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7-1-2013

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Abstract

This essay argues that while the act of mommy blogging may be empowering, the term itself reinforces women's hegemonic normative roles as nurturers, thrusting women who blog about their children into a form of digital domesticity in the blogosphere. Drawing on 29 blogs posts women wrote debating the term *mommy blogger* and 649 comments posted on these blogs, the author uses Judith Butler's concept of performativity to rhetorically analyze the term, using a techno-feminist lens and cyber-ethnographic approach. The author asserts that the use of the term *mommy blogger* continues the culturally ingrained performance of motherhood women learned since childhood, and, in so doing, holds women captive in this subjective norm that may not fit them. The use of *mommy*, versus *mother*, highlights the nurturing aspect of motherhood and conjures a prototype of the ideal mother, further marginalizing women by focusing on one attribute that does not apply to all women or even all mothers.

KEYWORDS: blogging, feminist theory, Judith Butler, gender issues, critical theory, textual analysis, cyber-ethnography

When Mom-101[1] (2009) posted about her hatred of the term *mommy blogger* on her blog, she prompted a maelstrom of comments from her readers. Mom-101 told her readers she grappled with the term because she is a mom and she blogs, and she often blogs about her family. "I have spent countless posts exploring my discomfort with the term mommyblog. I hate it hate it hate it. I hate the diminutive. I hate the cutesiness of it all. I hate the fact that before you've read a single post, it makes it beyond easy to dismiss a

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[1] Bloggers and people who post blog comments are cited by their online screen name unless they provided real names in the postings.

blog as being less clever/engaging/insightful/important as anyone else's" (Mom-101, 2009). The post received 91 comments from readers that ranged from vigorous support to suggestions for alternative terms. A few commenters suggested the term was accurate and innocuous. That blog was one of more than two dozen that tackled the topic in recent years. Satterwhite (2009) urged on her blog that women should reclaim the term the media bestowed on female bloggers: "If 'they' were going to continue to label us mommybloggers, we would make it a term that was synonymous with respect, integrity and quality writing. … As a collective of individual writers, we are taking back the term and demanding respect." Indeed, at the 2005 inaugural meeting of the BlogHer Conference of women bloggers in San Jose, CA, Alice Bradley, who blogs at Finslippy, drew attention by declaring: " 'Mommy blogging is a radical act' " (Lopez, 2009).

This essay critiques the term *mommy blogger* as an ideological concept, arguing that this term is far from benign. I assert that it reinforces women's hegemonic normative roles as nurturers, thrusting women who blog about their children into a form of digital domesticity in the blogosphere. While I believe that the experience of writing about one's family, children, and life can be a radically empowering act, I also assert that using a term such as *mommy blogger* can continue the performativity of prototypical motherhood that women have learned since childhood but that few women can achieve. In so doing, the term can subject women into a form of "spatial captivity" (Butler, 1997b, p. 85) that feels uncomfortable to many women because it defines them by only one attribute of themselves, being the mommy of a young child. I agree with Friedman (2010) who argues that mommy blogs, or the "mamasphere" as she calls it, offer ways to "subvert and reconstitute dominant myths about 'good mothers' " (p. 198). Similarly, I submit that

the term itself reconstitutes these myths of motherhood, even as women navigate the tension between the empowerment they may feel blogging and the subjection they may feel through use of this limiting term. I critique the words of bloggers and commenters who posted about the *mommy blogger* term, using Butler's (1993) concepts of performativity and subjectivity. I employ a cyber-ethnographic (Morrison, 2011; Gajjala, Rybas, & Altman, 2007) approach through a techno-feminist lens (Wajcman, 2010). To borrow from Butler's way of phrasing questions (1993, p.10), my aim is to answer this question: *Through what regulatory norms is the term mommy blogger materialized?* In other words, my focus is not just what the term means to different people, but how the discourse that precedes the term shapes the affect of the term in the larger context of women's social location. I critique women's computer-mediated words, using a native anthropological approach where I was both the observer and the measuring device (Cassell, 1997). I use this critique to form my techno-feminist rhetorical argument about the affect of this term on women.

This essay addresses an important question for feminist scholars because media forms enjoyed by women are often ignored as trivial or uninteresting (Gill, 2007). For example, personal blogs – such as *mommy blogs* – outnumber so-called filter blogs (Hodkinson, 2007, Huang, Shen, Lin, & Chang, 2007; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Wei, 2009). Yet both researchers and the mass media frequently focus on high-profile blogs, which are likely to be filter blogs (Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Herring et al., 2005a; Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, & Wright, 2006; Lopez, 2009). In personal blogs, writers express their feelings, thoughts, and observations and may link to other sites or blogs (Author, 2012; Hartelius,

2005; Herring et al., 2005a; Li, 2007). However, filter blogs differ because they are aimed at filtering web content (Herring & Paollilo, 2006) by providing some content at the exclusion of other content through many links to other information sources, such as blogs or news stories. Filter blogs are also less personal in nature and generally focus on political knowledge or providing information (Wei, 2009), rather than expressions of feelings. For example, most of the political blogs on the Huffington Post website would be considered filter blogs because they provide information – not expressions of feelings – and they link selectively to other content. Men are more likely than women to write filter blogs than personal blogs, so focusing on filter blogs tends to exclude women (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2008; Herring, 2000).

