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MOMMY BLOGS: USES AND GRATIFICATIONS
FROM A NICHE BLOGOSPHERE GROUP

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ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative study that employed the uses and gratifications theory. The purpose of this study was to understand why mothers use mommy blogs and the gratifications they get from that use. This study focuses specifically on the mommy blog readers and not the authors of the blogs. Through using the constant comparative method six themes emerged. They were (1) convenience, (2) community, (3) entertainment, (4) information, (5) ability to relate, and (6) inspiration/motivation. Through these results, it was discovered that the participants were able to gratify specific needs through mommy blogs.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Academic research on weblogs or blogs is still in its infancy, much like blogs themselves when compared to other media. “A weblog is a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an HTML browser” (Winer, 2003, p.1).

Moving into the 21st century, blogs gained increasing popularity (Goldsborough, 2003). Up from 57.4 million in 2006, (Technorati, 2009), a primary blog search engine, is tracking 133 million blogs. This number is growing frequently with the help of other social media and the accessibility of mobile devices (Sobel, 2010). In fact, blogs have become so popular that they no longer need numerical credibility (Helmond, 2008). Much of this popularity is credited to readers and fans of blogs totaling 346 million and 77 percent of active Internet users (Singer, 2009). With something for everyone, blogs have undoubtedly become a vital part of new media. In the results of a survey done by Penn Schoen Berland, blog readers are losing trust in mainstream media and gaining it in blogs (Sobel, 2010). With a third of bloggers describing themselves as sincere and measuring their success by personal satisfaction, it is not surprising that an important and influential trend in the blogosphere is mommy blogs (Sobel, 2010). Mommy blogs are a

subgroup in the blogosphere that caters to specific issues concerning parenting and children.

As an influential subgroup, the mommy blog audience continues to increase as mothers turn to social media as a medium to connect with other mothers. Twenty percent of daily online activity comes from women ages 25-54 with at least one child according to the Nielsen Company, a consumer information company (Howell, 2010). The topics on these mommy blogs are widespread from business, finances, health, and religion to parenting, families, and relationships.

It is a well-known fact that parenting is a considerably complicated job. Having someone to look to for advice, information, and motivation with the convenience of receiving it whenever and wherever you want is in high demand. Mothers don't always want to hear from experts and sometimes find it more comforting to "talk with people who are going through the journey of raising children with them" (Howell, 2010, p. 18).

Mothers are aware that their online relationships are less demanding, less competitive, and more confidential than conventional relationships (Francis, 2006). Active mommy blog readers benefit from having a communication outlet, which is often difficult for mothers who can easily get consumed with parenting and/or work responsibilities (Silva, 2009). "Blogging can also be a true sanity saver, allowing isolated and confused caregivers to let off steam, share their worries, and get a dose of solidarity and support – all without changing out of their bathrobes or revealing their names" (Francis, 2006, p. 1).

Mothers have numerous of responsibilities making them very busy individuals that do not have a lot of time for themselves (Silva, 2009). Users of blogs are known to have higher education and income level than the general public (Sobel, 2010). Therefore, the mommy blog readers are educated, computer competent, and busy women that know how to use new media in order to satisfy their needs. The inherent characteristics of the mommy blog readers make them an interesting group to research.

Importance of the Study

Much of the previous blog research has focused on the blog author and not the reader. This study will research specifically the mommy blog reader. Also, this niche group is becoming a large presence in the online community at such a rapid pace that there has not previously been an opportunity for academic research. However, mommy blogs are making their presence felt and heard among the online community. It is time for the academic world to pay attention to this phenomenon as well. This study intends to start that process by looking at the phenomenon of mommy blog readers. Through conducting a qualitative study utilizing the uses and gratifications theory, my expectation is that this study will add to the body of research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The basic definition of blogging is, “the reverse-chronological posting of individually authored entries which includes the capacity to provide hypertext links and often comment-based responses from readers” (Burns & Jacobs, 2006, p. 2). Blogs are different from the normal website because they are specifically hosted by a blogger who is able to post an array of information like links, news, commentary, pictures, video and audio recordings (Kaye, 2010). “The interactive nature, varying delivery and formats, and individualized content distinguish blogs from other online sources and certainly from traditional media” (Kaye, 2010, p. 194). Much freedom is given to the blogger due to the software capabilities. However, these capabilities still depend on the continuing interactions amid the community of bloggers and readers (Lövheim, 2011).

Blogs are increasingly becoming a trusted source online with about 33 percent of online users reading them (Smith, 2008). Readers depend on blogs to bring attention to wrongdoing, controversial issues, social trends, the latest news and information. On either side of the ideological divide, they have become an institution (Kaye, 2010). Most of this is because users are incorporated and appreciated, which is an unusual characteristic for most legacy media. What is interesting is why people read blogs; and more specifically, why mothers turn to mommy blogs to fulfill different needs.

