacting golden retriever experts.

She then shifts the narrative focalization onto her emotional state, especially her sense of failure and regret. Strong emotive lexis such as “weight of failure”, “suffocating”, “volatile environment”, “emotionally inept” firmly guide the reader towards conceding that returning Sadie to a shelter is the only reasonable solution, and, arguably, towards feeling empathy. The use of the conjunction “while” to introduce concessions to the arguments presented, demonstrates a clear authorial intent and purposeful narrative framing. “While” is used to introduce the counter-arguments of an imagined interlocutor, which are then disproven. “While I understand that any attention is better than the no attention she received in the past, I know that I can’t possibly give this dog the life she deserves, and that is devastating to me” (Armstrong 2003u). The reader is placed in the topographical position of this imagined interlocutor and is thus guided towards an unquestionable acceptance of the blogger’s arguments. The same structure is re-iterated in the following paragraph with the reader being encouraged once again to experience empathy and compassion. “While I know that the best thing for me, for my baby, and for Sadie is to find her a new home, I can’t help but feel like I’m giving up on this dog” (Armstrong 2003u).

This narrative focalisation technique appears frequently on the blog, specifically in posts that have a substantial impact on the blogger’s image as sincere and vulnerable. The technique is successful in mitigating negative interpretations of her decisions and in ensuring the majority of the audience is empathetic. The technique is further strengthened by the first-person confessional tone, by interpellative

questions and by self-deprecating remarks. The blogger is careful however not to allow the imagery of victimhood to supersede that of ruggedness, as that could potentially affect the whole brand and cause readers not to repeat their consumption experiences.

Drama ends with Armstrong declaring scriptotherapy and the search for a support group as her motivations for writing.

I guess I'm writing this here to help myself heal. I feel better writing about it, despite the risk of having people send me judgmental email telling me what a pathetic and selfish person I am. As needlessly dramatic as it sounds, my husband can only hold my head as I cry for so many hours before I have to get up and force myself to breathe again. I can't look at the backyard or the place next to the bed where she slept without wanting to crawl into a hole in the ground. Is that dramatic? It probably is, but when you're depressed, **everything** is dramatic. Breathing is dramatic. Perhaps I'm writing this to reach out to others who have suffered depression and have overcome it without the aid of medication. How do you get the drama to end?

(Armstrong 2003u)

Scriptotherapy and the need for a support community are positioned as Armstrong's impetus for writing, an impetus stronger than the fear of criticism from detractors. This statement represents a key authenticating element of Armstrong's sincerity, especially for regular readers of the blog who would have been well acquainted with the amount of negative comments the blogger received and her consequent decision to disable the comment function of the blog for most of 2003. Armstrong has been exposed to trolling since the inception of the blog and has used several techniques to mitigate its negative effects (Armstrong 2003a; Armstrong 2003i). Trolling refers to negative behaviour on comment threads, including but not restricted to "ludicrous rants, inane threadjackings, personal insults and abusive

language” [Naraine 2007, 146]. In her forum discussion analysis, Hardaker’s defines a troll as a user who purports to be sincerely invested in the community, but who in reality aims to cause disruption for their own personal amusement (2010, 237). This behaviour has been linked to narcissistic behaviour (Aboujaoude 2012, 68–88), toxic disinhibition characterised by rude language and anger (Suler 2004) or a manifestation of sadism (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014). Hardaker suggests that trolling is particularly damaging for Internet communities based on private information sharing and personal trust, given that users would likely abandon online spaces deemed ‘unsafe’ (2010, 237). Armstrong’s employment of comment moderation software as well as her attempts to educate her audience with respect to appropriate norms of online engagement points to her awareness of trolling’s damaging effects. While an in-depth discussion of this phenomenon falls beyond the scope of this project, it is important to acknowledge feminist research that highlights the misogynistic⁵⁶ nature of insulting commentary, particularly on forums created by women. Feminist scholars position chauvinist online commentary as an act of silencing women through intimidation or harassment (Herring et al. 2002; Herring, Johnson, and DiBenedetto 1995; Jane 2014a; Jane 2014b). Armstrong positions her reactions to negative commentary outside a gender dispute, focusing more on the detrimental effect these comments have on readers’, as well as her own, psychological

⁵⁶ This statement is made with the awareness that it is not only male or male-identifying trolls who participate in disciplinary rhetoric. Women have been shown to partake in similar behaviour as well (Bartlett et al. 2014). These claims are also underpinned by an awareness that gender online is difficult to ascertain beyond doubt.

wellbeing. Further notes on Armstrong's management of trolling will be discussed in the next sub-section as part of the Dooce community analysis.

Armstrong's decision to share her story and assume the risk of making herself a target for trolls is framed as an act of both bravery and desperation. What adds weight to this statement's authenticating power is the fact that seeking support from a virtual community represents a primary motivation for writing the blog itself.

I actually thought I was going to give up blogging when I had a baby because I thought I wouldn't have time, but I later realized that blogging was the only thing keeping me sane. (...)

When I had my baby, I had no real-life friends with kids, but I had all these friends online that I would connect with. Without them, I would have been very lonely. We have all these platforms now to connect and make each other feel less alone, and I feel so very flattered to be a part of it in any way.

(Grundy 2013)

Adding this dimension to the final comments of the post strengthens its claim to truth given that, as Friedman notes, the need for support as antidote to maternal isolation is what underpins most mommy bloggers' writing endeavours (2013, 3–20). Medical, sociological and women's study scholarship highlights the importance of social support for women as they develop their mother identities. Most researchers agree that social support involves relationships in which individuals feel loved, valued and connected to a larger social network (Oakley 1992). Lack of social support has been linked to depression and PPD (Ray and Hodnett 2001; WHO 2000; Westall and Liamputtong 2011). Furthermore, the need for support is heightened in

Western societies where women are often isolated from relatives or other mothers (Putnam 2001; Westall and Liamputtong 2011), making it harder for them to adjust to motherhood due to a lack of female role models (Buultjens and Liamputtong 2007) and also due to societal pressures to do 'everything right' (Westall and Liamputtong 2011, 77). In this sense, mommy blogs respond to a social exigency, as Morrison contends (2010), allowing women to share mothering practices and support each other's learning and daily struggles. Armstrong's mothering and depression narrative is consistent with these social and psychological exigencies, becoming thus imbued with a sense of sincerity.

While Armstrong is not the only mommy blogger to have discussed PPD, she is, to my knowledge, one of the first popular ones to do so⁵⁷. Moreover, what differentiates her narrative from others is the attention given to staging the story so that the audience partakes of reading as experiential event. For example, the revelation of her mental health condition is set against a narrative background whereby first-person narration and rhetorical tropes such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole and epithets ensure her perception as vulnerable and in need of support. The act of opening comments is presented as an act of bravery, with both followers and online detractors believing its genuineness. Online current affairs and news magazine *Slate* notes that Armstrong's account of her battle with depression had earned her

⁵⁷Alice Bradley also shares the intimate details of her mental health struggle on her blog, but her entries are chronologically subsequent to Armstrong's (Friedman 2013, 96).

certain respite from criticism, as well as genuine concern from her followers.

There are a few reasons why notoriously cruel Web commenters are retracting their claws when it comes to Armstrong's recent woes. For one, they admire her honesty when it comes to battling mental illness—over the years she's been extremely candid about her hospitalization for post-partum depression. Her regular readers are genuinely concerned about her health.

(Grose 2012)

Drama ends with a call for support, which represents a powerful interpellation into responsible and engaged readership as demonstrated by the response it generated. Armstrong reports having received

...hundreds of emails of support from people who have suffered depression, people who are dog lovers, dog lovers who have suffered depression, and many readers who are neither dog lovers nor depressives but were just concerned about my well-being.

(Armstrong 2003v)

The blogger expresses gratitude for the support the community offered her and for the personal stories the audience shared with her. In turn, Armstrong announces that she would attempt to respond to all of the emails received.

I am totally overwhelmed and comforted by the encouragement you have written my way. I cannot possibly thank you enough, and I'm currently starting the long process of responding to as many of these emails as I can. (...) I feel warmly welcomed into a large group of people who struggle with this disease and who are trying to make their lives better. Thank you for sharing. Your stories have touched me.

(Armstrong 2003v)

Lexis such as “comforted”, “encouragement”, “welcomed into a ... group”, “support” facilitates the construction of the fifth space of the everyday, the online community. Through the vehicle of cyberspace words connect individuals over geographical distances and, given the right interpellation strategies, comments foster a sense of belonging and mutual support. The years 2003 – 2009 showcase Armstrong utilising her depression experience to build a strong online support group. Most readers perceive her story as uncensored and brave and willingly respond to her interpellation. While the zany and abject character entertains and shocks the audience as the sophisticated and exciting human brand, the author of the depression narrative is the sincere, rugged and nonconformist individual unafraid to solicit emotional support.

Armstrong’s depression account engendered a profound level of audience engagement, with media outlets actually attributing her overall success to it.

(...) the wildly popular blog Dooce (which became wildly popular, in part, when she began chronicling her depression in real time years ago and followers gathered to give advice) (...)
(Belkin 2009)

The article called *Second Chance for Postpartum Depression* is a review of Armstrong’s book *It Sucked and Then I Cried* and covers in detail the stages of her depression as it appears on the blog. While it is true that the depression narrative fostered Armstrong’s success by attracting more visitors to the site, it might be an overstatement to attribute the blog’s fame entirely to it, given that dooce.com had already acquired a loyal followership by 2003, with a reported number

of 6,500 daily hits according to the *New York Times* (Belkin 2011, para. 16). It is also noteworthy to mention that the depression account represents only a small fragment of the blog's content. By April 2015, dooce.com archives register only 83 posts featuring the word 'depression'. Statistically this is a very small segment if we consider that Armstrong publishes an average of 40 posts per month. The month of October 2003, for example, registers a total of 30 posts out of which only two mention the disease.

While it is true that the depression narrative is a quintessential element of the blog's textual fabric and a decisive validating element of Dooce brand values, it is however important to note that the Armstrong human brand transcends this narrative and so does the product associated with it. As a sophisticated, exciting, rugged, nonconformist and sincere human brand, Armstrong fascinates. It is this fascination together with the product attributes of zany and abject aesthetics, interpellation and reality effect, cute and interesting content that secured the blog's steady followership for over a decade. Armstrong's writing style and story telling instinct, her ability to create a signified of raw honesty is what instigated her audience's engagement and loyalty. This represents the main point of differentiation from other "star" bloggers. Equally important is Armstrong's commitment to producing new content regularly as shown by her handwritten updates from a hospital ward. As Lawrence points, few bloggers are willing and capable to commit to their blog to this extent (Lawrence 2009). Armstrong's work ethic, brand management insights and writing style represent

crucial points of differentiation from less financially successful mommy bloggers.

Is Going to Be OK exemplifies Armstrong's audience management insights, especially when challenging normative discourses on mothering and breastfeeding. The blogger demonstrates narrative finesse and extreme caution with regards to her brand image, both of which are likely justified by the existence of conflict in the mamasphere. Derogatively termed 'mommy wars', public debates on mothering practices have been documented both in mommy blogging literature (Buttenwieser 2006; Crowley 2015; Morrison 2014) and medical studies (Westall and Liamputtong 2011, 78). Armstrong has not engaged in such disputes and the narrative strategies contained in this example showcase her conflict management skills.

Is Going To Be Okay announces Armstrong's decision to combat her persisting depression symptoms with medication. The entire 1,373-word post is dedicated to convincing the audience that her continuing breastfeeding and not taking antidepressants would mean "doing the selfish thing" (Armstrong 2004j). The effort Armstrong is putting in convincing a seemingly unforgiving audience to support her mental health decisions, is indicative of the blogger's purposeful construction of her brand image, as well as the careful cultivation of audience engagement and loyalty. The post reads as an apologetic justification of a decision seemingly bound to elicit public opposition, due arguably to mainstream support of breastfeeding as nutritional source for babies and high pressure placed on young mothers to conform to this expectation (Armstrong 2004d; Armstrong 2003m; Murkoff, Mazel, and

Lockwood 2008). For a blogger who built a reputation for being outrageously candid and shocking her audience out of a comfortable reading practice, the tone Armstrong adopts in this posts might seem unbecoming. Armstrong's move from the zany avatar towards a vulnerable, self-confessional persona aims to mitigate negative reactions or retaliation from the mommy blogging community, especially given that, as Friedman extensively documents, breastfeeding is both a popular and controversial topic in the mamasphere (2013, 60–129). Utilising a pleading, intimate tone represents a compositional strategy to deflate conflict widely used by mommy bloggers (Morrison 2014) and it is therefore unsurprising that Armstrong chooses to address the topic of breastfeeding with such great authorial care.

Breastfeeding has become a key public issue in the US in the last decade (K. Williams et al. 2013; Taylor and Wallace 2012; Vari et al. 2013). The benefits of breastfeeding are well-documented in the fields of medicine, midwifery, public health and social policy (K. Williams et al. 2013), with tropes such as 'breast is best' permeating popular discourse. Recently, feminist and sociological scholarship has interrogated this biomedical 'wisdom' given its conflation with being a 'good mother' (E. J. Lee 2007) and its social, emotional and cultural implications (Marshall, Godfrey, and Renfrew 2007; K. Williams et al. 2013; Giles 2005; Taylor and Wallace 2012). Lee argues that the notion of choice in infant feeding, which was hitherto framed as a decision between two equal alternatives, has increasingly become limited through constructions of a good mother/bad mother dichotomy (2007). The practice of artificially

feeding an infant has been increasingly associated with negative tropes related to parental irresponsibility and amoral behaviour (Marshall, Godfrey, and Renfrew 2007; Taylor and Wallace 2012; Stearns 1999). Hegney et al. point to the construction of breastfeeding as 'morally correct' and the resulting feelings of guilt, inadequacy and isolation experienced by women who do not engage in the practice (2008). Their findings are supported by many qualitative studies which highlight the marginalisation of women who use formula or who find the experience of breastfeeding taxing or unrewarding and their absence from mainstream health promotion accounts (Marshall, Godfrey, and Renfrew 2007; Wallace and Chason 2007; Taylor and Wallace 2012; Westall and Liamputtong 2011; K. Williams et al. 2013). Armstrong's breastfeeding experience falls within this category and, in this respect, her narrative challenges current disciplinary discourses. Interestingly, however, Armstrong does resort to normative tropes when delivering the news that she would discontinue the practice. Her decision is likely due to her awareness that normative breastfeeding discourses enlist fervent advocates both among the general public and the mommy blog community. Armstrong's motivation is however more complex given that breastfeeding is ceased due to a deterioration in her mental health. In this context, Armstrong faced and challenged another set of regulatory discourses related to stigma.

At the time, depression carried a public stigma in the United States, with the North American organisation, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), reporting that an overwhelming percentage of the United States population held misconstrued beliefs about

depression, “popular misconceptions that trivialize depression as ‘just the blues’ or dismiss it entirely as an ‘imaginary disease’ (...) as a ‘myth’ and deny that medical or other treatments are necessary for recovery” (NAMI 2006). Qualitative studies reveal that women suffering from PPD perceive themselves to be less competent than other mothers (Westall and Liamputtong 2011, 122–126), being likely to experience isolation and lack of support as a result of mental health stigma (V. L. S. Thompson, Noel, and Campbell 2004; Buultjens and Liamputtong 2007; Morrow et al. 2008). Armstrong positions her narrative amidst these competing disciplinary discourses as an act of honesty and duty-of-care to her readers. Through this rhetoric the blogger encounters a neutral ground whereby conflict is mitigated and reading as pleasurable event is given priority.

I’m telling you this because many of you have sent me your stories about how you’ve struggled with this disease, and I think it’s important to be honest and let you know that my struggle is ongoing. This whole motherhood thing is not easy. I am having a hard time.
(Armstrong 2004g)

Armstrong’s apologetic and self-deprecating tone, as well as her narrative effort to persuade the audience of the seriousness of her condition, aims to deflect potential audience defection and criticism by eliciting an empathetic response, whilst at the same time educating the readers on the topic. In *Is Going to Be OK*, the blogger positions herself as an individual in a life-threatening situation and asks the audience to understand that the seriousness of her condition warrants immediate medical support and termination of breastfeeding. The cheeky, entertaining, surprising, humorous zany character is replaced by an

online avatar pleading for acceptance and support. In the span of six paragraphs, Armstrong convinces readers that even though she had hitherto debunked the myths of breastfeeding as a magical bonding experience (Armstrong 2004d), she does nonetheless feel “devastated at the prospect of having to stop”.

I never thought that I would feel so devastated at the prospect of having to stop breastfeeding. I can't talk about it without crying. Feeding Leta is the only way that she is comforted by me, and once that is gone will she even know who I am?
(Armstrong 2004j)

Both on the blog and in the book *It Sucked and Then I Cried*, Armstrong is straightforward about the toll breastfeeding has had on her body. On several occasions, she points to the idealised narrative of the breastfeeding mother bonding with her baby and challenges it by enlisting the physical and emotional difficulties she experienced while engaged in the activity.