In addition, the number of women bloggers continues to grow, reaching an estimated 8 million in America in 2009 (Wright & Page, 2009). At the same time, the audience for mommy blogs is growing, with an estimated 39.6 million U.S. mothers online in 2012, (Gafni, 2009). This growth highlights the need to study this increasingly popular medium. Certainly, not all women bloggers are mothers and even those who are do not necessarily write about their families or children. However, as Morrison (2010) argues in her feminist genre analysis of personal mommy blogs, *mommy blogging* "is a phenomenon of the blog world, attracting vast numbers of authors and readers" (p. 1). As such, the mommy blog has reached a status in the blogosphere that other niches of blogs have failed to achieve. Media coverage of the *mommy blogging* phenomenon and the fact that this blog type has its own name bolsters the idea that *mommy blogging* is its own genre of computer-mediated female discourse that warrants critical analysis.

My own interest in term *mommy blogger* grows out of the two years I spent as a mommy blogger for a newspaper in Upstate New York, during the end of my 20-year career as a reporter and editor. As part of my beat covering parenting and children, I kept coming across blog posts that women had written, bristling at the term's constraints. Their expressions of feelings dovetailed with my own conflict over the term. I understood its relevance on the web, where keywords help a blog show up in Google searches and get noticed. For my own blog, I quickly learned that incorporating that term or its derivations into my blog posts was helpful to drive up readership, which was the goal of the newspaper I was working for at the time. At the same time, as a mother of two young children who call me mommy, I understood the utility and relevance of the term. In reading the debate that women bloggers and commenters wrote about the issue, I realized my own internal conflict over what the term meant about this aspect of my identity. In a sense, this project became a means to critically analyze my own feelings about the term *mommy blogger* by critiquing what other women had written about the term within the framework of my own understanding (McCracken, 1988).

For this project, I sought out every blog post I could find written by women about their feelings about this term. I found the posts online by searching through Google using the following terms, "mommy blog, "mommy blogger," "mommy blogging," "mommy blogger debate," "I like being called a mommy blogger," "Call me a mommy blogger," and "Don't call me a mommy blogger." When I found a blog post that discussed the issue, I also clicked on links within the post to see if they connected to other blog posts

about the topic. If they did, I include those blog posts in my analyses. I conducted my searches at three periods, December 2009, May 2010, and February 2011, in an effort to find as many blogs discussing the topic as possible. The blog posts I analyze were posted online between April 2006 and December 2010. Only public blog posts are examined. Comments on the blog posts are considered because there is often overlap between bloggers and commenters (Furukawa, Matsuo, Ohmukai, Uchiyama, & Ishizuka, 2007), so the line between blogger, reader, and commenter may blur. In addition, both the blog reader and blogger should be considered in such a critical analysis to grasp fully the nature of blogging (Baumer, Sueyoshi, & Tomlinson, 2008). Because my goal is to hear women's voice about the term *mommy bloggers*, three blog posts men wrote on the topic and 22 comments on blogs that appeared to be written by men were not analyzed.[2] As a result, I qualitatively analyze the texts of 29 blogs posts that 27 different women wrote regarding term *mommy blogger* and 649 comments posted on these 29 blogs to inform my techno-feminist argument.

I analyze the blog posts and comments as I might examine transcripts from in-depth qualitative interviews, reading them repeatedly to find commonalities in what the women were saying in an attempt "to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meaning are" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 49). To do this, I employ cyber ethnography, which involves the researcher being both the object and subject of her own study. As Gajjala and colleagues (2007) explain: "Cyber ethnography

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[2] The three blog posts and 22 comments that were not considered in analysis had bylines or screen names that used stereotypically male names or terms such as "daddy" or "dad" as part of their names. The remaining blog posts and comments were assumed to be written by women. Of course, there is no way to know for sure unless bloggers or commenters made their gender clear through pronoun use of by describing themselves as women or mothers.

complicates discussions regarding representation, authority, and writing in interesting and sometimes unique ways because of the nature of the medium/technology for interaction. The talking back or within cyber ethnography is nuanced and is based on a struggle and negotiation at structural, ideological and technological interfaces" (p. 211). For me, this involves employing a textual analysis in the post-structuralist sense, seeking to critique women's own computer-mediated writing about the term *mommy blogger*. This method allows me an "opportunity to step into the mind of another person to see and experience the world as they do themselves" (McCracken, 1988, p. 9) through women's public writings. I categorize the women's writing using a constant comparative technique (Johnson, 2000) to clarify which categories could be merged (Cresswell, 1997) to reveal manifest and latent meaning in the text (Kvale & Brickman, 2009). Finally, I try to use my own experiences and Butler's (1993) concepts of performativity and subjectivity to analyze their words rhetorically to craft my argument that the term *mommy blogger* has the power to cast women into a domestic sphere online that is neither liberating nor empowering. Undergirding my analysis is a techno-feminist lens that assumes "the materiality of technology affords or inhibits the doing of particular gender power relations" (Wajcman, 2010, p. 150). In essence, I assume that the very technology of blogging should be examined as part of the feminist perspective of what the term *mommy blogger* represents in our larger society.