Historical Survey of Previous Work

Since the beginning of the Internet, the idea of community has been at the forefront. Strong surviving communities on the Internet, such as blogs, have realized that the users have needs and seek to gratify those needs (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996). Arthur Armstrong and John Hagel (1996) noted that electronic communities meet four types of users needs. They are (1) the community of transaction, (2) the community of interest, (3) the community of fantasy, and (4) the community of relationship. They noted that in order to thrive online, there had to be as many of the four needs met as possible. With many mommy blogs some of the four needs listed above may be met; hence, that is why they have become such a force in the online community.

Our responsive and informational competency has been extended due to the accessibility of computer-mediated technologies; i.e., blogs (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). It was thought that communication online lags behind face-to-face communication because of the lack in informational feedback, the deficiency of social influence cues in dialogue, and depersonalization caused by the unavailability of non-verbal cues (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). It was found that there was less social presence online than in other media, meaning that the exchange in communication was less warm, personal, sensitive, and active (Papacharissi & Alan, 2000). However, Walther (1995) pointed out that the intimacy in blogs was no less than that of face-to-face communication. Online communication is seldom impersonal, when users have time and interest the relationship can become interpersonal, and there is a chance that communication online can become hyper personal when managed more effectively (Walther, 1995).

Online communication is an apparatus for social interaction, and creates a wealth of information for its users. Interactive and informational needs can be fulfilled when socio cultural networks are provided. The way in which people can come together through blogs creates strong and unique bonds. Having the opportunity to share personal experiences over topics such as children with illnesses, single parenting, or same sex parenting are some of the most gratifying things that come from blogs created by mothers (Hochwald, 2009). People put a good amount of effort into trying to get others to like and value them (Walther, 1992); therefore, in mommy blogs, just as much as in any context, communicators are eager for gratifying, personal, and involved relationships (Walther, 1992).

It has been noted often that people go to blogs because they are seeking information to subjects they have an interest in (Kaye, 2010). Many mothers seek specific information and/or advice to issues that are interesting to them and their lifestyle like budgeting family expenses, finding time for leisure with kids, how to make money while spending as much time with their families as possible, etc. (Carey, 2009).

More and more mommy bloggers are recommending products they like or have used to help with concerns like sleep, colic, potty training, and educational development (Carey, 2009). The mommy blog audience appreciates that many times the blog will inform where to purchase the product and may even include a direct link to the product's website; or, the blog may contain a place to purchase it directly on the blog itself (Thompson, 2007). However, mothers benefiting financially from their blogs raise some ethical concerns (Carey, 2009). "Readers flock to these blogs for real opinions from real

momms whose lives appear to resemble their own” (Carey, 2009, p. 1). Individual mommy blogs aren’t essentially large networks, but they are very tight networks (Thompson, 2007). When blogs first started to make money it infuriated people because they felt like blogs should be pure (Carey, 2009). Conversely, getting products to review for profit, “has become the standard model for a successful parenting blog” (Carey, 2009, p. 1). Many blogging mothers explain that they simply will not review a product if they do not like it or do not think it is worth the money (Silva, 2009). Readers trust this because mothers have been sharing products that work and don’t work amongst their non-virtual friends long before blogs came into existence (Carey, 2009). Even though readers know many mommy blogs get compensation for their reviews, they do not seem to mind, and believe that the mommy blogger would not give them false information. “There is a loyalty amongst parents that we have a duty to each other to be straight about how to spend their hard earned money and whether something is worth it or not” (Carey, 2009, p. 1).

In a 2002 study done by Kraut et al., they found that increased Internet use contributed to reduced communication in the home, smaller social circles, and a greater sense of depression and loneliness. However, being a part of an online community supplements the social life and does not take away from it (Matei, 2004). “Recognizing that social relationships are formed and nurtured on both sides of the digital boundary, early researchers now believe that the technological distinction of virtual is blurred and offline ties are frequently an extension of that community” (Grace-Farfaglia et al., 2006, p. 76). Many positive social benefits come from online communities and active participation in these communities (Grace-Farfaglia et al., 2006). Mothers often have very

little time to invest in their relationships offline, but can many times find time online. The Internet has been perceived as a substitution to face-to-face interaction, but the mommy blog can create a community that has no geographical base (Williams et al., 1994), meaning that mothers can be anywhere at any time and in any condition to be a part of this community. It has been suggested that offline relationships are more valued than relationships online, and that the gain depends on whether the relationship is being supplemented or substituted (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

In fact, “research has shown that people choose among interpersonal and mediated channels to fulfill interactive and informational needs, depending on availability and individual perceptions of a medium, and the type of need to be filled” (Papacharissi & Rubin, p. 176, 2000). Through the Internet feelings of isolation can be reduced (Grace-Farfaglia et al., 2006). It is easy for mothers to feel isolated because of their many obligations that trump their wants and needs for personal relationships (Silva, 2009); often, going to an online community that may relieve those feelings of isolation can be helpful (Silva, 2009). Online communities like blogs can create a communication environment that is inviting (Haraway, 1991).