The strange thing is that breastfeeding has never been the beautiful and peaceful and wondrous endeavor that they want you to believe it is. I'm sure it is for many women, but for me it has been a struggle from the first moment she latched on in the hospital. It started out with excruciating pain, and then continued being painful for a month, and now five months later I still get engorged when she doesn't eat a full meal. And Leta doesn't ever eat a full meal, so I'm CONSTANTLY worried about whether or not she's getting enough to eat.
(Armstrong 2004j)

Armstrong's narrative challenges popular representations of breastfeeding as “beautiful” and “peaceful” by enumerating the physical and mental challenges the practice posed for her. Armstrong's account is consistent with the symptomatology described in later

medical studies (Hegney, Fallon, and O'Brien 2008) and represents a 'radical' act at the time given the absence of such narratives from public health or popular culture discourses (Wallace and Chason 2007; Taylor and Wallace 2012). While Armstrong is not the only mommy blogger to discuss breastfeeding (for examples see Friedman 2013; Friedman 2009a; Friedman 2011), what differentiates her is the ability to construct a congruent human brand that retained the audience's interest and curiosity for over a decade.

Armstrong is careful not to invalidate her account of breastfeeding and its physical toll, ensuring thus the preservation of her brand image of honesty. While she admits to experiencing "paralyzing pain" and sleep deprivation due to it (Armstrong 2004j), she nonetheless transforms the activity into a magical instantiation of mother-baby bonding. The zany-bject style and the references to pain pervasive in previous posts are replaced by a confessional, almost liturgical tone and by tropes comparing breastfeeding to a "religious experience" or to the momentary restoration of faith in a divinity.

But there have been moments, a select few moments when feeding her has been an almost religious experience. Moments when she stops eating, smiles and reaches her hand up to touch my face. My beautiful baby in my arms and close to my chest, her soft fingers exploring the line of my chin. Those were moments when I believed in God.
(Armstrong 2004j)

For a blogger whose online persona was built on the dismissal of Mormonism as silly superstitious behaviour, mentioning God and religious experiences in a non-sarcastic tone is shockingly out of character. The unexpected departure from the zany persona aims to

validate the honesty of the account and highlight the significance of the event. Armstrong's use of religious metaphors could be seen as testament of her unbalanced mental state, with the shockingly entertaining Dooce being silenced by a disease that renders her powerless and vulnerable. On the other hand, the religious imagery and confessional tone are reminiscent of mainstream tropes whereby breastfeeding is presented as a 'moral', 'good' mother practice (E. J. Lee 2007; Marshall, Godfrey, and Renfrew 2007; Taylor and Wallace 2012).

Armstrong manages thus not only to mitigate potential conflict with other bloggers or with readers, but also to ensure her followers' continuing support and engagement with the blog. The importance of this cannot be understated as the blog's success depends entirely on steady followership.

At this point if I don't stop breastfeeding I will be doing the selfish thing. I understand that. I understand that I have to get better for the sake of my family, and at this point these drugs may be my only hope. But I didn't think my heart could break into so many pieces. I didn't know how much I loved feeding my baby, how fundamental it has been to my relationship with her, how much I have sacrificed to continue breastfeeding. My god, how I don't want to give it up.
(Armstrong 2004j)

In this fragment, Armstrong employs the same narrative framing and rhetorical use of apostrophe as in *Drama*. By placing the sentence "I understand that" after "At this point if I don't stop breastfeeding I will be doing the selfish thing" she creates the illusion of a dialogue between herself and an interlocutor who, in an attempt to persuade her to give up breastfeeding, is presenting the option as the only unselfish

one available. The structure of the paragraph forces the reader to occupy the same topographical position as the interlocutor, being thus guided towards an empathetic reaction. Armstrong expresses distress and regret at having to give up an activity whose full emotional impact was reportedly unbeknownst to her. Armstrong's narrative is consistent with medical studies on the experience of guilt in women who do not conform to breastfeeding discourses (see Williams et al. 2013; Taylor and Wallace 2012). Her account arguably reflects the emotional complexity involved in the practice. At the same time, the focalisation on Armstrong's vulnerable emotional state is a strategy to interpellate readers into a support community and mitigate criticism.

The final paragraph of the post reiterates the narrative framing technique with the added use of the cute as aesthetic category linked with the vulnerable.

So I'm sitting here writing this and I can barely type because I can't stop crying, and usually when I cry Chuck goes scurrying OUT of the room to get as far away from me as possible. But right now he's sitting ON TOP of me, his face pressed up into my armpit, and he's trying to get as close to me as possible. I think he knows I need him right now. I imagine he's trying to tell me, "You didn't breastfeed me, and look how awesome I turned out." And then he says, "It's going to be okay."

And I believe him.
(Armstrong 2004j)

The difference in Chuck's behaviour echoes the difference in writing tone and style and reinforces thus the extraordinary nature of the circumstances. As a narrative strategy, the imagery of the dog who, in view of his owner's struggle, becomes a loving and supportive pet, presents the audience with a response example and a subtle

encouragement to follow suit. At the same time, the magnitude of Chuck's behavioural change, marked in capital letters, reinforces the blogger's claim that it is only a critical situation that would drive her to consider weaning her daughter.

The post was successful in eliciting audience engagement. Armstrong thanks her readers for their support while restoring the zany as primary product attribute.

p.s. Thank you, thank you, thank you for all of your email. Thank you for reaching out to me. I really needed it this weekend. You helped me. May Chuck cuddle up into all of your armpits, too.
(Armstrong 2004k)

Armstrong's depression narrative is woven into the textual fabric of the blog, with Armstrong ensuring that the audience regularly receives the entertaining, interesting content that renders reading an experiential event. Armstrong is very skilled at creating a reality effect through her interpellative strategies and first-person narration. This reality effect triggers the audience's perception of the blogger as a friend, sharing her daily struggles in an intimate cyber-setting. This perception evolves gradually and reaches its pinnacle when Armstrong announced her upcoming hospitalization in a mental health institution.

The reason you won't be hearing anything from me for several days is because this morning Jon is driving me up to the hospital and I'm going to check into the psychiatric ward. I am very scared that if I don't go ahead and do this that I may experience some sort of nervous breakdown.
(Armstrong 2004r)

Armstrong reveals that her mental state is deteriorating in spite of having tried different types of medication. She describes in detail her

PPD condition fulfilling thus a double role: building the image of a sincere and rugged, yet vulnerable, individual and also offering a detailed account of symptoms which would later help educate the wider public on the many facets of post partum depression.

My anxiety has only gotten worse since I started psychiatric and medical treatment over two months ago. (...) The depression comes and goes, but the anxiety is constant. I can barely eat anything and I still can't sleep, even though I've tried every sleeping pill available at the pharmacy. It's seriously out of control.
(Armstrong 2004r)

Armstrong reports having sought medical help with the result of receiving a diagnosis she was reluctant to discuss on the blog "because it will be such a loaded discussion, and that medication has caused all sorts of problems" (Armstrong 2004r). The post is written with a sense of urgency, the confessional call for support and empathy having morphed into an impersonal, unemotional announcement.

I have to get all this shit figured out or I really think I'll hurt myself. I can't believe that I don't feel better. I can't believe that it's been two months and I DON'T FEEL ANY BETTER.

I have to believe that going to the hospital is at least going to let me clear my head, or that it may actually provide an answer. I have to believe in something right now because I don't feel like I have any hope. This anxiety is so painful, and I don't see an end to it.
(Armstrong 2004r)

The stylistically unadorned disclosure of hopelessness and suicidal thoughts, coupled with the absence of interpellative markers grant this post a sense of urgency unequalled in the history of the blog. Armstrong's imagery and metaphors mirror prevalent tropes in depression and PPD narratives. Qualitative studies based on in-depth

questionnaires reveal that subjects often refer to paralysing hopelessness, deadly anxiety and agony in their accounts (Westerbeek and Mutsaers 2008; Westall and Liamputtong 2011).

Armstrong does not call for the audience's understanding or support in any way, but simply states that she has published the post to inform her steady followers of the ongoing events.

I won't be checking my email for several days, or the internet [sic] for just as long, and I may die from the withdrawal. I wanted to tell you about this because many of you have been on this journey with me and I feel like you should know what is going on.

This is what is going on. I don't feel better.
(Armstrong 2004r)

The post contains one of the most engaging narrative hooks on the blog, a hook that arguably contributed to a soar in followership: the live documentation of a critical moment in an individual's ongoing battle with mental illness. Most readers would likely feel compelled to return to the blog regularly in search for updates on Armstrong's condition. This engagement is underpinned by the blogger's mastery at creating a cyber-specific reality effect, which not only grants the story ontological weight but also secures her perception as 'friend'.

The next post is published two days later, on the 28th of August 2004, and is prefaced by a note in which the blogger's husband announces that Armstrong had given him a handwritten blog entry.

NOTE: Heather asked me to type this in as an entry. She wrote this this morning and handed it to me today when I brought Leta in to have lunch.–Jon
(Armstrong 2004s)

Unlocked marks a return to the brand's zany tone and offers an account of Armstrong's hospitalization experiences. Importantly, the post opens and ends with her directly addressing her followers, thanking them for their support and promising to read the "email and comments Jon has been telling me about" (Armstrong 2004s).

The first thing I need to say is going to be very sappy and gross and some of you may be in danger of puking afterward, but here goes. For the past three days I have felt your support and good vibes and thoughts, and oh my god, your prayers. Here I am, a scrappy and disgruntled ex-Mormon cusser [sic], thanking you for your prayers. I feel like a crazed kid at a concert who has, in a moment of sheer insanity, jumped off the stage in a grand, sweeping swan dive. And you people caught me. And here I am floating through the crowd on your hands and extended arms. Thank you for catching me, Internet.
(Armstrong 2004s)

Maintaining the blog's strict publishing deadlines even from a psychiatric ward bears testament to Armstrong's commitment to her audience and to dooce.com as her business. The blogger is arguably aware of her readers' desire for the next instalment in the depression story and of the engagement this desire can potentially foster. This is not to say that the honesty of this narrative should be questioned or that monetisation rather than scriptotherapy should be considered the primary drive for writing. Armstrong's growing followership for more than a decade, as well as her active depression awareness campaign, speak to the veracity of the account and the blogger's genuine struggle with the disease and commitment to helping others suffering from it.

The blogger ends the post by thanking her readers again and promising to read their communication pieces, either emails or comments. In a powerful display of narrative interpellation, Armstrong

fosters the online reality effect and the 'real friend' perception by stating that her followers' stories represent a communication link between them and her, a link akin to real life verbal exchanges: "I can hear your voices" (Armstrong 2004s). The last two paragraphs of the post, feature Armstrong addressing directly the public stigma associated with depression while strongly expressing her refusal to withhold the story because of fear of "shame".

When people say that they can't believe I'm being so open about this I want to ask them WHY NOT? Why should there be any shame in getting help for a disease?

If there is a stigma⁵⁸ to this, let there be one. At least I am alive. At least my baby still has her mother. At least I have a chance at a better life. (Armstrong 2004s)

In a sense this post marks the beginning of the transformation of the depression narrative into the depression campaign. This transformation is underpinned by a shift in primary writing motivation, with scriptotherapy being surpassed by Armstrong's desire to raise public awareness. As the blogger becomes better able to manage the symptoms of her disease she begins to take a more active role in

⁵⁸ The term stigmatization originates from the Greek *stigma*, meaning to "mark" or to "brand" and it is used in the medical literature on depression to refer to the characteristics, or marks, the public attributes to depressed individuals, characteristics which discredit the individuals' social identity and position them as different from 'normal' people (Goffman 1968; Silton et al. 2011). Mental health research identifies stigma as a significant factor undermining the quality of life of individuals with depression due primarily to the fact that stigma is underpinned by a reluctance to engage socially with people affected by depression, with negative public perceptions of the illness and the patients afflicted by it being still common in the US and other Western countries (Matthias C Angermeyer, Matschinger, and Corrigan 2004; M. C. Angermeyer and Dietrich 2006; Hayward and Bright 1997; Silton et al. 2011; Van Dorn et al. 2005; Wood et al. 2014).

educating the public on the disease and its crippling effects. Armstrong's stance as public speaker and campaigner for greater awareness and understanding of the disease is instrumental to her human brand development. In a 2013 interview for the media trust and online parenting website *She Knows*, Armstrong declares that depression was the most difficult topic she had tackled in her writing. She confesses having been reluctant to write about it because at the time when she was most afflicted by the disease, public perception of depression was negative. The blogger aptly depicts self-stigma as the shame and fear underpinning the afflicted individual's reluctance to talk about depression or seek help.

What has been the most difficult topic to write about?

HA: The most difficult one was depression. I was terrified people were going to label me as crazy. You have to remember that 10 years ago this wasn't something that people readily shared with anyone. Of course, it's a much easier topic to bring up now. People are much more forthcoming and will tell you they're on Zoloft or Prozac without blinking an eye.

But back then, it was embarrassing if anybody knew I was on medication. I was very scared to talk about it, but surprisingly it has become the most rewarding thing I've ever written about. I've gotten a lot of emails from people who suffer from depression, but what has really been gratifying are the emails from the brothers, sisters, moms, dads, husbands, wives, etc. of people who had depression. They didn't realize what their loved ones were going through, and after reading what I wrote they were able to understand it was in fact a real thing. (Grundy 2013)

Armstrong's depression story served to educate the wider public by offering an insight into the everyday reality of a person diagnosed with depression and, specifically, of a new mother suffering from PPD. In this respect, the reality effect of personal blogs brings the ontological weight and authentication required for the story to have an impact.

Armstrong is particularly adept at capturing common instances of everyday life and the impact depression has on them. For example, menial everyday tasks such as walking the dog become insurmountable tasks:

There is just so much crying.

There are really good days, days when I feel strong enough to handle this job, (...). On good days I can go several hours without crying.

And then there are bad days, days when I can't see ever leaving the house again, days when I think that by the time I do leave the house again my hair will be past my waistline because how can I ever get my hair cut when the baby needs to be fed every 2.5 hours?? On bad days I think I'll never be able to walk the dog again, I'll never go shopping again, I'll never see a movie (...) On bad days I cry all day long.
(Armstrong 2004e)

Armstrong re-creates the everyday of a new mother by enlisting commonplace activities and concerns related to the baby's feeding needs, household chores or pet care. Initially, this establishes a point of identification between reader and avatar, a technique conducive to openness and empathy, allowing the reader to experience the everyday from a depressed person's perspective. The banality of the enumerated activities paradoxically enhances the severity of the situation, infusing the text with a sense of urgency. The realization that a good day for a depressed person means going "several hours without crying" might shock a reader out of a comfortable consumption of text and guide her towards an empathetic awareness of a new mother's despair. The repetition of the verb "cry" and the negative adverb "never" aim to portray the impairment caused by the disease. The blogger makes

ample use of this stylistic device and of lexis related to incapacitation, physical and mental disturbances and suffering.

My daily life feels like torture. I struggle to make it from hour to hour.
(...)

I can't cope with the screaming. I can't cope with her not eating. I can't cope with the constant pacing and rocking back and forth to make sure she doesn't start crying. I am sick with anxiety. I want to throw up all day long. There are moments during her screaming when I have to set her down and walk away and regain perspective on life, because in those very dark moments of screaming I feel like I have destroyed mine. (...)

For the past several weeks I have been silently whispering to myself **Fight this! Fight this!** But I lost the fight about seven days ago.
(Armstrong 2004g)

The precision of detail as well as the abundance of everyday instances permeates the text granting it ontological weight. The repetition of the negation "I can't cope" and the use of language such as "torture", "struggle", "sick", "throw up", "destroyed", "lost the fight" infuse the commonplace interaction between mother and child with suffering and a profound feeling of despair. Armstrong's account challenges prevalent representations of motherhood as 'natural' and reveals the insidious face of mental health battles many women keep hidden. There is ample evidence in literature that stigma has caused women to withhold the severity of their symptoms (Shakespeare, Blake, and Garcia 2003; Stephanie Brown 1994) and to hide behind a mask (Westall and Liamputtong 2011; Maushart 2000). Many women reported adopting the mask of the 'good mother', setting aside their own wishes and desires to attend fully to their children and husband, and fearing being labelled 'bad mothers' if they sought help for their depressive symptoms (Gammell and Stoppard 1999; Liamputtong 2006; Morrow et

al. 2008). Recent studies demonstrate the ongoing prevalence of these damaging attitudes and their detrimental impact on patient recovery (Westall and Liamputtong 2011). Set against this normative backdrop, Armstrong's narrative represents indeed an act of bravery. What sets her account apart is the fact that through her vivid imagery and engaging writing, Armstrong enticed a large audience to read and empathetically experience a mother's everyday battles.

Armstrong's persona gradually evolved from afflicted individual to resilient survivor, and finally, to advocate. In September 2012, Armstrong joined the Board of Directors of the Utah division of NAMI. The blogger's fame and significant followership, as well as her online and print account of her struggle, made Armstrong an obvious choice of spokesperson for the organisation. The blog post where Armstrong publicises the news is aptly entitled *As Part of My Life Calling* and it aims to encourage readers to donate to NAMI Utah's annual fundraising event, *NAMI Walks*. Armstrong vouches for the integrity of the organisation and encourages readers to join her in the walk.

I set up a fundraising page here: namiwalks.nami.org/armstrongmedia

I know money is tight, but if any of you would like to help out the funds raised through this walk pretty much ensure that NAMI can operate for the next year. I have personally met and talked to people who did not believe that their family member suffered from anything until the classes provided by NAMI opened their minds. It's truly amazing work.

I'll be there Saturday helping out with registration and participating in the walk (...)

If any of you would like to join us, I'd love to see you there...