The essay first explores the ideological concept of motherhood and how that relates to the term *mommy blogger*. Then I elaborate on how Butler's concepts of performativity and subjectivity relate to this topic. The third section analyzes the blog posts and comments in

my textual analysis, drawing on both performativity and subjectivity for illumination. I

conclude by drawing my own assumptions of what this rhetorical feminist analysis means

and contributes to communication literature.

Motherhood, Mommyhood, And Blogging

As a framework to understand the meaning of the term *mommy blogger*, it is important to

understand what blogging and motherhood – or mommyhood – represent in American

culture.

Bloggers create short online articles, called posts, and updated them frequently in reverse

chronological order (Blood, 2002; Miller & Shepherd, Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht,

2004a; Herring et al., 2005a). *Mommy bloggers* are women who describe their personal

experiences and feelings that at least occasionally relate to their children (Hartelius,

2005; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2005b; Lopez, 2009; Morrison, 2010;

Morrison, 2011). As such, mommy blogging is "purposive and deliberate social

engagement, a creative as well as interpersonal practice that mitigates the assorted ills

(physical isolation, role confusion, lack of realistic role models, etc.) and celebrates the

joys of contemporary mothering, especially in the earliest years of parenting" (Morrison,

2010, p. 1; see also Morrison, 2011).

In the United States at least, *mommy blogging* is mainly a middle-class phenomenon

(Author, 2012; Friedman, 2010; Thompson, 2007). Some argue the blogosphere offers

the possibility for empowering women because it can give them access to a sense of

community online and reinforce their agency (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). Others caution this empowerment (Newsom & Lengel, 2003) may be constrained by society's hegemonic social norms. The act of blogging has been found to be cathartic, even if few people read a blog, because it offers a place to shout opinions (Author, 2012; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrect, & Swartz, 2004b). Also, as Lopez (2009) asserts, *mommy blogging* in particular allows women to transform "their personal narratives of struggle and challenge into interactive conversations with other mothers, and, in so doing, [they] are beginning to expand our notion of motherhood, women bloggers, and the mother's place within the public sphere" (p. 744). In this sense, the term *mommy blogger* relies in part on our understanding of what motherhood means in contemporary society.

In our society, motherhood is a constructed concept that both idealizes and derides.

On the one hand, motherhood is presumed to be so "natural" and "biological" (Chodorow, 1978, p. 9) that the love of a mother has been elevated such that "maternal instinct has come to seem rooted in woman's very nature" (Badinter, 1980, p. xx), giving motherhood a positive role in society. Western society's image of motherhood is an all-giving, self-sacrificing, bountiful woman who anticipates every need of her child, specifically an infant or toddler, and is not overwhelmed by these needs (Bassin, Honey, & Kaplan, 1994). Yet, at the same time, motherhood locates women in a domestic sphere as women generally take primary responsibility for raising children (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988) while men fill the public sphere, which gives men the power to create and enforce social rules that can dominate women (Chodorow, 1978). In fact, the very

act of childbirth is connected to our society's understanding of womanhood (Oakley, 1979). When women become mothers, they are expected to focus on the ever-present needs of their offspring, rather than on themselves (Oakley, 1979). Particularly in western society where children are raised in isolated, small families – often apart from aunts, cousin, and grandmothers –motherhood may cast a heavy burden on women. This societal reality results in a concept of motherhood for many women that is dependent on constant contact with the child, particularly when the child is very young (Oakley, 1979).

It is important to note that this viewpoint pertains mainly to white women. For women of color, the subjective experience of mothering may challenge the social constructs of work and family as separate dichotomous spheres (Collins, 1994). At least for white women, motherhood can define women as inadequate even while the concept of motherhood is exalted. Second-wave white feminists felt women needed to move beyond the home and motherhood to gain subjectivity (Bassin et al., 1994). Oakley (1979) found that the "institution of motherhood is the way women become mothers in industrialized society" (p. 11), and the institution requires that women bridge the tension of their past dependence on others with a future of being depended upon. Today, the concept of motherhood continues to include these contradictions. Certainly, some of the exaggerated glory is retained. Yet, modern motherhood is defined by reliance on a bevy of experts to teach one to do everything from getting an infant to sleep through the night to ensuring middle schoolers do not turn into bullies. Dobris' and White-Mills' (2006) analysis of the popular *What to Expect* series of books on pregnancy and childbirth illustrates this point. They found that the series defines mothers as "inadequate in the very process of

mothering" (p. 34) and needing to rely on mainly male authorities to guide them.