Ferguson and Perse (2000) found that blogs are used in similar ways television was used for entertainment and/or social interaction. When examining blogs, Haas et al. (2007) found that readers firstly use them to gain information and would rather get that precise information from a trustworthy source. The second reason is because there is a relationship forming or there is an existing relationship between the reader and the author

(Haas et al., 2007). Relationships online are more developed personally for those who comment frequently and for longer periods of time (Parks & Floyd, 1996).

Barbara K. Kaye (2010) undertook a quantitative study on weblogs in order to find a scale to determine key motivational factors of using blogs. The factors she found were, “convenient information seeking, anti-traditional media sentiment, expression/affiliation, guidance/opinion seeking, blog ambience, personal fulfillment, political debate, variety of opinion, and specific inquiry” (Kaye, p. 194, 2010). She emphasizes, in the conclusion of her study that the foremost motivation for using blogs was because it is found to be a place that is uncomplicated and undemanding. Therefore, blogs allow users to gain access to an abundance of information and opinions, stay present with current issues, and obtain in-depth analysis (Kaye, 2010).

Some of the motives of participating in blogs instead of other media are because they are emerging and adapting everyday, and the user is in full control of his/her level of activity (Kaye, 2010). “Motives are general dispositions that influence people's actions taken to fulfill a need or want” (Papacharissi & Rubin, p. 179, 2000). The uses and gratifications theory concentrates on motives for media use, components that guide motives, and results from media related behavior (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). This theory depends on audience activity and communication motives are the essential elements of audience activity (Rubin, 1993). Technorati (2007) has thousands of blogs associated with parenting and in the blogosphere there are an estimated 26 million moms (Carey, 2009). “They seek out other moms’ advice for what they are looking for” (Thompson, 2007).

Theory

Blumler and Katz's (1974) uses and gratification theory brought attention to the idea that media users play an active role in choosing and using the media. The theorists suggested that users are goal-oriented in their media use and therefore taking an active part in the communication process. Depending on the need of the user the best media is sought out in order to fulfill that need. Uses and gratifications theory assumes that the user has alternate choices to gratify their need.

There has been much criticism about this theory. The strongest criticism is that it is too audience-centered and therefore not giving media enough power. Other criticisms have been that it relies too heavily on audience reports that may have a slanted perspective, the absence or attendance of effect cannot be addressed, it does not have enough power on a macro-level, and it can only be researched qualitatively (Baran & Davis, 2009). The uses and gratifications theory's weaknesses are almost the same as its strengths. Some of the strengths noted in the uses and gratifications theory are in mass communication. The strengths eminent were that the uses and gratification's theory is attentive to the individuals, the intelligence and capability of the user is respected, active and passive uses of media can be distinguished, the observation of using media is insightful, an intuitive way to bring media interactions into everyday life, and a great way to understand new media (Baran & Davis, 2009).

This theory was thought to be irrelevant until the rise of new media in the beginning of the 21st century. "Computer-mediated communication has revived the significance of uses and gratifications" (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 3). With new media the

amount of the audience participation is much higher than in print, television, and radio. Amid media that has been around longer there is little option to what the audience reads, views, or listens to. With new media the audience specifically seeks what they need to gratify. There is very little room for using something that isn't needed (Ruggiero, 2000).

The blog is a special species. It is known that the Web demands activity, but to be able to have a choice in the level of activity is what makes blogs special. Deciding upon one or two way communication is what some audience appreciates in blogs. Having the choice on the level of engagement one wants to partake in from just reading to adding comments and much more, may be a reason why blogs are so popular. The amount of participation is not in the hands of the media, but controlled by the user (Kaye, 2005).

Much of the research done on blogs is about the blogger him/herself or on the content of the blog and rarely paid any attention to the readers of blogs (Kaye, 2005). But it is what the reader is drawn to that is really interesting. When there are so many other ways to gratify needs why do they choose blogs? In this research it is not just about choosing any blog, but also about the mothers' choice to access mommy blogs.

RQ1: Why do mothers use mommy blogs?

RQ2: What gratifications do mothers seek from using mommy blogs?