(Armstrong 2012d)

Armstrong informs her audience of the work NAMI Utah does with respect to offering support groups and classes not only to people who suffer from depression but also to family members of afflicted individuals. She also mentions the organisation's attempt to persuade policy makers to promote depression treatment and combat the stigmatization of the disease (Armstrong 2012d). On dooce.com as well as in the book *It Sucked and Then I Cried*, Heather Armstrong shares a comprehensive and moving account of her struggle with public and self-stigma. In May 2013, Armstrong contributed to the *May is Mental Health Awareness Month* by posting a moving plea for people who suffer from depression to seek help and not lose hope. The blogger addresses her audience directly, empathising with those afflicted.

I've written about the continual fight I wage against my condition so that there is a face associated with this disease, so that anyone who is ashamed or made to feel ashamed about the way they feel, about how impossible it is to explain that they don't want to feel this way, that they have no choice, that they'd like to wake up in the morning and feel something different, something other than *I cannot do this anymore*, they can see me and know that I understand. I, too, have lived and ached with that hopelessness. I encounter it again from time to time, but I'm here and I've lived through it. No, it hasn't been easy. But here I am.

(Armstrong 2013f)

Perhaps even more poignant is the blogger's dedication of the post to those who misjudge depression for premeditated ridiculousness or moodiness. Three thirds of the post depict everyday scenarios of family members condemning depressed individuals for choosing to behave in alleged irrational ways.

But my story isn't just for them. It's for the father who doesn't understand why his daughter is so miserable. Why won't she just snap

out of it? Her kids are healthy, she's got a roof over her head, she's got friends. What reason does she have for being so sad? She's being ridiculous.

It's for the son who gets together with his friends and tells stories about his crazy mother. She's never happy and sleeps all day. She hasn't showered in a week. He's tired of her bullshit. Doesn't she know how embarrassing she is? Pull it together already.

It's for the husband who comes home from work and finds his wife curled up on the couch unable to speak, unable to unwind her body from the fetal position. All she has to do is look after the kids all day. It's not like she has to meet a deadline at the office. If she had to sit through his commute then maybe he could understand. What is it with her?

(Armstrong 2013f)

Armstrong casts an unforgiving light on one of the most insidious aspects of public stigma. When it is family members who stigmatize the depressed individual the chances for a positive outcome for the depressed are seriously impacted, often resulting in tragic outcomes. Armstrong cites suicide as "the third leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24" in the US and urges the public to consider the devastating effects depression can have on individuals and their families (Armstrong 2013f).

She utilizes the home, a locus of the everyday, as the background to family members' interior monologues. The depressed individual is a woman, whereas all the voices belong to male family members. Lexis and phrases such as "ridiculous", "bullshit", "embarrassing" illustrate their lack of understanding and highlight the blame cast on the suffering individual. Armstrong's assertions are congruent with feminist research that points to the historical devaluation of the disease through its feminisation (Westerbeek and Mutsaers 2008, 26–27) and with

qualitative studies that record PPD survivors' experiences of being dismissed as weak-willed and banal (Westall and Liamputtong 2011; Liamputtong 2006).

4.2 Audience engagement and loyalty

In 2004, 2006 and 2009 respectively, Armstrong added four new elements which can be seen as pivotal to her audience engagement strategies: the publication of a postal address where the audience is invited to direct their mail, the inclusion of sound and video bits on the blog and the creation of the Dooce community feature of the website.

In a post aptly named *Contact Me*, the blogger encourages the audience to send her emails, apologizing in advance for her inability to answer them all but promising that she read everything she received. She also encourages readers to contact her by 'snail mail'. For the first time since the inception of dooce.com, the blogger offers her readers a postal address:

Heather B. Armstrong
Blurbodooery
1338 Foothill Drive #230
Salt Lake City, UT 84108
(Armstrong 2004m)

The existence of a geographical location where the blogger can be contacted in real life strengthens the blog's claim to lifelikeness and the collusion between referent and signifier. The ensuing reality effect was further reinforced by the incorporation of sound and video clips on the blog. The audience's ability to see and hear Armstrong and her

family adds ontological weight to photographs' already established authenticating power. The blogger appears to be sharing more of her story with the audience fostering thus her perception as 'friend' and commonplace individual. The audience is offered points of identification with the blogger, whilst at the same time being entertained through zany aesthetics. In *My audition tape for "Hee Haw"* Armstrong shares a 30 second recording of herself asking "whether or not his computer was connected to the wireless router" in the Southern accent she alludes to extensively on the blog (Armstrong 2006a). The accent represents, in fact, one of the blog's narrative hooks being mentioned in 40 other posts.

In *Internet, this is for you* the audience is regaled a short audio recording of the blogger's first baby daughter.

(...) I tried to record her calling me Mom, but as experience has taught us getting Leta to cooperate is as easy as trimming facial hair with a potato shredder.

Here is the little voice we live with every day. [underline mine]⁵⁹ Let your ovaries commence exploding.

(Armstrong 2006b)

What is particularly relevant in these posts is that the blogger addresses readers directly by calling them "Internet". The rhetorical trope of personification is used to anthropomorphise the Internet and establish its synonym relationship with the audience. The blogger addresses "you", the reader of the blog, and shares her daughter's words with "you" – this combination of second person narration and audio authentication, strengthening the referential illusion. The staged

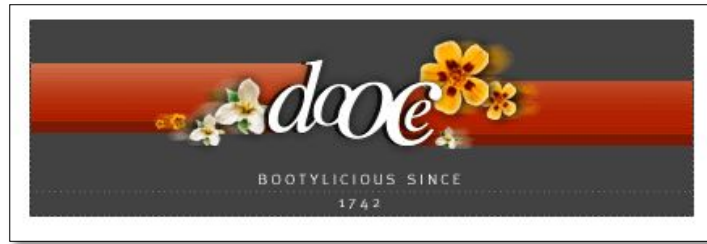
⁵⁹ The underlined text links to the sound recording, which opens in another window.

nature of the recording or the narrative intent underpinning the text, even if perceived, are likely to be ignored given that the power of authentication of video, sound and photographs speaks to a much stronger desire in the reader to voyeuristically partake in Dooce's everyday life, to engage with her and the community she is part of.

In 2015 there were 64 posts registered under the tag *Video*, with the first one published on 22nd March 2006. *Chuck, crackbaby* features a short clip of Chuck, the blogger's first dog, filmed in April 2002 when he was eight months old. In this entry, the blogger announces her decision to continue her "experimentation with features on this website which recently has included opening up comments, purchase of a dedicated server to handle bandwidth, and new mastheads⁶⁰ every month" (Armstrong 2006d).

Armstrong first introduced mastheads in September 2001, seven months after the blog's inception. The first masthead featured the brand name, *Dooce*, written in cursive font, and the tagline "*bootylicious since 1742*". The entry featuring the banner introduces two new tags: design and masthead (Armstrong 2001e), which alerts readers to Armstrong's web designer experience and prowess. It also offers them the opportunity to visualise her designs as a gallery in reverse chronological order.

⁶⁰ A website masthead represents the banner or header used at the top of a website. This banner could include a graphic image or text and its main purpose is to identify the website (Cambridge English Dictionary 2016).



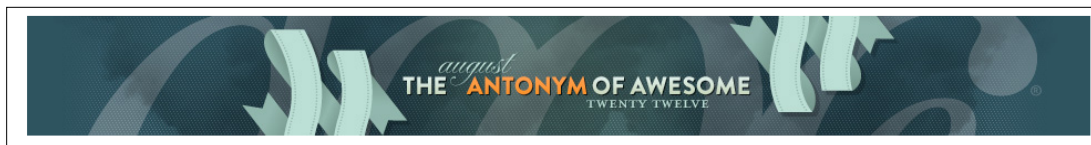
(Armstrong 2001e)



(Armstrong 2003g)



(Armstrong 2008d)



(Armstrong 2012b)

Armstrong's awareness of the importance of brand name and logo is showcased by the Dooce logotype, its distinct font, curvy lines and different letter sizes. Its consistent iteration on all brand touchpoints, website icon, mastheads and the Dooce calendar, demonstrates an awareness of brand visual identity and the importance of it being immediately recognizable. The letterform represents a distinctive focal point, infused with brand personality and meaning. Dooce as name symbolises the zany, whereas the logotype with its

stylised letterform points to the interesting as brand attribute. Armstrong's mastheads feature the name prominently in the first five years of the blog's existence. The look and feel of the logo and the masthead, as well as the font used in the blog posts create a visual identity easily associated with the brand. This cohesive proprietary system of symbols, colours, imagery and typography underpins Armstrong's development of a unique visual and textual brand identity. From 2005 on, the blogger's masthead designs become more stylised. Having a defined and recognized brand image gives Armstrong creative license to begin experimenting with alternative imagery. The 2012 example above has parts of the logotype in the background, whereas the 2008 masthead utilises the curvy typography as a subtle brand reminder.

Most mastheads contain a tagline, a short and catchy phrase that encapsulates the brand's essence, personality and positioning. Armstrong's taglines are consistently related to the zany as core brand attribute. Marketing and communications literature highlights the importance of taglines given that, although they have shorter lifespans than logos, they can be very instrumental in reinforcing a brand's message or image (Wheeler 2009, 24–25). Armstrong retains a consistent approach to her taglines even when she moves across platforms from blog to Twitter account, for example, her Twitter caption "I exploit my children for millions and millions of dollars on my mommyblog" (Armstrong 2007a) being underpinned by the same zany and interesting aesthetics.

On the 2nd of November 2009, Armstrong announces the introduction of a new, separate, interactive section of the website, called *Dooce community*. A *super special secret something* introduces the new feature, the motivations behind it, an example from a reader, the rules for participating in the community and a thank you to the blogger's advertising network and the specific sponsor of the space.

(...) 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 (meaning the team I introduced above) 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. Internet, please say hi to:

The new dooce® community! [hyperlinked]

(There's a tab in the navigation at the top of the page now, too!)

Perhaps you just want to meet other dooce® readers, or maybe you'd like some tips on photography, or maybe you'd like to compare horror stories when it comes to adopting a herding dog. I think we all have a lot in common, and I've always thought that I could sit down with any one of you, have a beer, and shoot the shit late into the evening. Of course, if you're one of my Mormon readers, we'd have Sprite and shoot the heck until curfew.

I plan to participate in the discussions over there as much as I can. In fact, I'll be featuring interesting questions and answers over here on the main site every day. In fact, let's start with this one from user jKottke [hyperlinked]:

Jon, how are your balls?



Asked by [jkottke](#) in [Family & Relationships](#)
2 days ago

I mean, come on. Who doesn't want to weigh in on that one? (...)

To get started you can either create an entirely new account or log in with your WordPress.com, Typepad, or any other Open ID account. Additionally, you can use your facebook [sic] account if none of the other options work for you.

I also wanted to set this up because I get approached probably four hundred times a day by companies who want to give free stuff to my readers, or who want to pass along a discount code, and this way I can distinctly separate all that stuff from the writing I do about my boobs.

Finally, I want to thank our advertising network Federated Media (Hi, Mugs!) for all the work they've done on this project and Suave specifically for sponsoring this space. Thank you, Suave, for making this happen! You'll notice some of the team at Suave twittering tips and whatnot in the sidebar.

Oh! I almost forgot. From now on if you want to comment on the posts on dooce.com you'll have to be a member of the community in order to do so. There are many reasons we chose to implement this step, but it all boils down to this: I am a rather sensitive flower, and this way no one can anonymously come here and say SHE IS A SPAGHETTI LEGGED TROLL WHO EATS PIG VOMIT.

That troll is so going to get hate mail from the pig people. (...)
(Armstrong 2009m)

It is with the advent of the Dooce community that the blogger's interpellation strategies reach a level of complexity unequalled by other parent blogs. While online platforms like *cafemom.com*, which feature posts by many parent bloggers and reader comments, existed since 2006 they differ in fundamental ways from the Dooce community. *Cafemom.com* is linked to other platforms such as *The Stir*, *MamasLatinas* and *BabyNameWizard* and is clearly branded as part of a digital media company. Its *About* page is akin to that of an enterprise, lacking the personal presence and confessional tone of a blogger.

Moreover, the platform boasts being “the premier strategic marketing partner to the best brands, offering innovative custom solutions, contextually relevant media, and performance-driven targeting in order to help advertisers win with our audience” (cafemom.com n.a., para. 2). The explicit profit driven nature of the platform has a direct effect on reader engagement with it, positioning the website as not necessarily a safe space of self-disclosure but rather an open forum for discussion where controversial topics might not be appropriate. The Dooce community, while being sponsored by advertisers, is, however, significantly different primarily because Armstrong kept her commitment not to alter her writing style or the content she chose to cover to please advertisers, a decision which she communicated clearly and regularly, both on the blog and in media interviews.

When I started making money, I made a very deliberate decision that I was never going to censor myself because of an advertiser. (...) Three advertisers pulled out. I still felt good about the decision. (...) In 2009, I started doing branded content. (...) It didn't change Dooce. I wouldn't let it, because I worked, and still do work, harder on sponsored content than on anything else. It has to be authentic and organic. I have an obligation to my readers first and then to the client who is paying my salary. There's a lot of work behind the scenes that goes on in convincing a brand that I need to be able to speak a certain way. (...) (Rudolph 2015)

The second fundamental difference between the Dooce community and an online platform such as cafemom.com is the type of engagement it generates. Through the use of narrative strategies and the aesthetic categories of the cute, zany, abject and interesting, Dooce creates a space where both the blogger and the audience can feel safe to share intimate thoughts, discuss taboo topics or make irreverent

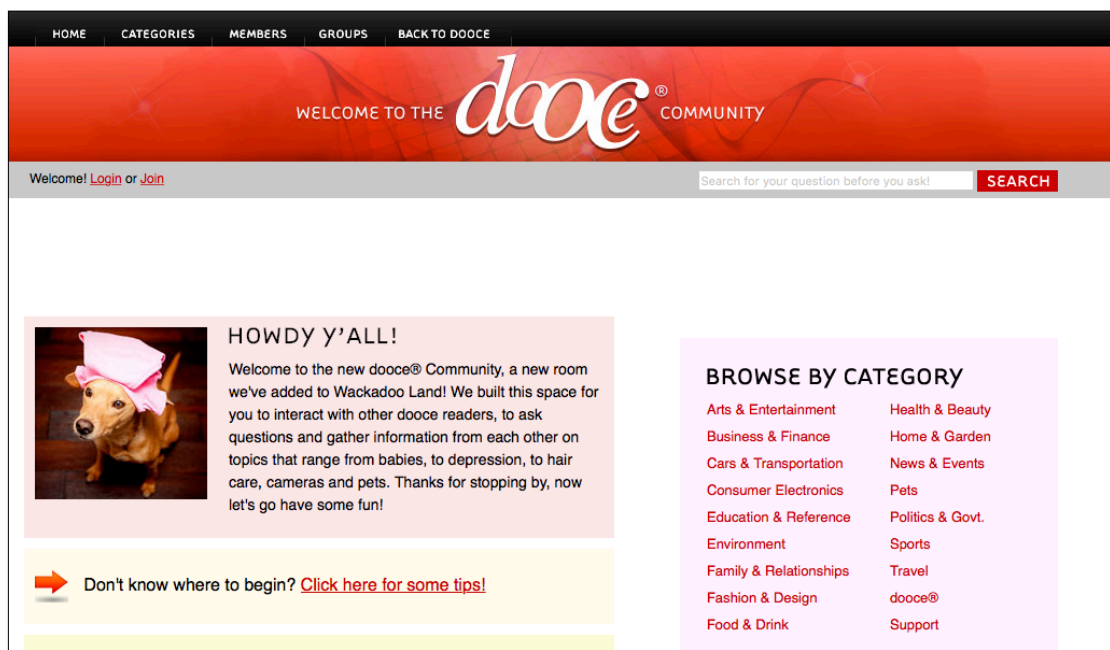
humorous comments, all within pre-established interaction parameters. The audience's engagement with the Dooce community is thus complex and it involves the blurring of the boundary between geographical communities and cyber communities. The blogger addresses her audience directly and encourages them to participate because she would like to know them better and for them "to get to know each other better" (Armstrong 2009m). The collusion between referent and signifier is further precipitated by scenes of interaction between blogger and audience over beer or Sprite. Interaction in cyberspace is thus over-imposed to hypothetical real life intimate interactions between friends sharing stories, which encourages readers to suspend disbelief and become characters on the blog.

Readers are asked to create avatars in order to participate in the community. This is done as a way of ensuring appropriate participation and is part of the blogger's strategy of interpellation into active readership discussed above. The avatar represents the online representation of the reader, a representation linked to their existing Facebook or blogging profiles or to an altogether new profile. Readers have the option to use their real name and photos or to invent user names. The result is that the reader takes the cyber leap into the community the blogger creates and becomes thus part of the story. The reader accepts the name given by Armstrong, "you who are like me", "you who has stories to share" or "Internet", and by doing so comes into cyber-being as subject. In the post above, Dooce introduces one such reader, jkottke. This reader is likely Jason Kottke, author of one of

the first blog aggregators and the blogger responsible for increasing dooce.com traffic by linking to the blog in 2001 (Belkin 2011).

Removing anonymity represents an attempt to counteract online trolling and normalise extreme behaviour. It is, of course, technically almost impossible to enforce this thoroughly and reliably without user cooperation. While it is not difficult to create a username that does not reflect one's identity, the consequences for the overall functioning of the community are minimised. This is primarily because a user's interactions with the community become self-regulated in the sense that someone making useful, funny comments will attract interactions, whereas someone engaging in trolling is likely to be ostracized.