In this current study, *mommy bloggers* operates as a culturally infused concept that springs from a societal understanding of motherhood. Every one of us has a mother -- good, bad, indifferent, or absent -- who shapes our understanding of motherhood, which is complicated on social and cultural levels (Bassin et al., 1994). But the societal representation of motherhood, shaped by hegemonic norms, cannot be separated from that individual concept, because *motherhood* and *mommyhood* are too salient for most people to understand apart from how society represents them. When the term *mother* or *mommy* is used in American society, we tap into a collective cultural construct of what our society values about *motherhood*. As Lakoff (1990) explains, "mother is a concept that is based on a complex model in which a number of individual cognitive models combine, forming a cluster model" (p. 74). A *mother* may mean someone who gives birth, contributes genes, nurtures a child to adulthood, or marries a father, Lakoff explains. Western cultural norms dictate that the *best* example of a mother in our society would be a biological mother who is and always has been female, who is principally concerned with nurturing, does not work outside the home, and is married to the child's father (Lakoff, 1990). This construction is culturally specific and results from a concept of motherhood that is shaped by experiences women encounter before they become mothers (Oakley, 1979). The closer a woman's experience of motherhood gets to this constructed norm of motherhood, the more representative of motherhood she may feel. In fact, the term *mother* is so hegemonically ingrained in our culture that some lesbian parents shun it and opt for what they see as the more neutral "mather" (Padavic &

Butterfield, 2011, p. 183), a hybrid of mother and father.

Now, certainly, many mothers today work outside the home. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 63.6% of mothers with children younger than 6 were employed in 2008, compared with less than 40% in 1975.[3] However, despite this trend, women's work outside the home is often counted as less important than men's. Societal norms assume the ideal western worker is a white male who is employed full time and has a female partner who is a secondary wage earner or not employed, but in either case she takes most of the responsibility for caring for children or older parents (Haddock, Zimmerman, Ziemba, & Lyness, 2006). At the same time, particularly middle- and upper-middle class women face the contradicting cultural pressure that they should work in a high-powered job until they have children and then tend to those children themselves rather than rely on paid care-givers (Haveman & Beresford, 2012). Haveman and Beresford (2012) argue that persistent cultural schemata are rooted in traditional gender roles that involve women doing more housework or child care than men, which may lead them to opt for less time-consuming jobs once they have children (See also Bianchi, 2011; Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Haddock et al., 2006). While it is impossible, of course, to prove whether society perpetuates these traditional gender roles, 4 decades of national time-use data suggest that for the average American, these roles persist at least in some fashion. Bianchi's (2011) analysis of 40 years of historical national time-use data shows that while men on average were doing much more housework and child care in 2003-2008, compared to 1965, they still lag behind women. According to these data, men spent on average 9.5 hours weekly on housework and 7 hours weekly on child care in 2003-2008,

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[3] Data accessed at http://www.bls.gov.

compared to women who spent on average 17.9 hours weekly on housework and 13.9 hours weekly on child care in that period (Bianchi, 2011). Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2011 show a similar trend: Women on average spent more than double the time daily caring for children compared to men and more than triple the time daily on housework compared to men.[4] According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the nation has 154,000 at home dads who are not employed outside the home, compared with 5 million at-home moms.[5] Therefore, even with more women working outside the home today than in decades past, the concept of *best* motherhood that Lakoff (1990) describes seems to persist, at least in myth. This relates directly to the concept of *mommy blogger* because the term taps into this idea of what motherhood is in our society, defining a *mommy blogger* in reference to the nurturing motherhood ideal.

Subjectivity And Power

This understanding of *mommy blogger* dovetails with Butler's (1993) concept of performativity. Performativity is not a singular or deliberate act or theatrical, but the "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, 1993, p. 2). To me, performativity applies to the term *mommy blogger* because women have seen motherhood *rehearsed* before they become mothers themselves, and this performance shapes the cultural hegemonic norms of what it means to be a mother.

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[4] Data accessed from http://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.t01.htm. For 2011, men spent an average of 0.24 hours daily on care of children, compared to 0.54 hours daily for women; in regard to housework, men spent an average of 0.27 hours daily, compared to .87 hours daily for women, according to these data.

[5] Data accessed from http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/pdf/cb11ff-07_mother.pdf and from http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/cb11-ff11.html

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Oakley (1979) found that in our society, women only think of themselves as mothers when they begin to care for their child, not merely upon giving birth. The term *mommy blogger* continues this performance, relying most strongly on the subcategory of mother as nurturer of young children who is not employed outside the home, and thereby use of this term may thrust women into a form a digital domesticity. When news stories categorize bloggers as *mommy blogger*s, these bloggers may feel this unspoken invisible hand – what Butler (1997b) calls the "psychic operation of the norm" (p. 21) -- urging them into the role that used to be called *super mom*. "Social categories signify subordination and existence at once. Within subjection the price of existence is subordination, " Butler (1997b, p. 20) writes.

As a result, women may find the *act* of writing a mommy blog empowering because it offers an opportunity to share opinions, ideas, and feelings that have no airing in any other public sphere. Personal blogging satisfies women's needs to disclose information about themselves (Author, 2012; Morrison, 2011; Nardi et al., 2004a; Nardi et al., 2004b). Mommy blogging in particular allows women who are mothers to share their personal narratives (Lopez, 2009), as well as negotiate the tension between their own identity and their role as mothers (Morrison, 2010). I do not dispute this viewpoint. In fact, as a mommy blogger I felt a sense of empowerment because I could explain to the world, or at least my readers, how I felt about my role as a mother and how that fit how I saw myself. I could draw on my own personal narrative of motherhood and apply its lessons to my own life, while also articulating other aspects of my life and how they intertwined with my role as a mother. In a very real sense, blogging allowed me to

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"present a much more complex and, as a result, arguably a more authentic view of motherhood" (Friedman, 2010, p. 201) to my readers. At the very least, being a mommy blogger provided me a circle of women with whom to share common experiences, and some of these women remain in my life today, three years after I stopped blogging about my children.