Studies on magazine online communities offer useful points of comparison given that they, like blog communities, trade on a sense of trust, belonging and support offered to readers who are part of the group. Binns discusses the negative impact even a small number of trolls can have by creating a different atmosphere from the carefully cultured brand and destroying the feeling of community that is a major draw for regular visitors (Binns 2012, 547–548). She enlists technical solutions and community management tools implemented by web editors to limit trolling, from removing anonymity and implementing site design that rewards desirable behaviour, to encouraging their journalists to get involved in discussion threads or employing site moderation (Binns 2012). Armstrong employs all of the above and does so in a manner consistent with her brand image. For example, the screenshot below represents the landing page of the Dooce community on 26th May 2016.



(community.dooce.com 2016)

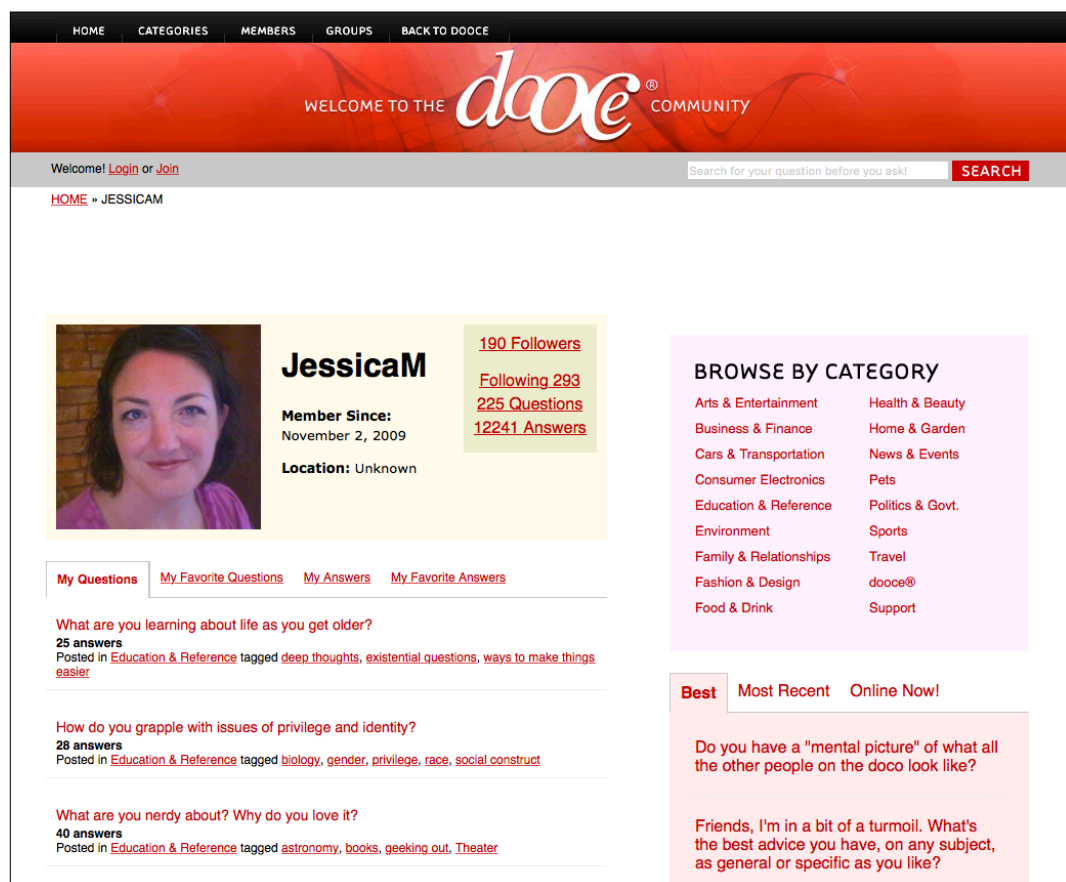
The masthead reproduces the logo and is consistent with the design parameters and brand logotype. "Howdy Y'all!" points to the core product attribute, zany aesthetics, and links to a narrative hook, Armstrong's Southern accent. Chuck's picture embodies cute and zany attributes and is likely used as a brand visual cue pointing to the light-hearted nature of the forum. Armstrong displays the rules of engagement prominently on the landing page. Readers are able to see existing discussions without logging in, but they cannot contribute to them unless they create an account. The categories featured on the right-hand side offer easy navigation, as well as an insight into the multifaceted nature of the community. Armstrong is challenging yet again media discourses, which dismiss mommy blogging as lacklustre fascination with infant bowel movements by including topics such as "Business & Finance" or "Cars & Transportation". Through the variety of topics visibly displayed she arguably encourages readers to question

normative discourses, which relegate women's interests to areas related to the private or celebrity gossip.

Armstrong implements site design that rewards appropriate behaviour and flags trolls. Each user has the opportunity to up-vote the answers they like and to report inappropriate comments. The site uses moderators who assess reported accounts, manage account requests and troubleshoot user problems. Armstrong has not revealed the cost involved in community moderation, however, given member numbers it is likely to be a high one. The community question: "What is your "Member Since" date here on the DoCo? How many answers have you written?" reveals that in 2013 the community had almost 50,000 members (community.dooce.com 2013b). Armstrong's media kit reports 61,000 registered users, 230,000-250,000 page views/month, and 50,000-60,000 sessions/month in 2015 (Armstrong 2015a).

What sets Armstrong apart from the three other "star" mommy bloggers in Friedman's pantheon (2013, 71) is her ability to pick up on new information and communication technological trends. A cursory comparison of dooce.com with the other blogs reveals that, from a technical perspective, Armstrong's website is much more user-friendly. Although Connor and Kennedy's blogs have an archive function and tags, for example, navigating through their content is limited by publication chronology. Dooce.com is the only mommy blog, to my knowledge, to offer search functionality, a much greater number of tags, and an archive landing-page optimised for non-chronological consumption of content.

Likely due to her web designer professional background, her technical skills and social media knowledge, Armstrong has consistently been at the forefront of blogging innovation. From increasing her blog traffic by reaching out to a more famous blogger, to creating a presence on every social media platform from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and a now defunct Tumblr profile, she consistently demonstrated creativity in her marketing strategy and in adopting new trends. Community user profiles, for example, emulate Twitter accounts in terms of being user-friendly and accessible. Their Twitter-inspired features include sections such as Member Since, Location, Number of Followers, Number of People Following, Number of Questions and Number of Answers.



(community.dooce.com 2009)

Jessica M. is an active member of the community and her profile page exemplifies a typical user. She has been a member since 2 November 2009 and her number of followers, questions asked and questioned answered quantify her active contribution.

The questions displayed on her profile are hyperlinked to their respective comment threads. The three examples showcase the variety in discussion topics generated by users. Arvidsson's argument that brands capitalise the immaterial labour of consumers (2005; 2006) becomes particularly poignant in this context. He argues that brand communities contribute to making the brand a medium of communication and interaction, with consumers adding to its use-value by jointly developing a collective meaning and a social world around the brand (Arvidsson 2006, 67–74). I employ Arvidsson's theory and argue that members such as Jessica M. contribute through their active community involvement to the creation of a common identity around the Dooce brand and a shared experience of it. Arvidsson refers to this ethical surplus and contends that brands switch the roles between production and consumption, whereby value is not extracted at the point of production, but rather at the point of consumption, meaning that it is consumers who, through their creativity and communication practices, produce added value to products (2005; 2006). The Dooce community certainly stands proof to that, not only because Armstrong explicitly uses the forum for different advertising purposes, but also because readers' interactions produce a social world exploited by the blogger as a source of surplus value. Readers' communication practices

represent the immaterial labour underpinning the construction of an online space where consumers feel connected to one another. Marketing scholarship shows that this type of attachment strengthens consumers' loyalty to a brand (Fournier 1998; Thomson, MacInnis, and Whan Park 2005) and engenders a sense of belonging to a group. Strong experiences of relatedness are shown to have a positive impact on brand loyalty and on consumer trust (Deci and Ryan 2000; Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Doyle et al. 2012). Readers like Jessica M. are thus instrumental in promoting consumer engagement with the brand and fostering other consumers' loyalty to it.

The creation of the Dooce community represents one of Armstrong's core points of differentiation from other bloggers. No other mommy blog, to my knowledge, offers its readers a similar platform. Members of the Dooce community refer to it as DoCo, a portmanteau term symbolic of their brand attachment. The discussion threads present consumers engaged in a self-reflexive practice and aware of their immaterial labour. In response to a member complaint about pop-up banners that cover the entire screen when opening question threads, for example, users express agreement, offer each other technical advice to avoid the disruption, but also express concern about Armstrong's revenue being negatively impacted. "I'm using Chrome with adblock installed so I'm not seeing them. I do feel a tinge of guilt that I'm not supporting Dooce's ads, but this is making me feel less so" (community.dooce.com 2013a).

Armstrong's insights related to the creation of this online space, to its design and to its monetisation showcase the employment of

brand management strategies that no other “star” mommy blogger utilised. These insights, as well as her narrative instinct are what admittedly determined her success in creating a brand name that is a Trivial Pursuit answer (H. B. Armstrong 2015a).

Chapter 5

“These posts keep me in business and allow me to continue to tell stories”

Chapter 5 offers an analysis of dooce.com’s gradual monetisation starting from 2004. The first sub-section discusses the introduction of ads and banners on the blog and Armstrong’s adept management of audience complaints. The second section elaborates on additional monetisation strategies employed, as well as Armstrong’s successful leveraging of brand attributes to ensure consumer loyalty and counteract defection. The chapter ends with an overview of brand awareness avenues such as book publications and social media usage and Armstrong’s prolific cross-platform presence. The chapter relates to all four research questions, being underpinned by theories on aesthetic categories, audience trust, brand authenticity and consumer attachment as outlined in Chapter 1’s thesis statements 1, 2, 4, 6 and 8.

5.1 Mitigating brand identity, consumer loyalty and blog monetisation

Armstrong began the monetisation of her blog by asking for donations to support the maintenance of the website, “hosting fees and upgrades to handle traffic and more media rich content” (Armstrong 2003c). Zany aesthetics permeate the otherwise demure and factual tone of the request: “No funds will be used to buy booze unless you directly specify that I should do so, and then I will buy booze like no one has ever bought booze before” (Armstrong 2003c). Calling for donations through her website positions Armstrong as part of the crowdsourcing and e-begging⁶¹ avant-garde, given that in 2003 the phenomenon of raising revenue through online platforms was very much in its infancy. At the time, the only existing crowdsourcing platform was ArtistShare, a website allowing fans to financially support their favourite artists’ product development (Freedman and Nutting 2015; Newman 2015; Chinen 2013). A decade later, crowdfunding entered legal and financial regulatory discourses, with the White House legalizing equity crowdfunding in 2012 (Mollick 2014). Similarly, e-begging, also known as cyber-begging or Internet begging, gained traction as well as fierce public opposition in the early 2000s (Witchalls 2003).

A year later, in 2004, Armstrong announced her intention to upgrade the blog’s revenue-raising model by featuring advertising in

⁶¹ Crowdsourcing is a method of raising revenue for a project by harnessing small donations through an online funding platform (Mollick 2014). E-begging represents the online version of the RL phenomenon with websites specifically dedicated to asking the general public for money to meet personal needs (Witchalls 2003).

the form of banner and text ads. What makes dooce.com a relevant case study of successful personal blog monetisation resides not necessarily in the marketing strategies Armstrong experimented with, but rather in her ability to mitigate audience defection and retain consumer confidence in her core brand values of honesty and non-conformism. Armstrong's personal brand image is carefully curated to mitigate potential audience mistrust generated by the introduction of a financial element to a relationship founded on self-disclosure. Her brand image of uncensored maverick and the zany-abstract product attributes permeate Armstrong's media presence and aim to deliver a clear message to her audience: monetisation will never impact the integrity of the Dooce brand.

The decision to monetise her blog is introduced as being motivated by bandwidth costs and the ensuing need to switch hosting providers, as well as a desire to "make a lot of improvements, add more features and make this website an even better waste of your time" (Armstrong 2004o).

(...) Some of the things I'd like to see here include:

1. Search functionality
2. Better/more categorization of posts
3. A daily photograph
4. A monthly round-up of hate mail, love mail, and could take me or leave me mail, and my commentary on all of it
5. Adding back to the archives all the older posts that I have deleted
6. Lengthier descriptions of music, books and websites I'm enjoying
7. A site FAQ section, including an explanation on the tools I use to build this site (...)

(Armstrong 2004o)

Armstrong shares with the audience the improvements she would like to make to her website and ends the post by eliciting readers'

feedback on their interaction with the site and its content. Interpellation and zany aesthetics are used to frame the news of the blog's monetisation as part of a larger conversation on product improvement and the added value for the audience.

(...) Here's where I ask for your feedback on the idea of a redesign. I want your input. What would you like to see here?

(NOTE: NUDE PICTURES OF ME ARE NOT AN OPTION. DON'T EVEN ASK. Nude pictures of Chuck, however, coming soon!)

Have you got any ideas?
(Armstrong 2004o)

From a marketing perspective, Armstrong's framing represents market research, specifically primary research conducted with the purpose of gaining an understanding of the effectiveness of a product. Armstrong's question replicates on a small-scale marketing qualitative data collection methods such as interviews, surveys or focus groups. The blog comment functionality and cyberspace as non-geographically bound location allow Armstrong to replicate traditional consumer focus groups more easily and cost-effectively. The insightful aspect of Armstrong's strategy resides in her use of interpellation to make the audience feel involved in the change process and consulted on it. This type of interpellation differs from previous instantiations of second-person narration given that it does not only elicit desired reader behaviour, but also strengthens consumer allegiance to the Dooce brand community. Engaging consumers in product development and conducting regular surveys on product satisfaction represent key marketing strategies employed by well-established brands across

different industries (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005; Füller, Matzler, and Hoppe 2008; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Martínez-López et al. 2016a; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009; Muñiz and Schau 2005). Brands such as Audi, Ducati and Harley Davidson capitalise on their brand communities' innovative potential and incorporate consumer opinions in new product development (Füller, Matzler, and Hoppe 2008; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Verona, Prandelli, and Sawhney 2006). Similarly, Armstrong opens the opportunity for passionate and innovative members of her brand community to engage in product development and by doing so, she not only capitalises their creativity and immaterial labour, but also, and perhaps more importantly, she secures her readers' excitement about and investment in the website upgrade.

The product development frame represents one of the narrative strategies designed to reduce audience defection, alongside narrative focalisation and first-person confessional writing.

(...) Now here's where I talk about the possibly controversial part: I want to try and make money with this website (Gasp. Sigh. Please alert the sell-out police.) This may seem too ambitious, and it may very well be too ambitious as this is a personal website that talks a whole lot about poop. But Jon and I have given this a lot of thought, and generating any sort of revenue from the site, however meager or paltry it may be, would help relieve at least a little bit of the burden Jon carries in supporting this family financially.

I've considered taking a job outside the home, but that would mean that I would probably have to give up this website. I don't possess the juggling skills to raise a baby and work a full or part-time job and maintain the amount of writing I have done here. This website brings me much happiness and joy, and it has been the most therapeutic part

of my treatment for postpartum depression. Why not try to make a living out of it?

I've thought about getting a job writing a column for a magazine or newspaper, but I would inevitably be subjected to an editor in those circumstances, and editors always seem to suck the life out of whatever I've written (...)

(Armstrong 2004o)

Zany and abject aesthetics permeate an otherwise humble and demure text. Armstrong pre-empts her audience's reaction of surprise and resistance, with lexis such "sell out police", "possibly controversial", "gasp", "sigh" pointing to antagonistic reader reactions. She then proceeds to shift focalisation from that reaction to her perspective and her emotional investment. This narrative shift has been used previously on the blog in instances where Armstrong was conveying information with potential negative consequences on her brand image⁶². The blogger mitigates undesirable public perception by employing metaphors of the everyday and scriptotherapy as motivation for writing. She utilises the audience engagement generated by her depression narrative and engenders a sense of urgency around the preservation of the blog's unique attributes. The everyday is rendered through metaphors such as "meagre" or "paltry" "revenue", "relieve the burden", "supporting this family financially", which point to financial concerns common to a significant segment of her target market. The main aim of the paragraph is to establish a point of identification between blogger and audience, with the humble tone of phrases such

⁶² See previous chapter.

as “may seem too ambitious”, “meagre” or “paltry” further reinforcing the blogger’s perception as a common individual.

The second section builds on this image and introduces a key warning; the product might cease to exist unless the action proposed is taken. Armstrong is careful to soften the warning by shifting narrative focalisation on scriptotherapy and the importance of retaining the blog as a source of “happiness and joy”.

The following paragraph portrays Armstrong as a competent author, who has explored employment options related to her writing passion. This paragraph also marks a shift from Armstrong as a common individual, to Armstrong as author of a product with unique selling points. Zany and abject product attributes are alluded to and the audience is once again warned that their consumption experience might be negatively affected by print media’s probable censorship. This point is further reinforced by Armstrong’s pledge to retain her core brand values and authorial agency.

Unfortunately I’m not quite sure how to make money doing this. I applied for Google AdSense and they rejected me because of “Inappropriate language.” Yes, that’s right. Google wants nothing to do with me and my motherfucking fucker fucks, my poops and penile diseases⁶³, my nursing bras and engorged, cabbage-wrapped torpedo boobs⁶⁴. Here’s what they actually said:

⁶³ “penile disease” refers to Armstrong’s mishearing “peanut disease” in a conversation with her English host family’s small child while she spent a semester abroad in college (Armstrong 2004n).

⁶⁴ “cabbage-wrapped torpedo boobs” represents one of the narrative hooks of the blog. Although not as frequently mentioned as constipation or Mormonism, it is nonetheless a theme reiterated in several blog posts. It refers to the blogger’s natural remedy for alleviating post-lactation chest pain (Armstrong 2004l; Armstrong 2004c; Armstrong 2004o; Armstrong 2004p; Armstrong 2005a; Armstrong 2006e).

"We've found that your website contains content that isn't in compliance with our program policies. We don't allow websites with excessive profanity or potentially offensive content to participate in Google AdSense."

Somehow I feel rather proud.

I don't want to be edited or censored, and I would never alter the content of this site to qualify for an advertising program. My stance on this may leave me moneyless, but at least I'll have my dignity and you'll have my cabbage boobs.

(Armstrong 2004o)

Armstrong delivers a strong message to her audience, promising to retain the core product attributes unaltered, with the enumeration of zany and abject aesthetic objects admittedly aiming to prove the point. From a brand management perspective, the blogger is successful in veering the audience towards perceiving her online persona as both honest and nonconformist. The visually prominent placement of the phrase "Somehow I feel rather proud" serves to strengthen Armstrong's perception as an author unafraid to transcend propriety rules in order to retain her authorial agency.

In a post published two days later, Armstrong addresses her audience's response to her interpellative call by thanking them profusely and announcing that she would not be charging for access to the website, but instead she will be accepting advertising with the promise of it not impacting readers' consumption experience or the visual identity of the brand. Interestingly, Armstrong invites her audience to advertise on the website, an effective strategy not only to source potential clients, but also to encourage readers to become invested in the blog's development and growth (Armstrong 2004p).

Armstrong maintains frequent communication with consumers with respect to the blog's monetisation and upgrade process. Framed within the brand's zany aesthetics, this communication practice creates the perception of transparency, with Armstrong being mindful of making her readers feel that their relation has primary importance over any financial gain.

If I haven't thanked you for a donation you've sent to this website, please know that I'm working on it. Sometimes Amazon doesn't send me your name when you donate, and sometimes I just get behind. Please send me an email and kick me in the butt. In the meantime, thank you. I can't say it enough: thank you.

As for selling my soul to advertisers, I'm doing a test run of sorts with the lovely and wonderful people at **Coudal Partners** [hyperlinked] who agreed to sponsor this site for a couple months with an ad for their very cool and "sweet" **Jewelboxing Packaging Systems** [hyperlinked]. We're going to look at traffic patterns and statistics, and then I'll use that data to develop a system of ads for this site in the next few months. If you'd like to be notified when that system goes live and are interested in advertising here, please drop me an email and I'll add you to the list.

(...)

(UPDATE: I'm running some test ads on the individual archive pages, and I'm getting ads for canker sores! CANKER SORES! I didn't know canker sores needed advertising. AWESOME!)

(Armstrong 2004q)

Armstrong combines zany aesthetics with factual information on the monetisation process to create a reading experience that presents the audience not only with informative and relevant content, but also with the perception of partaking in the product development process. The monetisation of the blog is staged and, to some extent, modelled

on research and development processes for new products, which require a prototyping and testing phase. I argue that one of the factors contributing to Armstrong's success was her ability to present monetisation as a carefully measured and quantified endeavour rather than a haphazard revenue-driven pursuit, and her image as author attempting to ethically explore revenue channels and their optimal usage serves to reinforce this message.

In the meantime, Coudal is running a week-long Dooce Family and Friends discount on their **Jewelboxing DVD/CD packages** [hyperlinked]. Write a note to "crew at jewelboxing dot com" and mention Dooce and they'll send you a link to follow for a \$10 discount. Valid until midnight next Thursday August 26. How cool are these people? I would definitely party with them, and then let them watch my baby as I got drunk and passed out. Just kidding. I wouldn't pass out. I'd just throw up.
(Armstrong 2004q)

This paragraph represents a pre-cursor to sponsored blog posts as it exemplifies the basic narrative technique the blogger will make extensive use of in all of her commercial posts. The technique involves establishing an emotional connection between the product or the manufacturing company and the blog protagonists. In this example, the ambiguity of the phrase "these people" aims to anthropomorphise "the company" as a group of "cool" individuals the blogger would "party" with and to whom she would entrust her baby, the underlying message arguably being that the company is reliable.

One of Armstrong's insights regarding audience retention relates to her direct engagement with reader complaints. A post published shortly after the monetisation announcement reproduces a reader's

negative appraisal of the blog's donation tab and Armstrong's response exemplifies how leveraging established brand values can be utilised to dismiss complaints and engage audience support in the process.

Earlier this year before Leta was born when I was in a state of behemoth, swollen proportions and prone to crying at the beauty of a saltine cracker, I got the following email in my dooce inbox:

Subject: welfare journaling

I found your site through some other site. It's obviously a well designed site that uses decent software.

But whenever I see a "donate" page on a blog, it's a major turn off. I never revisit sites that ask for donations or even suggest that readers donate. If you can't afford to fund your own domain, find a free site like diaryland or something.

If people have money to donate this frivolously, why not list worthwhile charities that you support (if you support any at all).

You don't classify as a charity.

Had this person seen the state of my ankles at the time I think he might have reconsidered. I cried for hours after reading this because I was pregnant and because I felt so misunderstood in the most dramatic, teenage way possible. Why couldn't the world just get along?

I think most people who visit this site understand that the donate option is a way for readers to say thanks. It's more like dropping a few bucks into the hat of a street performer than it is supporting a charity, and thank you dear reader for being so clear-headed and very, very generous.

(Armstrong 2004q)

Interestingly, the email had been received several months prior to its publication, yet the blogger chose to address it only after the monetisation announcement. I argue that this discrepancy in chronology forms part of a deliberate strategy to diffuse negative

feedback and gear audience perception towards positive acceptance of advertising or, at least, non-resistance or defection. It would be reasonable to assume Armstrong's circumspection regarding audience complaints about monetisation. Her decision to tackle negative feedback by referring to donation objections, rather than advertising complaints, is arguably very astute. Donating, as opposed to website advertising, resides completely within readers' control, which means that a user who refuses to support the website whose content he enjoys is more easily vilified. Armstrong employs a combination of narrative and rhetorical techniques, particularly polarisation, to foster an in-group identity whose ideology posits monetisation as justified compensation for a pleasurable consumption experience.

The outer narrative frame of the post focuses on the blogger's emotional and physical state, with the likely purpose of establishing an empathetic response in the audience. Through polarisation, Armstrong constructs an "us-versus-them" discourse according to which "most people who visit this site" points to the in-group who exhibits the desired behaviour, demonstrating their gratitude and support by donating "a few bucks". The blogger utilises this device extensively, particularly with second-person narration to interpellate consumers into recurrent and responsible readers. Additionally, she employs rhetorical devices such as analogy between donating on the website and compensating a "street performer". Armstrong arguably aims to establish a synonym relationship between her writing and art forms, connecting thus the act of donating to crowdsourcing rather than cyber-begging. This is particularly important given that public and

media perception of Internet begging has been primarily negative due to controversy and fraud (Witchalls 2003; Newman 2015; Monroe 2016).

Armstrong employs tropes such as sarcasm and euphemism to dismiss the reader's negative appraisal, as well as contrast to further vilify him by comparison to donors, who receive a diatribe in the ensuing paragraph. Ridicule and hyperbole are further utilised to diminish the complaint's credibility beyond refutation:

And another thing about the selling of the soul and the thing: Google AdSense reversed their decision and accepted my application! FUCKERS! Thank you to whoever wrote in and complained because YOU WIELDED SPECIAL GOOGLE MIND POWERS! I will probably test out a few ads here and there in the next couple of days because not enough of my soul has been sold. Only parts of it are black and dead. I should sell the rest of it on eBay.

(Armstrong 2004q)

Zany aesthetics, hyperbolic associations between monetisation and Christian metaphors of damnation such as "selling of the soul", "my soul has been sold" or it is "black and dead", underpin a sarcastic representation of potential audience misgivings regarding generating revenue through the blog. The post showcases Armstrong's prowess in managing her audience's expectations and reactions. Whether due to entrepreneurial instinct or marketing insight, Armstrong's audience management techniques set an example to be emulated and also further researched.

5.2 Additional monetisation strategies

In October 2005 I began running enough ads on this website that my husband was able to quit his job and become a Stay at Home Father (SAHF) or a Shit Ass Ho Fuckingbadass. He takes both very seriously. This website now supports my family.
(Armstrong 2013b)

By 2006 advertising was generating a “comfortable enough middle class to upper-middle class income” for the Armstrong household (Canham 2006). Throughout the blog’s existence, Armstrong maintained a consistent approach to her public relations strategy: she disclosed sufficient information to sustain the brand value of honesty but was never explicit about revenue figures or the alternative monetisation avenues she explored. In a 2011 interview for *The New York Times*, Armstrong declared “We’re a privately held company and don’t reveal our financials”, although the author of the article estimated that blog income was at the time \$30,000 to \$50,000 per month, “and that’s not even counting the revenue from her two books, healthy speaking fees and the contracts she signed to promote Verizon and appear on HGTV” (Belkin 2011). An in-depth analysis of the blog reveals that Armstrong has gradually and surreptitiously utilised additional forms of advertising related to product endorsement, from the creation of a *Daily Style* category, to collaborations with companies and institutions, and ultimately to sponsored blog posts.

The *Daily Style* category was first introduced in 2007 and it initially comprised short references to products that the blogger considered interesting or useful. Products are introduced as intrinsic elements of

narratives starring the blog protagonists, with links to external websites creating the opportunity for easy purchase. An early example from the category showcases the concept in its simplicity and efficacy. A photograph of the entire post, rather than just the text, was chosen in order to better illustrate the seamless weaving of advertising into the brand narrative and visual presence.



[HOME](#) [ABOUT](#) [ARCHIVES](#) [MASTHEADS](#) [CONTACT](#) [SHOP](#) [FAQ](#) [VISIT THE DOOCE COMMUNITY →](#)

FOLLOW ME:



Browse: [Home](#) > [2007](#) > [November](#) > [18](#) > [I do](#)



I do

2007/11/18

Jon and I have never owned traditional wedding rings for various reasons, some involving money and the fact that I don't like to wear jewelry unless I'm dressing up for a specific occasion. Like say, to impress my mother. Or maybe on that official trip to Target. So I buy "wedding rings" all the time, including this lovely, oversized peach-colored ring that I bought for \$3.99 at Forever 21. It goes with both my gold *and* silver earrings, and gives me something to fidget with when my father asks Jon how he feels about gay marriage.

Posted in [Daily Style](#)

(Armstrong 2007d)

The post exemplifies a pattern followed by the blogger in most of her commercial posts: the product is enmeshed in a narrative frame whose main purpose is to establish an emotional response in the audience. In this case, the absence of wedding rings due to financial constraints or fashion preferences appeals to readers' empathy, while the zany aesthetics of a conservative Mormon's and a Democrat's contrasting views on homosexual marriage offers comic relief and guards the text against the maudlin or sentimental.

In January 2016, the website archive registered 674 posts under the *Daily Style* tag. It is not within the number of posts however that the importance of this category resides, but rather in its evolution. What started as a short entry featuring one product, evolved into a carefully curated collection of products thematically linked. Armstrong publishes such collections on average once or twice per month, with an increase around commercial public holidays such as Valentines Day or Christmas.



Browse: [Home](#) > [2015](#) > [December](#) > [04](#) > [Holiday for Her](#)



Holiday for Her

2015/12/04

Fortunately (for me) the girls are spending Christmas here this year. That's all I want from Santa. That's it. Last year I was pretty miserable, but splitting up holidays (among many, many, many other things) is something you have to take into consideration when you get divorced. In 2012

while I was still in the thick fog of our separation I wrote the foreword to 42 Rules for Divorcing with Children: Doing It with Dignity & Grace While Raising Happy, Healthy, Well-Adjusted Children by Melinda Roberts (number 17 up there). I just now pulled up the text file in which I wrote it and parts of it are hard for me to read:

"I was ten years old when my mother and father told me and my siblings that they were getting divorced. We sat around the kitchen table, and I remember the sound of my legs squeaking against the yellow vinyl of the dining chair when I took my place. I thought that if I could crawl up inside that noise then I wouldn't be able to hear what I knew they were about to tell me, news that had been years in the making."

(...)

It's a wonderful book, very direct and clear about the things you *must* hear that you do not want to hear. If you or anyone you know is going through a split and it involves children, read this book. And then pour yourself a stiff drink and buy a purse.

1. 2016 Stitch the Stars Calendar Kit \$25

2. Soma Sustainable Pitcher & Plant-Based Water Filter \$39.99

(...)

18. Hall of Small Mammals \$19.98

19. Between the World and Me \$14.40

(Armstrong 2015g)

The post is emblematic of the category in its present day iteration. The products presented are arranged in a carefully designed virtual display, a signature style of the Dooce brand. The introduction aims to offer meaningful content and engender an emotional response. Armstrong's effort to maintain high standard content consistently throughout the category's eight-year time span points to her professional work ethic and her commitment to the business. Posts featuring enumerations of products linked to other websites would

likely result in audience defection on most blogs; yet Armstrong retains her high blog traffic by offering emotional and insightful narrative snippets in exchange for her readers' clicks. Although there is no explicit discussion of the revenue generated by such posts, the fact that each hyperlinked product redirects onto a different website would support the conclusion that Armstrong is probably paid per click. Current automated advertising networks such as Google AdSense or Federated Media, Armstrong's primary advertising partner, follow two main algorithms for blogger remuneration: cost-per-click (CPC) or cost-per-thousand (CPM). CPC, as the name suggests, means the blogger receives a small amount of money every time a reader clicks on a link, whereas CPM entitles bloggers to financial compensation for every 1,000 ads displayed (Reardon and Reardon 2015; Coker 2016; Lotich 2015; Scott 2016; Rich 2014). From this perspective, CPC represents the optimal algorithm for the type of posts published in the *Daily Style* category.

The example above showcases one of the most emotionally fraught narrative hooks of the blog: Armstrong's divorce. The topic's limited mention on the website creates a sense of scarcity and urgency, a marketing strategy often used to increase consumer purchase. In this context, scarcity aims to stimulate reader interest and simultaneously reward loyal audience members by offering them a small instalment of the divorce narrative⁶⁵. Incidentally, the introduction also serves to

⁶⁵ Armstrong is currently capitalizing on this narrative through a podcast called *Manic Rambling Spiral*. Released as an independent project, the podcast offers weekly instalments of Armstrong's and her friend John Bray's struggles as divorcees and single parents (Armstrong 2016d).

recommend one of the products advertised, a book on divorce whose foreword was authored by the blogger.

Armstrong diversified her product endorsement channels by introducing references to products in other blog categories, including *Daily*, the main dooce.com narrative repository. From 2007 on, readers encounter more products seamlessly interwoven in the blog's narrative texture. Armstrong's financial compensation for these endorsements has not been made explicit, but the effectiveness of product placement on dooce.com was documented in the media.

Ms. Armstrong's product endorsements -- bestowed only on items she's purchased, she says -- wield impressive clout. Yukiko Kamioka in Colchester, England, says she was struggling with only 10 visitors a day to her Web site, seabreezestudio.co.uk, until Dooce endorsed her handmade bags; 3,000 visitors immediately swamped her site, and she soon sold out of her merchandise.

(Shellenbarger 2008)

Armstrong's influence relies on her persuasive endorsements and also on the numbers of daily views. Out of a reported 100,000 daily visitors (Belkin 2011), if only a small minority were to click on the links provided, the website traffic generated would still amass a substantial number. Product placement on dooce.com is consistently well curated both in terms of visual display and narrative structure. What distinguishes Armstrong from other personal bloggers is her narrative prowess, her use of the reality effect and zany/abject aesthetics to make the product an inextricable part of her family's story. The success of this technique is proven by the blog's popularity over fifteen years in spite of a consistent yearly increase in endorsements. In the example below, Armstrong recommends an online personal styling service in an entry

tagged *Daily Chuck*. This category is dedicated to posting a weekly picture of the family pets and comprises more than 1,000 entries spanning over eleven years.



Funnel neck

2015/01/28

This is my favorite piece from my latest Stitch Fix package, a super casual and comfy pullover that could not possibly represent my taste more. As little lounging around I do, I'm always dressed as if that is all I do and this top just screams that. I did sign up for these packages because I wanted to step outside of my comfort zone a bit, wanted my kids to have memories of me dressed in something other than yoga pants. But sometimes I think the stylists show a little mercy, like *it's okay if your kids only remember you dressed in yoga pants, Heather*.

It is. It really is. And the stories they will tell of that crazy woman and how she humiliated that dog.