However, I argue that the use of the term *mommy blogger* may undermine this empowerment for some women by leading to what Newsom and Lengel (2003) call "contained empowerment" (p. 2) because the term reifies the prototypical version of *mother* as a caring nurturer whose life revolves around the needs of her young children. Women may see themselves as empowered but actually can become complicit in their own oppression, undermined by the very patriarchal system they attempt to flout (Batliwala, 1994). I acknowledge that empowerment can be a "slippery notion" (Duffy, 2010, p. 31) within a feminist context. Therefore, I first must clarify that I see empowerment in the sense of it being a process (Batliwala, 1994) by which women initially realize their own oppression and that eventually leads them to see that "they are not only personally oppressed, but that women as a gender are oppressed" (Green, 2008, p. 372). Until women's understanding of oppression makes this shift from the intrapersonal, to interpersonal, and finally societal level of analyses, women cannot fully challenge the repressive patriarchal structures that lead to the oppression (Green, 2008). However, it is important to note that this process may not be linear; rather, it may be a series of "mutually reinforcing and interconnecting subprocesses" (Carr, 2003, p. 13). When applied to this study, I propose that the power of the norm operates in the female

blogosphere in relation to the term *mommy blogger*. Women, because they have internalized patriarchal norms – perhaps without realizing it – may participate in their own oppression by measuring themselves against a norm of womanhood that exemplifies idealized motherhood: nurturing, heterosexual, married, at-home women who care for their children. Initially, they may not view this as gender oppression because they are seeing oppression only at the individual level. If they personally do not feel oppressed, they may miss the larger societal oppression that has been imposed by these patriarchal norms.

Mommy Blogger Versus Mother Or Mom Blogger

In reading the blog posts and comments women wrote about the term *mommy blogger*, it became clear that the women in my sample saw the use of *mommy* versus *mother* or *mom* within the term as having power to put women in their place. They noted that being called a *mommy blogger* made them think others, particularly men, would see them as less credible, serious, professional, qualified, or erudite than if the term were *mother blogger*. Use of *mommy* within the term seemed to conjure what Lakoff (1990) called the *best* example of motherhood and all that entails, banishing the blogger to the virtual private sphere and defining motherhood in a way that few women in this study felt fit them. Many women in the study seemed to feel the use of *mommy blogger* gave the term more power to diminish. As Caryn (Rocksinmydryer, n.d.) writes in a blog comment: "Mommies, to me, speak in baby talk or simple language since children who say mommy are toddlers or (in) early childhood. Moms or mothers speak clearly, with authority and understanding, and with an overall tone of sagacity." Gurukarm (Mom-101, 2006) offers

a similar sentiment in a blog comment: "I HATE the word 'mommy' – my kids have always called me mom, or mama – mommy is the whiniest sound to me … (say it with me: 'moommmmyyy – he hit me! mooommmmyyyy, she's touching me!')" In a blog comment, Elizabeth (Nataly, 2007,) calls the use of mommy a "verbal pat on the head" and a "gratuitous use of descriptors referring to reproductive status." Nataly's (2007) blog post summarizes sentiments of many women in the study:

I hate that it makes me and what I do sound cutesy and childish. I feel that it diminishes the importance and impact of what I do. … I think if the term were "mom" – such as mom blogger, or business mom, or mom wars – I'd feel slightly less irked. I am a mom, but why should anyone other than my daughter call me mommy?

With this debate over *mommy* versus *mom*, the women seem to be bristling against the notion of motherhood as a performance, a performance they do not want to legitimize. Butler (1993) asserts that gender is a performance that people act out not as theater but as a reiterative practice shaped by discourse. I argue that motherhood is also a performance, and that these women realize that being a *mommy* requires they act out different cultural roles than being a *mother.* Both words conjure a role of mothering that values nurturing above other categories, but with *mommy* that image is heightened and exaggerated, the women seem to be saying. In this case, the women seemed to view the use of *mommy blogger* as tapping into a stereotypical subcategory of motherhood – the at-home mom of very young children who fills her days with caring for them and, therefore, has little of value to say on serious topics. As a result, they get a clear sense that the term *mommy*

blogger leaves them out of the public sphere, and, therefore, less valued by society. Their words reveal a palpable tension between seeing the act of blogging as a freedom from the reigns of domesticity while seeing the term *mommy blogger* as relegating them back within a digital domestic sphere.