Posted in Daily Chuck | Tagged Chuck, Coco, dog, pet, Stitch Fix, stuff on my dog (Armstrong 2015c)

Contracting a personalised fashion service is underpinned by the blogger's desire for a change in style. Armstrong aptly endorses the service both for providing fashion suggestions compatible with her taste, and for expanding her comfort zone. The cute aesthetics of Chuck modelling one of the clothing items, and the metaphors of the everyday encapsulated in the reference to "lounging around" clothing and "yoga pants", establish a point of identification between blogger and her audience. They also, and perhaps more poignantly, address a key target market both for the Dooce brand and for the service, namely women, particularly mothers. As with all product endorsements on dooce.com, except for sponsored blog posts, it is unclear whether Armstrong received any compensation for the post.

Bloggers' relationship with marketers represents a contemporary phenomenon with ever-evolving implications for brands, consumers, bloggers and legislative bodies (J. Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007; Klein and Ford 2003). Both Sullivan (2009) as well as Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2008) state that blogger compensation for product placement or endorsement can vary widely depending on website traffic and marketing partners. Whilst Armstrong's agreements are not available to the public, a comparison with mommy blogger Amy Oztan's sponsorship disclosure can offer an insight into the different types of blogger-sponsor arrangements. Oztan has developed a fifteen-level compensation disclosure list, which aims to clearly represent her relationship with any company she mentions on her website selfishmom.com. Admittedly less influential than Heather Armstrong, Oztan is nonetheless a relevant example as her classification

comprehensively subsumes the types of monetary and non-monetary relationships between brands and bloggers as recorded in entrepreneurial blogging guides such as Reardon and Reardon's *Blogging: A Practical Guide to Plan Your Blog: Start Your Profitable Home-Based Business with a Successful Blog* (2015) or Scott's *Internet Business Blueprint: Start a Business via Blogging, Youtube Marketing & Kindle Publishing* (2016). They will be outlined in detail below:

Compensation levels will be stated clearly at the beginning or end of any post that mentions a product, service or location that is covered by any of the levels listed below (or possibly within a post if there are many products listed, such as a gift list). If no compensation level is listed, it is to be assumed that there was no compensation involved with the post or any products, services or locations mentioned in the post. For the purposes of these levels user does not consider transportation to and from a local event, or food consumed at an event, as compensation. Compensation refers to cash, gift certificates, products, or services.

Level 0: The blogger has no significant relationship with any product, service or brand mentioned in this post.

Level 1: The product or service mentioned was provided to the blogger free of charge (or at a considerable discount not available to the public).

Level 2: The product or service mentioned was provided free of charge *and* the blogger was compensated to post about the product or service.

(...)

Level 13: This is a sponsored post. The blogger was compensated to write this post. While the blogger's opinions in the post are authentic, talking points may have been suggested by the sponsor.

Level 14: The blogger is under contract with the company, product or service mentioned in this post. While not specifically paid for this post, the blogger is paid by the company to attend events and write about the company/product/service. The blogger receives free samples of the product, special access to the company, and all of the blogger's costs are covered when attending events related to the company.

Level 15: The blogger works for the company mentioned in the post on a freelance basis.

(Oztan 2010)

The compensation modalities itemised on Oztan's list offer a comprehensive image of the vast array of sponsorship agreements between companies and bloggers. Levels two to thirteen cover the inclusion of links from specific websites, featuring products in pictures or videos, attending events and/or mentioning events, giving away products as competition prizes or having a personal relationship with a company or an individual connected with the product which might influence the blogger's opinion. Dooce.com offers extensive examples of all of the above-mentioned types of product endorsement, with the caveat that on dooce.com the only posts that contain a caption related to the blogger's financial compensation are sponsored blog posts. These posts are linked by the tag *Sponsored* and their number, thirty-six over fifteen years, represents an insignificant percentage of the total amount of entries that contain product endorsements. Whilst an in-depth analysis of all these posts is beyond the scope of this project, the examples discussed so far raise concerns regarding the endorsements' credibility and Armstrong's legal responsibilities. The possibility that Armstrong received no compensation for any of the products endorsed in these posts of course exists. It is however mathematically difficult to prove that text and banner ads alone, together with thirty-six sponsored blog posts, could generate the blog's high estimated revenue.

Her site brings in an estimated \$30,000 to \$50,000 a month or more. (...) the sales rep for Federated Media, the agency that sells ads for Dooce, calls Armstrong "one of our most successful bloggers," then notes a few beats later in our conversation that "our most successful bloggers can gross \$1 million."
(Belkin 2011)

From a legal perspective, Armstrong's undisclosed endorsements occupy a grey area. In May 2000, the US Federal Trade Commission (hereafter FTC) published its first guidance document on sales disclosures in online advertising, which would later be updated to its current version *.com Disclosures. How to Make Effective Disclosures in Digital Advertising* (The United States Federal Trade Commission 2013). According to the FTC Act, bloggers are required to display "clear and conspicuous" disclosures if they received financial compensation to mention a product, unless the product was received for free or the blogger is part of a network marketing program. The FTC states that it does not monitor bloggers and that in the event of significant law violations their area of focus would be the advertiser or "their ad agencies and public relations firms" (The United States Federal Trade Commission 2015). A definitive conclusion regarding the type of compensation, if any, Armstrong received for the products she endorsed remains elusive and beyond the scope of this project. What is of interest, however, is Armstrong's ability to retain high blog traffic whilst increasing product endorsements. The main factors contributing to this have already been outlined, yet one final example needs to be discussed as it relates to Armstrong's audience management insights in the face of a crisis with damaging effects on website traffic and brand image.

In 2013, one of Armstrong's sponsored posts received a significant number of reader complaints related to the position of the sponsorship disclosure at the end rather than at the beginning of the text.

Clara • 3 years ago

I appreciate that you always label your sponsored posts. Any chance you could put the sponsorship information at the top of the post not the bottom? I always feel kind of cheated when I read a post and then at the end realize that it's sponsored. I just like to know that I'm reading an ad when I'm reading an ad.

(...)

Lossi • 3 years ago

I have started scrolling down to the bottom of dooce posts before reading now, as I found I really dislike being drawn in to a story about this family I've come to care about over the years, only to find out the whole post is there because some company paid for it be [sic] there and to have their brand associated with the good feelings I have for Heather and her girls. (...)

No judgement on Heather - I realize, you've got to pay the rent, and sponsored posts are a legit way to do it.

(...)

cathyhub • 3 years ago

Could you please please please [sic] identify sponsored posts as "(sponsored)" at the start of your posts? I promise I will read them -- I love your writing enough to do so -- but it will prevent me from groaning aloud at the ending.

Seriously, I often laugh or smile or gaze at the computer ruefully at your last lines. But with these I-had-no-idea-this-was-paid-for posts, I groan out loud and for a single moment I suddenly and really and truly don't like you. I talk myself out of it, but these moments are unpleasant and would be easy to avoid by identifying sponsors (or just the fact that it's sponsored) at the start.

(...)

Jane LaBatte • 3 years ago

These sponsored posts are getting effing BULLSHIT. (...) Please stop tricking us into reading your advertisements. Sponsor news up top, front and center please.

(for the record: first negative post I have ever left you in 10+ years of reading... but I am getting beyond annoyed at these surprise "sponsored by" endings to your blogs)

(Armstrong 2013a)

Whilst reader comments varied in tone, the overall majority expressed discomfort when encountering the sponsorship disclosure at

the end. Even though Armstrong has a well-documented history of receiving negative feedback and “vitriolic” comments, as discussed in media interviews for the *New York Times* (Belkin 2011) or the *Dallas Observer* (Laussade 2010), what makes this particular instance noteworthy is the fact that the majority of complaints came from loyal brand consumers. Additionally, readers exhibited a level of information regarding sponsorship disclosure regulations absent in previous years, with commenters engaging in dialogue with each other and pointing that the “FCC requires that bloggers label sponsored posts as such. If you read a post that has not been clearly labeled as sponsored (...), my understanding is that the blogger is breaking the law” (Armstrong 2013a).

Armstrong published her response six days later in an entry entitled *I’m Listening*. The blogger adopts a serious and factual tone, with zany aesthetics utilised only in the first paragraph to alert the audience to the post’s importance. The text resembles a press release with Armstrong addressing her consumers’ concerns and promising to place the sponsorship disclosure at the beginning of posts. Armstrong’s public relations strategy is directed at educating her audience on key aspects such as product development labour, sponsor selection process and the importance of financial compensation for personal bloggers.

Today I’m going to pull back the veil a little bit and address some very vocal, at times brutal, at times totally helpful criticism that was left on a recent sponsored post. I read through every comment, even the ones that made me wince, and I wanted to let my thoughts simmer a bit before I put anything down in writing. (...)

Many of you know that I have been making money from this website for close to eight years. In fact, this website has been my family’s primary

source of income for almost that entire time. I was one of the first authors to sign with **Federated Media** [hyperlinked] and have remained a loyal partner with them ever since. Together we've enjoyed the growth of this industry and weathered the unpredictable nature of it's [sic] ongoing transformation. I mention them here because I looped them in over the weekend, showed them what the response to that post looked like, and asked if they would go on record about why it's good for people like me to work with big brands. I'll get to what they had to say in a minute, but first I want to address the biggest complaint I heard: (...)
(Armstrong 2013c)

Armstrong's response is strategically constructed to make consumers feel they are listened to and that validity is given to their arguments. Armstrong is, however, careful to restrict the validation to discrete comments and to place focus on her commitment to address their concerns. The post is positioned as a dispassionate and thoroughly considered response to a serious matter, although Armstrong's emotional reaction to the comments features prominently at the beginning of the post in emotive lexis such as "brutal" criticism, "wince", "let...thoughts simmer".

A perfunctory analysis of the post might conclude the second paragraph is arguably superfluous or, at the very least misplaced, being better positioned immediately before Federated Media's press statement. This would however fail to acknowledge Armstrong's strategic positioning of her consumers' complaints in a broader discussion of the importance of independent bloggers, likely aimed at enlisting readers' support by making them feel they contribute to a positive cause. The juxtaposition of the information contained in the first three sentences resembles the rhetorical organisation of an enumeration, resulting in a neutral rendition of facts: the audience was

informed the website was generating revenue; the website had been the family's "primary source of income"; Armstrong was one of the first "authors" to partner with Federated Media (hereafter FM). This enumeration aims to reclaim the brand values of honesty and transparency and to anthropomorphise FM. The marriage metaphors of "loyal partner", "together we've enjoyed...and weathered the unpredictable" personify the company, with the likely aim of making it more relatable to the audience. This rhetoric sets the narrative context in which Armstrong addresses the audience's main grievance.

Why don't I label a sponsored post at the beginning of the post?

This is a very valid question. Many authors do label sponsored posts right at the top, but my personal policy is to disclose the sponsorship at the end of my story. I decided on this policy for a few reasons. There is a very fine line that authors like me have to walk when working with brands. I don't think traditional publications have to deal with this complexity as much as someone like me who is an independent voice. I don't work for a large corporation or answer to a board of directors, and the authenticity of that independence is at the core of why bloggers like me have an audience.

(Armstrong 2013c)

Armstrong acknowledges the validity of the readers' question as well as the disclosure practices used by other bloggers. Interestingly though, rather than comparing herself to other "independent" authors, she chooses to refer to traditional media practices. Armstrong positions her independence and authenticity as her unique selling points and contends that the demands placed on authors such as herself are greater than those placed on "traditional publications". This point forms part of a larger debate around disclosure standards for traditional versus online advertising channels, with the FTC's public stance on the

matter being that standards are upheld equally for all mediums. The FTC states that the audience's awareness of a potential bias is more contentious online than in traditional media channels (The United States Federal Trade Commission 2015). TV and print advertising have become more ineffective due to consumers' increased mistrust of the industry, resulting in an augmented interest in online product reviews. Lee and Koo suggest that consumers trust peer users more than they trust corporations (2012). It is this very mistrust of mainstream advertising, according to Shih-Ju Wang et al., that has fuelled the rise of bloggers as online product reviewers and endorsers (2015). Armstrong points to this scepticism and proceeds to reveal the process she undertakes in selecting her sponsors.

So when my ad partner comes to me with the chance to work with a big brand, I have to weigh several factors. Does this brand fit my voice? Does it make sense for my audience if I work with this brand? Will this brand in any way disrupt the way I tell my story? Add to that the increasing impossibility for blogs like mine to make money with traditional banner ads. If I don't work with sponsors, then I can no longer afford to run my website.
(Armstrong 2013c)

The first part of the paragraph is dedicated to outlining the ethical and narrative considerations involved in the sponsor selection process, namely the ability to retain the Dooce product attributes and the sponsor's compatibility with the blog's market segment. Certain reader comments would seem to place the latter point under scrutiny, however. The sponsored post that sparked Armstrong's public relation crisis aimed to promote the advantages of building a new house over renovating one. Several readers expressed their disbelief in the

blogger's authenticity, with the example below as the most poignant one:

Carla • 3 years ago

Heather, as soon as I learned that you're promoting new homes via these sponsored posts, I felt a bit disappointed.

I'm not entirely sure who you're writing these posts for. People like you, who make more in one month than I do in an entire year? Quality construction costs money, and even then there are drawbacks.

I just feel you're starting to lose us a bit. Even the "Around the Web" links below your post feels like you're compromising your values for the sake of more views and income. We love you, Heather, so it kind of bothers me that I'm writing this, but I'm going to go ahead and post it anyway.

(Armstrong 2013a)

The comment encapsulates the dilemma faced by all bloggers who endorse products: monetisation relies on high blog traffic and on consumer trust; financial compensation for product endorsements can, however, have a negative impact on consumer trust and loyalty; and audience defection, in turn, can decrease blog revenue. The blogger is thus placed in the almost untenable position of continuously re-affirming the sincerity of his relationship with consumers, while carefully screening sponsors and maintaining a reliable income. Armstrong's answer points to these challenges and to the current state of the market, in which banner advertising has ceased to generate sufficient revenue. She issues a warning that without sponsorship from "big brands" the website will cease to exist, the matter-of-fact tone of the passage granting the fragment a sense of urgency. She then proceeds to outline her writing approach to sponsored posts.

I take my authenticity very seriously because it's fundamental to my relationship with you. And when I sit down to write a sponsored post, my thinking goes like this: if I can tell my story the way I've always told my story, if I can share my life with you in the style that I've been writing for twelve years, if I can do this without the sponsorship affecting how you read my words, then I've done my job. Then I have been successful.

(Armstrong 2013c)

Armstrong's topic sentence is particularly interesting due to a shift in core brand value from honesty to authenticity. Whilst it is true that authenticity, namely her unique writing style or, in other words, the product attributes, have been responsible for Armstrong's rise to fame, it was honesty, nonetheless, that underpinned the relationship between blogger and readers. Honesty, as core brand value, was carefully curated through first-person self-disclosing narratives and its main purpose was to instil consumer confidence in the blogger's authorial independence. What the topic sentence does, is use the two values interchangeably, signalling thus to readers that retaining the product attributes in sponsored blog posts represents in effect Armstrong's allegiance to her brand values and to the relationship established with them. Armstrong attempts to shift consumer focus from blogger bias to product attributes and position thus the offering of a satisfying consumption experience as the blogger's only duty of care to her readers and success indicator of her performance.

If I label the sponsorship at the beginning of the post, I'm wary that it will impact the way you read my stories. I am in no way trying to dupe you or deceive you or trick you. In fact, I work tremendously hard to do just the opposite, to preserve the genuine spirit of my voice. I make every effort to show that *Heather* is still here. Perhaps I am more

successful in one post than I am in another, but I assure you that I give every word and paragraph the same seriousness.

However, I am open to changing this policy since there were so many objections. Going forward I will alert you immediately to the sponsored nature of a story and hope that you will read it knowing that I have done my best to write the content that you have come to expect from me.

(Armstrong 2013c)

Armstrong employs the rhetorical device of contrast to establish an antonymic relationship between deceit and authenticity. By contrasting concepts such as deceit or trickery to voice and style integrity, Armstrong is again shifting consumer focus from author bias to product attributes. The adjective “genuine” is likely a deliberate choice of lexis given its double connotation of “sincere” and “authentic”, allowing Armstrong to reiterate the juxtaposition of “honesty” and “authenticity” and their synonymic use in relation to the brand. Authenticity is linked not only to product attributes such as zany/object aesthetics, reality effect or brand visual presence, but also to non-conformism. Napoli et al., as well as Beverland and Farrelly outline the fact that authenticity is ascribed to brands perceived to be virtuous or ‘having purity of motive’ (2016; 2010). By equating sincerity with authenticity, Armstrong is thus encouraging readers to reconnect with their belief in the brand’s integrity and in her as author driven by an intrinsic love of writing, rather than solely a financial agenda.

Armstrong utilises her maverick brand persona and the product attributes to dismiss consumer doubts regarding potential bias or dishonesty. She is likely well aware of the serious implications of a fall in

consumer confidence for website traffic and revenue. The carefully orchestrated narrative structure of the post, the lexical and rhetorical selections as well as the factual and demure tone attests to Armstrong's audience management skills. Rather than conceding immediately to changing the position of the sponsorship disclosure statement, the blogger goes to great lengths to persuade the audience that, in effect, she had maintained her core brand value of honesty by preserving her writing style. She also addresses reader complaints regarding the increasing number of sponsored posts by elaborating on the motivation underpinning bloggers' marketing partnerships with brands. It is in this context that FM's media statement is reproduced, arguably with the intention of further differentiating the text from a typical post.

Federated Media Publishing's mission is to champion an ecosystem where independent and influential publishers thrive. (...) Just like print media, digital publishers cannot afford to create content on an ongoing basis without advertising dollars to support their work. Delivering content that inspires, informs, and delights readers day in and day out takes time, staff, photographers, research, materials, etc.

Just like any article you may come across whether in print or digitally, if the content doesn't resonate with the reader, it's their prerogative whether to engage with the content or not. Time, effort, research goes into all pieces of content that our publishers produce. And if an article happens to be sponsored, we believe publishers have an obligation to always disclose that so that readers understand the nature of the relationship between publishers and brands. If they chose to read the content, fantastic. If not, they can return to the site knowing that the content they enjoy will return because advertisers recognize the immense value of independent voices online.

(Armstrong 2013c)

FM's statement is based on an analogy between traditional versus digital forms of advertising and points to bloggers' right to be

compensated for the content they produce. They compare blogs to print media and emphasize that their production entails editorial and research work, which generate running costs. FM highlights, however, bloggers' greater dependence on sponsorship as sole source of revenue. The statement's last sentence is particularly insightful from a rhetorical perspective as it subtly vilifies readers who do not read sponsored content and rebrands advertisers as digital Maecenas. This process of rebranding is at the core of Armstrong's audience management strategy. Her creative way out of the blogger untenable position is to re-signify the brand core value of honesty as authenticity and persuade the audience that product attributes bear testament to her integrity. Similarly, FM attempts to re-signify advertisers' role as supporters of independent authors. The onus to support bloggers is thus transferred onto the audience, with Armstrong concluding her media statement by explicitly reinforcing this message.

If you ask any professional* blogger about what it's like to run their business*, I'm willing to bet that every single one of them will tell you that the amount of work* and the hours spent* making sure that their content is fresh and compelling and entertaining (plus bookkeeping*, back-end work*, and the mountain of administrative minutia* required to keep things up and running) is all far more intense than they ever imagined it would be. I'm not saying that any of us are asking for a pat on the back as I'm sure that other small business owners* in any other industry* would say the same thing. Working with brands and writing sponsored posts are now what makes it possible for me to continue to spend these hours developing this product* for you. These posts keep me in business* and allow me to continue to tell stories. [*underline mine]

(...)

I hope that I've explained why and how I approach working with brands, and even if you still disagree with me I wanted to give you my side of things. I'm going to open up comments in case you have any

further questions or concerns that I can address. As always, thank you for reading and taking the time to share your opinion.
(Armstrong 2013c)

Juxtaposition is a rhetorical device widely utilised by Armstrong to construct ideological analogies between seemingly unconnected concepts. In the example above, the underlined text pertains to the semantic category of business administration. Its co-existence with creative writing terminology, such as “fresh and compelling and entertaining” content or “tell stories”, allows Armstrong to create a persuasive analogy between blogging and small business ownership. It is through this analogy that the immaterial labour involved in blogging is revealed to the audience. Eleven years after the announcement of the blog’s monetisation, Armstrong rebrands her website as a business rather than the creative pursuit that contributed to her happiness and mental wellbeing. This is also the first instance when Armstrong refers to dooce.com as a “product” rather than a blog, a personal website or a source of community support. The paragraph and, indeed, the whole post represent a very well constructed text and a particularly effective use of rhetorical devices to mitigate negative audience perceptions of her brand. Armstrong’s solution to her 2013 image crisis was to rebrand authenticity as honesty and her website as product whose very existence depends on sponsorship agreements. She places the audience in the position of buyers, whose only ethical behaviour would be to read sponsored posts and click on the links provided, ensuring thus the small business whose product they utilise gets its due compensation.

Establishing the validity of Armstrong's claim is beyond the scope of this project. What is relevant however is the audience's reaction to her statement. The post received over 400 comments, the majority of which showed loyalty and support to the Dooce brand. Clearly, Armstrong's audience management insights proved effective as her fame and revenue continued to grow, culminating with her 2015 invitation to the White House Correspondent Dinner as part of Arianna Huffington's team of new media influencers.

5.3 Brand awareness strategies

Successful monetisation of a personal blog relies primarily on the website generating sufficient traffic (Rich 2014; Reardon and Reardon 2015; Coker 2016; Scott 2016). Product attributes such as writing style, content relevance and author voice are, as previously discussed, primary factors in audience retention and loyalty. Creativity and authenticity are not, however, sufficient to increase website traffic especially as the proliferation of blogs over the past decade resulted in a more competitive digital environment in which independent authors are required not only to find points of differentiation from their competitors but also new channels to engage their target markets (Coker 2016; Rich 2014). Bloggers are advised to explore ways of advertising their blogs through blog directories and aggregators, search engines, social networking sites or by exchanging links with other websites (Rich 2014; Reardon and Reardon 2015; Coker 2016; Scott 2016). During the past fifteen years, Armstrong explored various

avenues to raise brand awareness and drive more traffic to dooce.com and some of her strategies contain pertinent insights.

In 2001 dooce.com was receiving an average of 58 daily hits. This number increased to 2,000 after Armstrong emailed Jason Kottke, creator of one of the first blog aggregators, to ask for technical advice. He linked to her website and that resulted in a dramatic increase in readers (Belkin 2011). Of course, a link on an external website would prove ineffective had the content presented on dooce.com not been engaging enough for readers to want to return and potentially share the website with others.

Armstrong's blog traffic amplified in the aftermath of her dismissal to an average of 25,000 daily hits (Belkin 2011). After a break from writing, Armstrong returned to the digital space and her blog registered a steady 6,500 daily visits, until her pregnancy announcement and her hospitalization quadrupled the number (Belkin 2011). Whilst these occurrences have likely been fortuitous in Armstrong's case, they do however reveal several important aspects related to blog management. Firstly, the increase in traffic following the two announcements was an indicator that the blogger had discovered two significant market segments. Armstrong was savvy enough to recognise this and to develop her product so that it catered to these audiences. As discussed in Chapter 3, although she expressed misgivings about the term "mommy blogger", she nonetheless recognised that through content related to mothering she could access two significant market segments: women, in general, and mothers, specifically. As shown in

Chapter 4, through the depression narrative, Armstrong diversified her market presence to appeal to both genders.

Secondly, the blogger realised early on the importance of publishing new engaging content regularly. As discussed in the previous chapter, her handwritten updates from the psychiatric ward confirm her commitment to the brand and her blogging acumen. Dooce.com has thus been a frequently updated website for fifteen years, more specifically until April 2015 when Armstrong announced she would gradually reduce content updates as she intended to focus on a new business venture, HBA Media (Armstrong 2015j).

Armstrong utilised various alternative avenues for brand awareness, including traditional media channels. Getting coverage in reputable newspapers, magazines or TV stations such as the *New York Times*, *Forbes*, *The Washington Post* or *CNN*, represents the result of assiduous work on both digital and print channels. I will focus on two strategies Armstrong employed as they showcase Armstrong's marketing acumen: publishing books and developing a cross-platform social media presence.

Armstrong first introduced the idea of publishing a book as part of her monetisation announcement in 2004.

I'm going to shop around a book. The ideas I have are still under wraps, but this is definitely something I want to do. Too bad **Everyone Poops** has already been written.
(Armstrong 2004p)

Armstrong authored two books *It Sucked and Then I Cried - How I Had a Baby, a Breakdown and a Much Needed Margarita* (Armstrong 2010a) and *Dear Daughter: The Best of the Dear Leta Letters*

(Armstrong 2012a). She also edited the essay collection *Things I Learned About My Dad in Therapy* (Armstrong 2008a). The move to print text represented in Armstrong's case not necessarily a product diversification attempt, given that all three books feature content hitherto published on the blog, but rather a brand awareness campaign aimed at engaging new market segments. Listed sixteenth on the *New York Times* hardcover nonfiction list (Schuessler 2009), *It Sucked and Then I Cried* increased Armstrong's media presence significantly. Although thematically the book represents a patchwork re-iteration of blog posts, there are several differences between the two versions. Inherent distinctions between print and hypertext are enhanced by the narrative implications of having distinct target audiences.

The affordances of cyberspace underpin the basic points of differentiation between print and hypertext: interpellation strategies made possible by the comment functionality, use of second-person narration in non-fictional accounts, video and audio material to complement the text, and the online reality effect as a fifth loci of the everyday. There are, however, several narrative points of differentiation, which point to authorial intent likely underpinned by different market constraints.

The following example represents a zany rendition of the Armstrongs' baby naming deliberations. The print and online versions are identical except for grammatical tense and text layout. In order to facilitate an optimal comparison, both versions will be rendered in their entirety, with the online excerpt accurately reproducing the font, character size and layout as they appear on dooce.com.

(...) So in the tradition of the Utah Baby Name we took an existing name and tweaked [sic] it into an unrecognizable mass of nonsense (I grew up with a Mormon family who named their children VeLyn, DaNelle, KoVar and TreMaine). I threw out “Fonzie” which Jon transformed into “Fawnzie” which when taken to its logical Utahn conclusion ends up being “Fawnzelle.” And so, I present to you:

The Armstrong Work in Progress (if it's a girl)
“Fawnzelle La Bon Marché Armstrong”

or

The Fawnzelle La Bon Marché Project
Part 1, Vol 1

-

The Armstrong Work in Progress (if it's a boy)
“Fawnzel Le Bon Marché Armstrong”

or

The Fawnzel Le Bon Marché Project
Part 1, Vol 1

(...)

(Armstrong 2003!)

The book *It Sucked and Then I Cried* renders the same content as follows:

So in the tradition of the Utah Baby Name we took an existing name and tweaked it into an unrecognizable mass of nonsense. It was not uncommon to meet people in this state who had names

made up entirely of random letters just thrown one either side of what could be, if you squinted hard enough, an actual word, like Aaronica or Ondulyn or Claravid. I threw out Fonzie which Jon transformed into Fawnzie, which when taken to its logical Utahn conclusion ended up being Fawnzelle. And so, our work in progress was called: Fawnzelle La Bon Marché Armstrong, if she turned out to be a girl; Fawnzel Le Bon Marché Armstrong, if he was a boy.

(Armstrong 2010a, 8)

The first notable difference between the two versions is in layout and the text's visual impact. Armstrong carefully curated the brand image online through the consistent use of the *Helvetica Neue Light* font, character size 11, Dooce logo design, and text layout. The brand's visual identity is retained in print just on the cover, with the first edition featuring only the phrase "creator of dooce.com" in the brand font (Armstrong 2009a). The sense of anticipation and suspense generated through the online layout are absent in print. The difference in narrative tense from second-person present simple to first-person past tense results in the book lacking the immediacy and interpellative quality of its online counterpart.

The most compelling difference between the two versions is the distinctively less prominent position zany and abject aesthetics occupy in print. This is particularly evident in Armstrong's second book, *Dear Daughter*. Published two years later, *Dear Daughter* embodies a clear departure from the product attributes and arguably from Armstrong's human brand values of non-conformism and honesty. Zany and abject aesthetics are entirely absent from the letter collection, the print version being an extensively edited reproduction of the online narrative. The

editing revolves, not around changing narrative tenses, but rather editing out all potentially controversial statements. The example reproduced below aims to visually represent this by italicising all the sections of the letter omitted in print.

Newsletter: Month Three

2004/04/27

Dear Leta,

I have fed you twice a night every night for the past 84 days, and I have to ask you: aren't you full yet?



This week you turn three months old, *and your father and I can't believe we have made it this far. The past few weeks have seemed like some sort of hazy acid trip, not that we would know what an acid trip feels like because we would never drop acid, no not ever. Drugs are bad and you should say no to drugs, but Advil is totally okay, and can I tell you how happy I am that I get to take Advil again? When I was pregnant with you I wasn't allowed to take Advil, and whenever I had a headache or a sore muscle your father would take a handful of Advil and stand close to me in hopes that his nearness would soothe me. If that didn't work he would bring me Doritos, which I have to say are far better than any drug on earth. Not that I would know anything about drugs. Just say no to drugs.*

I say that the past few weeks have been hazy because we're still trying to figure out your sleep schedule. We've made huge progress since last month, at least in terms of night sleeping, but the day sleeping thing is causing your

chemically imbalanced mother to hide in the closet and scratch sores that don't exist.

We put you to bed every night sometime between 6 PM and 8 PM depending on how you've slept during the day, and we always go through the same ritual of bathing you, dressing you, and feeding you. This ritual is our favorite part of the day, and one night last week your father was late coming home from work and I had to bathe you by myself. I have never seen your father so devastated! He missed bathtime with his little Thumper, a nickname we've given you because whenever we lie you down on the changing table you immediately begin thumping it with both of your legs so violently that the whole changing table shakes.

You LOVE the changing table. You love it more than the swing or the bouncy seat, and sometimes you love it more than being held by me or your father and we promise not to hold that against you, *at least not until you come home with piercings in your face and then I WILL TOTALLY HOLD IT AGAINST YOU.*

During the night you will usually sleep in stretches that last anywhere from three to five hours, and you will also go right back to sleep after you eat. When you wake up in the morning at about 7 AM you are always smiling, and Leta, those morning smiles are the reason your father and I decided to have kids. Your smile is brighter than the sun, the most beautiful addition to my life, *and I would forsake all the Advil and Doritos in the world to see it every morning.*

And then there is the day sleeping, or more accurately, the complete absence of day sleeping, and when you don't sleep during the day you are the crankiest baby on the planet. So cranky, in fact, that sometimes you scream. Can we please talk about the screaming? Is the screaming really necessary?



I have received a lot of advice concerning your screaming, people who think you might have reflux or an ear infection, people who think I need to stop breastfeeding you, people who think I need to start feeding you Cheerios already. And I think this may be the first instance where I take a stand as your mother, the one person who knows you best, and declare that the only reason you are screaming is because you are tired. Your little body needs rest, and when you take naps during the day you are glorious, the most precious and wonderful and awesome baby that ever came out of a womb. When you don't take naps you are HORRIFYING and there isn't a window in the world that I wouldn't throw you out of.

For the past five days you have slept well both at night and during the day and you have only screamed ONCE, and that was yesterday when I tried to put you in the Baby Bjorn, the contraption that holds you to my chest so that I can walk with my hands free. I couldn't figure out how the straps worked, and you were being very patient, and then somehow I flipped you upside-down and the strap wrapped itself around your face, and I would scream, too, if my mother mushed my nose between two metal snaps.



We love you, little Thumper.

Love,
Mama

[italics mine]
(Armstrong 2004h; Armstrong 2012a)

The letter has been reproduced in its entirety to offer a comprehensive picture of the difference in tone, content, and arguably authorial intent in the absence of the italicised sections. This example is representative of the editing undergone by all the Leta letters in print. It

is not, however, the amount of text omitted that is of significance, albeit it being considerable, but rather the narrative and aesthetic considerations underpinning the editorial choices. The example above clearly demonstrates that all the zany and abject aesthetic objects have been removed, resulting in a text devoid of the Dooce product attributes, so much so that it would arguably be unrecognisable as Armstrong's work. Although the print version reproduces its digital counterpart without any change to narrative tense or person, the omission of zany or abject content results in a text prone to sentimental glorification of motherhood. For a blogger who purposefully created a brand image of uncensored author, honest about her motherhood struggles, Armstrong seems extremely out-of-character in print. Sentimentality and a one-dimensional portrayal of motherhood as unconditional devotion and adoration of one's baby epitomise the very patriarchal discourse Armstrong challenged throughout the entire existence of the blog (Armstrong 2004f; Armstrong 2003p; Armstrong 2003t; Armstrong 2003f; Armstrong 2004a; Armstrong 2003w; Armstrong 2005b). Armstrong's zany and abject aesthetics, as well as her content choices were framed as hallmarks of the blogger's sincerity and authenticity to such an extent that 13 years after the blog's inception, Dooce's mothering narrative is reported as "put[ting] women off mothering" (Graham 2014) because of its disclosure of parenting challenges.

It would be reasonable to assume that editorial changes are attributed to publishing norms and legal liabilities. I would argue however that they are underpinned in Armstrong's case by the books

having a different target audience. Armstrong herself acknowledges on the blog that “the letters have been edited so that you could give this book to your very religious grandmother or conservative aunt and they wouldn’t hit you over the head with it” (Armstrong 2012c). I argue that Armstrong did not publish the books for financial revenue, which of course would have been welcomed, but rather as a brand awareness strategy. Through print she secured access to traditional media channels and used them to drive traffic to her blog. As documented on dooce.com, attending book tours, launch events and interviews meant more publicity and increased media attention for Armstrong as human brand (Armstrong 2011; Armstrong 2010b; Armstrong 2009i; Armstrong 2009g; Armstrong 2009e; Armstrong 2009d; Armstrong 2009c). *Dear Daughter* is the last book Armstrong published and whether this represents a coincidence or rather a response to editorial censoring, it is difficult to establish. What remains unquestionable is Armstrong’s ability to utilise successfully different platforms to promote her public image and raise her brand awareness. This holds particularly true in relation to her social media presence.

Social media platforms offer exposure and can contribute to generating more blog traffic. Safko offers perhaps the most illustrative definition of the medium and its potentialities. “Social media is the media we use to be social. (...) The story is in the tactics of each of the hundreds of technologies, all of the tools that are available for you to connect with your customers and prospects, and the strategies necessary to use these tactics and tools effectively” (2012, 3). He organizes social media into 15 categories, ranging from social

networking sites to photo sharing, livecasting and microblogging (Safko 2012, 9–22). Interestingly, for Safko blogs represent a type of social media, perhaps due to their extensive use as brand awareness tools by corporations. Armstrong's social media strategy exemplifies in this respect a double-layered complexity, with the blogger utilising various channels to promote her own brand and endorse others. She has been one of the first bloggers to capitalise social media's potential for brand awareness raising, increasing audience numbers and, incidentally, getting a replacement for a malfunctioning washing machine.