Not "Just" A Mommy Blogger

Women writing about the term *mommy blogger* often saw the term as reductionist because it defines women by only one aspect of themselves. As Cagey (Phdinparenting, 2009) explains in a blog comment, the problem is the term *mommy blogger* is "all too often used in a sneering or condescending tone with a 'just' usually placed right before." Other women suggested that even if "just" is not written, it is implied when the term *mommy blogger* is used. They seem to be saying that *mommy blogger* defines the role of motherhood as far too narrow to be comfortable for them. "I am one who likes to think of myself as a Blogger," explains Angela (Short Pump Preppy, 2009) in a blog comment. "That's it. I happen to be a mom." The term, Cloud (Julie, 2009) writes in a comment, seems to imply "I ONLY blog about motherhood." Babes Rockin' Mami (2010) writes that she felt *mommy blogger* gave the connotation of what she called a "perfect mom," a category she felt did not fit her: "The (perfect mom) would never yell at her one year old in frustration! Or just tell him to shut up. Or not get up the second he cries for the tenth time for dropping the same mother effing toy on his own mother effing foot. This mommy does." In a guest blog post, Bamberger (2008) sums up this idea:

When the main stream media talks about "mommybloggers" it's often meant to refer to a group of stay-at-home mothers who, in their spare time, write about the trials of motherhood. Some of us fit into that category, but there's a lot of shortsightedness if people think that's all that "mommybloggers" are. … Would a male attorney dare refer to me in open court as a "mommylawyer" if I decided to go back to practicing law? Would you refer to your internist as "mommydoctor?" And why not? Because it would be a major insult, suggesting that their profession was somehow less important or that they were somehow less qualified because of their parental status.

The women's comments suggest that when they hear the term *mommy blogger* it re-affirms traditional motherhood: a woman who does not work outside the home, who cares for her children, who is very much in the private sphere, has little to say on serious topics, and is somehow foreign in the public sphere. If that role does not fit them – and it does not seem to fit many of them completely – it feels marginalizing.

I also suggest that a question borrowed from Butler (1999) helps explain what the women are grappling with: *Does the term mommy blogger denote a common identity?* Butler (1999) proposes that it is impossible to separate "out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (p. 6). She argues the discourse in which feminism functions undermines the presumed universality and unity of women. I think her idea powerfully relates to the concept of the *mommy blogger*. One cannot separate the mommy from the blogger or the *mommy blogger* from the discourse in which it operates. The term pretends a unitary category of *mommy*

*blogger*s exists, but in reality this is a fragmented corpus with divergent experiences, ideas, and understandings. Some women who blog are not mothers. Some are mothers, but, as Bad Mommy Blogger (2009) explains in a blog post, "not everyone wants to be pigeonholed by their ability to procreate or sign adoption papers. Some want to be recognized as Somebody other than so-and-so's Mom." Butler (1999, 1988) notes that *female*, *woman* and *gender* are not stable notions. I argue that *mommy* and *mommy blogger* also are unfixed. As such, the term may enslave some women through "spatial captivity" (Butler, 1997b, p. 85) while empowering others, even if that empowerment is contained.

Empowerment Of The Genre

Many women who wrote about the term *mommy blogger*, including those who did not like the term, noted the term has marketing value. The women acknowledged that having a clear category name helps bloggers increase traffic because people need to know what search terms to type into Google or other search engines to find their blogs. Certainly, from a marketing standpoint, having a term such as *mommy blogger* is useful (Thompson, 2007) as a means to target advertising dollars or draw readers. Some women who wrote about the term in my sample seemed to suggest that term *mommy blogger* is only a category, and it may not *mean* anything more than calling a drama a drama. The term also cements the group of *mommy blogger*s into a form of community that is attractive to marketers, and some women reported gaining power from that community. "As I sat and spoke to the heads of a multi million dollar company, it all became very clear to me that I am a huge asset to these people simply because my hand rocks the cradle **and** the

internet," I.E. Family (2009) writes on her blog. Courtney V (2009) takes this idea further

on her blog, suggesting sub-categories, such as *mommy blogger* who reviews products;

mommy blogger who writes about food; *mommy blogger* who posts videos. "I'm all for

calling myself a mommyblogger," Christina (Mom-101, 2006) comments on a blog post.

"It's just a word, or words, depending on how you write it." For some women the fact

that the term has been questioned raises ire: "I have no issue with the mommy blogger

title. That's what I am I think and I think this whole uproar is frustrating," Gliding

Through Motherhood (Phdinparenting, 2009) writes in a comment.

Rhetorical genre theory is helpful to critically analyze what the women seem to be saying

about the term *mommy blogger* and its potentially empowering role as a genre. Genres

are pervasive in just about every form of media, from film to television to DVDs, and

help people see connections between media and popular culture (Grant, 2007) in part by

establishing two groups: media that fit the genre and those excluded by it (Altman, 1984).

However, rhetorical genre theory suggests genres are more than just categories or

taxonomies. Genres are dynamic, created through both the producer and audience, and

can lead to social action and organize social interaction (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Miller,

1984). Genres are generated from a *kairos*, or cultural moment in time (Miller &

Shepherd, 2004). They "normalize activities and practices, enabling community members

to participate in these activities and practices in fairly predictable, familiar ways in order

to get things done" (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010, p. 79). Genres seek to explain the evolution

of social reality that "becomes more than a formal entity; it becomes pragmatic, fully

rhetorical, a point of intention and effect, and act of social action" (Miller, 1984, p. 153).

Miller and Shepherd (2004) argue persuasively that blogging is a genre that is an evolutionary product arising from the *kairos* of the 1990s, a era marked by mediated voyeurism, self-disclosure, and reality television that aims to capture human interactions in a raw form. I agree. Morrison (2010) extends this idea, positing that *mommy blogging* is a genre within blogging that developed in response to a pressing need among mothers, particularly new mothers, as they brook the "unbearable tension between their full identification with and performance of the identity character of 'mother' and of 'self' " (p. 5). For these women, blogging becomes a way for them to locate their experiences of motherhood in a wider context, find a community, and share experiences (Author, 2012; Morrison, 2010). Under this view, the *act* of *mommy blogging* may be radical (Lopez, 2009) or empowering by giving women a place to express their voice (Author, 2012.) From a techno-feminist perspective, clearly women's identities can be configured as they navigate digital technologies such as blogging (Wajcman, 2010), so the very act of blogging about parenting can offer women a feeling of empowerment. In addition, the content of *mommy blogs* may offer empowerment for their readers, by presenting a more realistic yet celebratory view of early motherhood (Morrison, 2010) to "show us the way that mothers act up and are acted upon" (Friedman, 2010, p. 199).

For example, Satterwhite (2009) explains on her blog that early women bloggers who wrote about their children were not taken seriously by society or the media, but once they gained a name, *mommy blogger*, this began to change: "You see back then mommybloggers were at the very bottom of the blogging food chain. We were just moms

writing as a 'little hobby.' We were not taken seriously. We were not respected. We were frivolous bloggers who would go away soon enough." But the women gained more power once they formed a group, a collective voice. As Karoli (2008) writes in a blog post:

The value of a term like mommyblogger is this: It defines a very powerful and vocal demographic – a group of thinking, tech-savvy, engaged women. … The real benefit of being part of a larger community called "mommybloggers" is the power that comes with the rise of collective voices. Power to change things. Power to be heard.

Karoli's comments are particularly interesting because she obviously derives much pride form the term *mommy blogger*, and, for her at least, it creates a picture of a woman in action, who straddles the public-private spheres and triumphs in both. I do not dispute the empowerment she feels through the *act* of blogging. I, too, felt empowered by raising my voice in the public sphere of the blogosphere, and her sincerity is tangible in her words. However, despite the true empowerment many women may derive from the term *mommy blogger,* this term cannot operate merely as a category because the words independently and together have meaning from the discourse that precedes them.

Categories are fluid and may overlap subjectively (Derrida & Ronell, 1980), and, therefore, fail to provide meaning because the name, or any name, does not capture all of who that particular blogger is. Butler's (1997a) caution that labels, such as *girl* or *delinquent*, do not just categorize people but provide a practical sense of how the body can and cannot negotiate its social space seems particularly apt. For linguistic beings,

"formative power precedes and conditions any decisions we might make about (language), insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power" (Butler, 1997a, p. 2). I suggest that *mommy blogger* may operate similarly to the term *girl power*, which Newsom (2005) asserts offers young women only temporary limited "agency masked by stereotype" (p. 4). In both examples, *girl* and *mommy* offer limited agency because they can infantilize females by focusing on the passive aspects of stereotypes associated with them.

Without disputing the true empowerment women may feel through the act of writing a *mommy blog,* it is important to realize that this power may not recognize Foucault's (1977/1995) concept of power as "mobile and constantly shifting set of force relations that emerge from every social interaction and thus pervade the social body" (Allen, 2005, p. 9). This power normalizes a society that values sex between a married man and woman with the intent to produce children (Foucault, 1990), and I argue this helps bolster a traditional narrow view of motherhood where women take up the private sphere. In this sense, the women may become complicit in their own oppression because they see oppression only at the individual level (Batliwala, 1994; Green, 2008). If an individual woman does not feel oppressed by the term *mommy blogger*, she may see it as empowering without acknowledging that empowerment is inherently a process. In this process, women may initially judge what is oppressive in regard only to themselves, but eventually they grasp that gender oppression has macro- or societal-level implications (Green, 2008). As such, the personal empowerment they feel may be "bounded … flawed and fluctuating" (Gill & Ganesh, 2007, p. 286).

I suggest that some women may have internalized the norms of society that place them in a domestic sphere to such an extent that they fail to see how a term like *mommy blogger* might subject them, holding them captive. Butler (1997b) writes that this subjection "signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject" (p. 2) through discursive productivity where the subject is "initiated through a primary submission to power" (p. 2). Or As Redneck Mommy (Phdinparenting, 2009) explains in more down-to-earth terms: "I think perhaps my dislike of the term mommyblogger stems from not wanting to be marginalized or defined by another; stuffed into a mold that doesn't fit me. I don't need others to do that, I do it often enough myself."