Armstrong has currently a well-developed cross-platform presence, which she utilises extensively to drive traffic to her blog, earn revenue through advertising, engage her audience and add ontological weight and character depth to her online persona. The platforms employed throughout the fifteen-year blog span are: Twitter, Flickr, Facebook, Vimeo, Instagram and Pinterest. Armstrong's least used platforms are Flickr and Vimeo, arguably due to their decrease in popularity caused by the rise of Instagram and Pinterest. Armstrong's 2015 *Media Kit*, lists her number of followers on Twitter (1.5+ million), Pinterest (123k+), Instagram (40k+) and Facebook (16k+). An in depth-analysis of the strategies used by Armstrong on these various platforms falls beyond the scope of this project due to the vast amount of material published. Instead, a short analysis of Armstrong's engagement with Twitter will be provided, given that this platform surpasses the others in longevity of use and number of followers.

Twitter represents by far Armstrong's preferred medium, not only because this is the first social network she subscribed to, but most

importantly because the channel lends itself to the pithy brevity of Dooce zany aesthetics. New posts are announced through tweets, encouraging thus readers to access the blog. They also serve as brand 'reminders' in that their high frequency aims to constantly reinforce consumers' positive associations with the brand. Over the past 5 years, Tweets have become a source of advertising revenue for Armstrong. These Tweets showcase the same compositional strategy as sponsored posts, with the advertised product being weaved into the visual and narrative fabric of the Armstrongs' story.



(Armstrong 2016c)



(Armstrong 2015h)



(Armstrong 2015l)

The hash tag #ad alerts consumers that the blogger received compensation for the post, whilst the other hash tags direct them to the sponsored twitter profile and/or website. The photographs and captions above seem staged solely for the purpose of advertising and consumers would probably find them unconvincing. Armstrong is however careful to time the release of sponsored content so that it is preceded and followed by a significant amount of non-sponsored Tweets, ensuring that her followers are entertained. Both on the blog and on social media platforms, Armstrong is always mindful of her audience's reading experience, followers being regularly rewarded with novel, entertaining and meaningful content.

Armstrong utilises social media to solidify the reality effect of the blog by attributing ontological weight to her online persona. Social media's informal recognition as repository of real-life snippets and its dependence on photographic imagery authenticate the blogger's existence. This authentication extends to the constructed human brand persona, allowing Armstrong to create a believable brand image as competent and glamorous, sincere and rugged, likeable and easily identified with. Armstrong's success in capitalising social media's potential resides in her ability to maintain a strong congruence between her image on different channels and her brand value propositions.

Chapter 6

“So, what will happen to dooce®?! Will you shut it down? What is your last post going to say?”

In April 2015, Armstrong announced that she would be reducing the frequency of content updates on dooce.com and directing her creative energy to a new company, HBA Media, Inc. Exploring the complex motivations underpinning Armstrong’s decision offers an insight into the current digital media landscape and personal blogs’ position within it.

I know you’ve noticed that my silence over here has started to span longer periods of time, and that has everything to do with projects I’ve taken on outside this space, projects that use a different part of my brain and require me to exercise different skills. (...) These projects have provided a much needed distraction from what many of us who have been doing this since most Vine stars were still an unfertilized egg in a womb are facing: a dangerous level of exhaustion and dissatisfaction.

By “doing this” I mean “crafting and sharing stories about the experiences in our lives.”
(Armstrong 2015j)

Armstrong defines herself as a storyteller, a digital author engaged in the creative rendition of a non-glamourised everyday. She positions herself as part of the “many of us”, personal bloggers or mommy bloggers, who were at the forefront of digital innovation long before the current online influencers’ conception. Through the trope of polarisation, she delineates two co-existing, and potentially competing,

digital author groups: bloggers, such as herself, and social media influencers, such as Vine stars. She develops this polarisation by outlining the differences between the two, from age to writing motivation.

Everything has been reduced to a small square photo on a phone. Attentions spans are now 140 characters long, sometimes as short as a video or a picture that self destructs in a few seconds. I have stood in a line at a coffee shop and watched as seven people in a row ordered something without looking up from their phone. The quick fix is king.

Many of my colleagues have closed up shop entirely, and I have an insight and an understanding as to why they would make that decision. "Living online" for us means something different than it does for young college kids or professionals who spend their entire day on a phone or computer. For us it means inviting a virtual audience into our home—our very distinctly messy home that has not been styled for an Instagram photo—and offering them an honest look at our spaces, our relationships, our victories as well as our wounds knowing that in the process of doing so we help each other to feel less alone.

It has also in recent years turned into a peculiar livelihood that involves grueling and inhuman publishing schedules, hours spent on the phone with networks and brands trying to convince someone outside of the relationship with that virtual audience why something will or will not work, email threads about those phone calls lasting months on end. (Armstrong 2015i)

Armstrong places dooce.com in a media landscape dominated by web celebrities and social media platforms driven by fast content consumption, specifically *Vine*, the self-proclaimed "entertainment network where trends begin and blow up" (vine.co n.a.); *Instagram*, the photo and video sharing social networking service; *Snapchat*, the messaging application where "a video or a picture (...) self destructs in a few seconds" (Armstrong 2015j); and *Twitter*, the social network

featuring “140 [character] long” messages (Armstrong 2015j). She highlights the detrimental effects such platforms have on consumers’ attention span and bemoans the ensuing “gruelling and inhuman publishing schedules” (Armstrong 2015j). Fast consumption of reduced content results in consumer demand for higher publishing frequency, as well as increased competitiveness among online authors. Establishing a point of differentiation in a virtual environment increasingly populated by individuals in search of stardom through content-light platforms is arguably taking a toll on authors such as Armstrong, whose unique selling point resides in the quality of text produced.

Armstrong contends that “living online” for authors of her generation is underpinned by different motivations from those of current web celebrities. She argues that community building represented the primary writing impetus for mommy bloggers, being an antidote to loneliness and isolation. The repetition of phrases such as “many of us”, “many of my colleagues”, “for us” rhetorically supports the trope of polarisation and creates a strong group identity. Armstrong develops the distinction between the two digital groups further, by arguing that their representation of the everyday is inherently different. She establishes a connection between this representation and writing motivation, and concludes that for authors such as herself, driven by the desire to harness peer support, the representation of their everyday life is not glamourised, but lifelike, with all its inherent messiness publicly displayed. The trope of the “very distinctly messy home that has not been styled for an Instagram photo” reinforces the message that mommy bloggers base their product on a promise of sincerity and self-

disclosure. Armstrong is arguably utilising this promise to establish a definitive point of differentiation from competitors and educate the audience on the ethical underpinnings of her platform. Rhetorically she employs contrast to differentiate between authors such as herself who curate their content and negotiate with brands in order to ensure the integrity of their message and its suitability to their audiences and “young college kids or professionals who spend their entire day on a phone or a computer” (Armstrong 2015j). The veracity of Armstrong’s claims resides beyond the scope of this project. What is of importance, however, is that her remarks are indicative of the contemporary online environment and the varying platforms competing for consumer attention. Evidence from traditional media outlets supports Armstrong’s observations, with publications such as the *Telegraph* (2015b), *Time* (2015a), *New York Magazine* (2014) or *Forbes* (2010) regularly publishing lists of online influencers. Research on the impact of social media on public discourse or marketing strategies is still in its infancy given that this phenomenon is in current development and wide social implications are yet to be discerned. Current trends, as inferred from news publications, indicate that social media platforms are seen by marketers and public relations companies as novel and potentially lucrative avenues. To refer to one example, Todd Sampson, former CEO of advertising company Leo Burnett Australia⁶⁶, has recently decided to invest in a new start-up that matches brands with Instagram

⁶⁶ Todd Sampson is currently the non-executive Chairman of Leo Burnett Australia. The Canadian-born Australian is also a television personality, being a co-host of the advertising discussion panel *The Gruen Planet* and the presenter of the science series *Redesign My Brain* (Sampson 2015).

influencers (P. Williams 2016). In view of current news features, I claim that social media platforms represent a new and uncharted territory in terms of brand advertising, leveraging audience trust much like personal blogs did less than five years ago. Social media platforms seem to have gone beyond being a fad, with some, such as Twitter or Facebook, boasting considerable longevity given the medium's rapid obsolescence rates. Further research is needed in order to establish these platforms' impact on consumer behaviour and social discourse.

Armstrong's 2015 post highlights another insidious aspect of creating an online human brand, an aspect particularly relevant for a female author actively pursuing the monetisation of her mothering labour.

But what makes this livelihood glaringly different are not only the constant creative strains of churning out new and entertaining content—content we cannot delegate to anyone else because our audiences read our stories for our particular voice and perspective—but also the security systems we've had to set up as an increasingly more diverse group of people throw rocks at our houses with the intention of causing damage: passersby, rubbernecks, stalkers, even journalists. We have separate security systems for those who take every word and decision we share and deliberately misinterpret it, disfigure it to the point of it being wholly unrecognizable, and then broadcast to us and to their own audiences that they have diagnosed us with a personality disorder.

"Living online" for us looks completely different now than it did when we all set out to build this community, and the emotional and physical toll of it is rapidly becoming a health hazard.

(Armstrong 2015j)

Armstrong denounces trolling's detrimental effects on her psychological wellbeing. While negative commentary permeates all platforms and is directed at both men and women, there is nonetheless

a current pervasive aggressive rhetoric directed at female authors. As documented in diverse media outlets such as *BBC's Women's Hour* podcast (Barnett 2016) or *The New Yorker* magazine (Mead 2014), online misogyny, particularly its most violent expression as rape or murder threats, represents a disciplinary discourse aimed at silencing women. Armstrong has a well-documented history of dealing with online detractors, both male and female, on her blog as well as Twitter and Facebook. While this material resides beyond the scope of this project due to its vastness, it is necessary to acknowledge that trolling has become intrinsic to cyber-space, with female authors being likely targets.

Many friends who know about all the changes in my life have asked, "So, what will happen to dooce@?! Will you shut it down? What is your last post going to say?" And I always stand there and shake my head. I have no intention of shutting this space down. There are too many memories in these pages, and frankly, I still like to write stories. I still have a few contracts that I need to see to completion, and I will continue posting here. But eventually I'd like to get back to the reason I started "living online" in the first place: writing for the love of it, writing when the story inside is begging to be told.
(Armstrong 2015j)

Armstrong's closing remarks re-affirm the brand values and position her blog as a creative act of self-expression. At the same time, they seem to suggest the same misgivings about the negative impact publishing deadlines and advertising contracts have on the authenticity of the stories told as expressed by mommy blogger Jennifer Lawrence in Chapter 3. I argue however that Armstrong's comment is more likely underpinned by a desire to differentiate her voice in a crowded online space, rather than a negative appraisal of brand partnerships.

Although Armstrong articulated her desire to “live online” as she did in the blog’s early stages, dooce.com has nonetheless continued to be regularly updated, featuring both content posts and product placement entries. Likewise, her social media presence adhered to the same strict publishing schedule, ensuring consumers were frequently reminded of the Dooce brand and rewarded for their loyalty. Armstrong’s actions seem to be underpinned by the same desire to overcome the medium’s transience as expressed by Vine star Paul Logan in an interview for *Business Insider*. The aspiring “biggest entertainer in the world” confesses that he is acutely aware he “is on the clock” given that his fan-base, comprised largely of young women, is likely to defect if left unengaged (Moss 2015, para. 8). While Logan is driven by a desire to “cross over into mainstream media” (Moss 2015, para. 9), Armstrong seems to reject the lure of stardom and focus instead on building an Internet marketing and social media consultancy, HBA Media.

Despite her misgivings about digital influencers, Armstrong is, nonetheless, one of them. Her attendance to the White House Correspondents’ Dinner as part of Arianna Huffington’s web celebrity crew, alongside YouTube stars Tyler Oakley and Bethany Mota, Snapchat’s Jerome Jarre and Vine’s Marcus Johns and Nash Grier, stands proof to that (Heil 2015).

Armstrong’s status as online influencer and human brand represent the main points of differentiation from the other “star” mommy bloggers in Friedman’s pantheon. Armstrong’s design and IT knowledge undoubtedly reinforced her uniqueness by allowing her to

develop a compelling brand visual identity and a user-friendly blog platform. The previous chapters discussed in detail the writing techniques and audience engagement strategies underpinning the Dooce brand emergence. Rather than summarising the arguments hitherto presented, I would like to extrapolate from Armstrong's case study two strategies that could facilitate the transformation of any personal blog into a business.

The first strategy relates to the paradigm shift presented in Chapter 3 regarding authors conceptualising their blogs as enterprises rather than creative pursuits. This shift entails bloggers purposefully employing both business-to-consumer (hereafter B2C) and business-to-business (hereafter B2B) marketing strategies. While at first it might seem improbable for such distinct business models to operate concurrently, I would argue that personal blogs operate both B2C and B2B transactions. Reading as event, or the consumption of blog content, represents a B2C transaction, namely a direct relation with consumers, who are also the end-users of the product. These transactions are not directly monetisable, unless, of course, the blogger decides to restrict website access to subscribers only. B2B transactions refer to the blogger's interaction with brands and can be conceptualised in the form of eWOM. They represent the main revenue source for personal blogs. A blogger is consequently placed in the position of "selling" her product, namely making her content appealing, whilst simultaneously promoting other brands. Clearly, this model's success depends entirely on audience trust and loyalty, which enlists honesty and authenticity as necessary brand values. Beverland

argues that certain brands are “imbued with authenticity” (2014, 111), a quality difficult to achieve given that genuineness is a consumer’s subjective valuation, often residing outside marketers’ persuasion capabilities. I employ Beverland’s assertions and contend that personal bloggers are in the felicitous position of having more influence over consumer brand perceptions. Due to the online reality effect, bloggers have the opportunity to create close relationships with the audience and present themselves as sincere and trustworthy. Through the same narrative mechanism, they can cultivate points of identification with their audience, whereby they are perceived as everyday individuals and even friends. This consumer attachment and trust enable the blogger to subtly influence audience perceptions of their own brand and of others. Sincerity and authenticity require constant reaffirmation and Armstrong’s techniques of doing this, as discussed in previous chapters, could be successfully replicated, with the right amount of originality and writing prowess.

The second strategy refers to utilising social media, including the blog platform, to generate audience engagement. I employ Aaker et al.’s (2010) conceptualisation of social media usage and offer examples from the case study to illustrate its practical implementation for a personal blog. Aaker et al.’s method is staged in four steps, the first requiring the identification of a concrete and measurable goal (2010, 19–49). With respect to a personal blog, this goal could be related to a specific followership number. Whilst Armstrong has never been explicit about such targets, she employed strategies to increase her audience from the very early stages of the blog, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The second step involves grabbing the audience's attention, with Aaker et al. highlighting the importance of authenticity for maximum impact (2010, 49–73). Armstrong's depression narrative, particularly the real-time documentation of her hospitalisation, served exactly this purpose and while not every personal blogger can offer such an emotionally fraught account, an original and aesthetically interesting story could generate similar levels of engagement. Aaker et al. recommend four design principles for such stories: a personal dimension, an element of surprise or curiosity, photographic or video content and a trigger for the senses either through sight, sound or, I would add, through visceral consumption of text (2010, 49–73). Armstrong's zany, cute, interesting and abject aesthetics exemplify how such consumption can be rhetorically staged.

The third step entails compelling the audience to care deeply, which, as Aaker et al. point out, represents the most unpredictable outcome given that engagement is often underpinned by emotion, rather than logic (2010, 73–107). Armstrong's depression and motherhood narrative, particularly her appeal for support and her self-disclosure, were crucial in securing audience loyalty. Although such content might be outside the remit of most personal bloggers, the main parameters of her narrative, namely the deeply personal aspect of the story, the confessional yet not sentimental tone, or the five human brand personality traits, can be replicated in different contexts.

The last step involves enabling and empowering the audience to take action. Aaker et al. argue that involvement leads to commitment and the opportunity to act translates into empowered and loyal

followers (2010, 107–143). Blogs represent the perfect platform in this respect as audience interaction is embedded in their very structure. Armstrong's points of differentiation with regard to this include her interpellation strategies discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the visually prominent display of comments under each blog entry and the creation of the Dooce community as outlined in Chapter 4. While creating an online community such as DoCo is arguably beyond the realm of most personal bloggers, a fervent followership can be cultivated by reinforcing the technical affordances of the medium through interpellation techniques.

Armstrong is undoubtedly an online media influencer and a pioneer digital entrepreneur. Monetising motherhood's immaterial labour and challenging normative discourses on women and mothering qualify Armstrong's writing as a radical act. Her continuing success and the fervent followership she amassed over the past decade stand proof that with creativity, courage, persistence and a wireless connection, anything is possible, including making "millions of dollars"⁶⁷ talking "a whole lot about poop"⁶⁸.

⁶⁷ Excerpt taken from Armstrong's Twitter tagline "I exploit my children for millions and millions of dollars".

⁶⁸ Excerpt taken from the blog entry *Chchchch-Changes* (Armstrong 2004o).

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