DISCUSSION

This essay seeks to apply a techno-feminist lens to the debate in the blogosphere over the term *mommy blogger* to uncover the regulatory discursive norms through which this term operates and affects women. Using the words of women bloggers who wrote about this term and comments posted on these blog posts, I offer a critique of the term *mommy blogger* as an ideological concept to analyze the discourse that precedes the use of the term and the affect this term has on how women, particular mothers, see themselves in the digital sphere. Based on this research, I argue that while the act of mommy blogging may be empowering – the term *mommy blogger* reinforces women's hegemonic normative roles as nurturers, thrusting women who blog about their children into a form of digital domesticity in the blogosphere.

Clearly, *mommy blogger* is a neutral term for few of the women who write about the term in blog comments and posts analyzed in this study. The term brings up both individual and cultural ideas of what motherhood is. How the term affects these women seems to relate directly to how they understand motherhood. Do they fit the role of *motherhood* or *mommyhood* that they link to the term *mommy blogger?* If so, the women feel more comfortable with the term or even see it as a form of empowerment. If the role does not fit them, the term marginalizes them or makes them feel that others, particularly men, see them as less than other types of bloggers. It is clear from the women's words that the use of *mommy blogger*, rather than *mom* or *mother blogger*, has great salience. This makes sense, as *mommy* even more than *mother*, fits what Lakoff (1990) calls the *best* example of motherhood in western culture: a nurturer of young children. Use of *mommy blogger* rather than *mother blogger* also seems to have more power to cast women into the private sphere because *mommy blogger* more clearly defines women as not doing the work of men, as the other. It is diminutive. It sounds cute. It is a name only young children call their mother. It seems telling that several women felt the term came with the word "just" attached, either literally or in their own minds. As Francis (2008) explains on her blog: "I cringed, then felt indignant. Mommy blogger? That's what I am? Not a blogger who happens to cover motherhood in addition to other topics. Just…mommy blogger."

Clearly, *mom blogger* or *mother blogger* offers less of a feeling of diminishment for these women, though the terms are considered synonyms for a female parent of a child. I argue the discourse that precedes *mother* or *mom* is different than the one that leads to *mommy.* As children grow up, they move through a developmental process that often leads to

switching from calling their female parent *mommy*, to *mom*. This symbolizes both a maturity of the child but also the child's greater independence. So relying on *mommy* in the term *mommy blogger* points more directly to a less independent child, who is more shackled to his or her parent. By inference, a *mommy* is more tied to the child, focused on the child's needs and has less time or energy for other projects that call pull out of the domestic sphere. So the term *mommy blogger* continues the script of women's hegemonic normative roles as nurturers to a greater extent than *mom blogger* or *mother blogger* might.

Based on data from women's blogs and blog comments in this study, the term *mommy blogger* seems to mean mother, mom, mommy, woman who writes about children, woman who writes for other women. For some women, the term gives a sense of community, a sense of being part of something larger than themselves, which they see as giving them a feeling of empowerment in the blogosphere. However, other women seem to see the term as the type of "spatial captivity" (Butler, 1997b, p. 85). As Francis (2008) wrote: "No matter how proudly we may use the title, the fact is that, at least to me, Mommy Blogger still sounds kind of silly and trivial."

In summary, I suggest that mothers put on the role of motherhood in our society, as Butler's (1993) concept of performativity suggests, and that the prevalence of the term *mommy blogger* picks up on this script. But in so doing, the identities of individual bloggers can be lost, along with their agency, as they are subjected to subjugation through a term that has potential to minimize who they are to just one element. As women use the

term, they may become complicit in their oppression by failing to see that the term may

reify hegemonic norms that diminish women at the macro or societal level, even if an

individual women blogger does not feel marginalized by the term.

CONCLUSION

The obvious question after my critique is: So what do we do? Do we banish the term

mommy blogger or rally against it? I think not. I doubt we could succeed in ridding the

blogosphere and media of this word because it has become ingrained through use. The

whole mechanism of the Internet relies on this type of shorthand "keyword" to help

people find blogs on particular topics, and help bloggers get readers for their work. So

even if we could succeed in removing this term from our lexicon, I would not advise that

such a goal would not be worth the effort. What is important about this work is helping

women understand themselves and each other through awareness that terms such as

mommy blogger are not neutral and arise from multiple discourses. This awareness, I

believe, is a first step in ridding our world of gender oppression through a process of

empowerment that leads to change. As Batliwala (1994) writes (emphasis in original):

In order to challenge their subordination, *women must first recognize the ideology that*

legitimizes male domination and understand how it perpetuates their oppression. This

recognition requires reversal of the values and attitudes, indeed the entire worldview, that

women have internalized since early childhood. … Society is forced to change only when

large numbers of women are mobilized to press for change (p. 131).

Too often in our culture, we ignore the power of words, as if they have no meaning. This purpose of this study is to show that the term *mommy blogger* does have meaning, meaning that resonates with many women. My aim was to give voice to these women, to give the debate some prominence, and elevate to a greater public understanding the struggle women today still wage. My hope is that exposing this meaning will bolster women's efforts to fight for true empowerment through the blogosphere. For as Wackwitz and Rackow (2007) write: "Feminists have assumed that having voice is an important – even the most important – goal and strategy for rectifying subordination" (p. 268).

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