RQ3: What gratifications do mothers acquire from using mommy blogs?

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Focus groups were used to gather information concerning mommy blogs. This method was chosen in order for the participants to intensely share their interest and ignite further discussion on the topic (Morgan, 1997).

Participants

The criteria used to choose members of the focus groups were that the participants had to be mothers with at least one child age 12 or under living with them, and they must frequent mommy blogs at least once a week. These qualifications were specified to best fit the research questions and the findings. In order to find these participants snowball sampling (Patton, 1990) was used. This method of sampling “yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest” (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141).

To find participants, contact was made first with the head of the mothers’ group at a large Midwest corporation, a director of a childcare center in a suburb of a large metropolitan city in the Midwest, and a librarian who ran the baby and child story times. These three people posted flyers advertising the focus group. They also spread the information by word of mouth.

The participants who came from the sampling were 12 Caucasian women with a minimum of a bachelor's degree. Their frequency of visiting mommy blogs ranged from once a week to several times per day. The age range was between 27 and 39. Their children were all under 12. Eight of the participants were employed and worked outside of the home. Four were stay-at-home moms or homemakers. Ten of the participants lived in the suburbs and two lived within the city limits.

Data Collection

Two groups with six participants in each were formed. The number of participants and groups were selected in order to exhaust information and to avoid repetitiveness. One was held in a conference room at a public library because the focus group was initially advertised there. Dinner was provided for the participants as a way to show appreciation for them taking time out of their busy schedules. The other was held in a conference room at a large Midwest corporation. A meal was provided for these participants as well. Before the audio recording began the participants were told about confidentiality. They were asked to read and sign a consent form.

Along with the consent forms (appendix C), participants were asked to answer demographic questions (appendix B). As the meeting began, an audio recording was initiated. An introduction was read reminding the participants of the study's purpose, reminding them why they were asked to participate, reiterating that the conversation would be kept confidential, and noting that they were being audio recorded. The participants were also notified that their names would not be used and the data being collected would not be linked back to the participant; they instead would be identified by

the number labeled on their demographic sheet. Additionally, they were informed that the data being collected would only be used by the researcher. An Interview guide (appendix A) was followed loosely by the primary researcher for the focus group discussion. The participants were welcomed and asked questions about their use of mommy blogs. Each session lasted about one hour and forty-five minutes.

Data Analysis

After the focus groups were complete and all the audio-recorded data was gathered a verbatim transcription was completed. This transcription was done in order to reference and analyze the data. After the transcription was complete, the data was analyzed using Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method to find continuing themes. This was done using open coding that identified emerging themes, reading transcripts line-by-line and categorizing and coding the concepts found in the data. This allowed the findings of constant reoccurring issues of importance to the focus group of mommy blog readers. From looking through this lens and using the constant comparative method, themes began to emerge. Once all the data was coded, each incident was compared to other incidents and placed into a category. This was done by axial coding, establishing the concepts and making them more theoretical. Finally, reoccurring themes were established.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Six themes emerged from the discussion in the two groups. They were (1) convenience, (2) community, (3) entertainment, (4) information, (5) ability to relate, and (6) inspiration/motivation.

Convenience

The participants conversed many times about the importance of mommy blogs being convenient. Many said that if mommy blogs were not so convenient that they would not read them at all. Participant 1 said, “With my iPhone it’s so easy. If it weren’t easy to access I wouldn’t use them.”

Convenience, to these participants, is anything that saves time and/or reduces work and it can also add to one's ease or simplicity. Most of the participants explained convenience as being high on the list of needs for them. They may not always have access to a book, magazine, or TV, but while in their day-to-day life it is easy for them to access mommy blogs through their smartphones or tablets. Participant 9 said, “If I’m nursing or in the lactation room I will just turn on my Kindle and go to the mommy blogs.” It was noted several times that there were alternative venues to get some of the

information being sought, but because the accessibility of blogs was much more convenient, the initial action was to go to mommy blogs first. Participant 10 explained,

I have a couple of free magazine subscriptions to Parents Magazine... I never read them. They come right to my house and I'm like ooh that looks like an interesting article oh wait I have to do this over here and I just don't have time.

Many participants claimed that if their need cannot be gratified by their normal world that it is quick and easy to get it from the virtual one. However, convenience did not just stop at accessibility but carried into a deeper meaning of getting specific mothering information compiled into a few mommy blogs. It was not just that it was easy for these participants to take out their smartphone but the fact that for one question about mothering advice, the one answer they were searching for, was in a mommy blog. The idea of not having to go to several different resources and spending valuable time made these blogs convenient. Participant 4 said, "Obviously time is precious and I'm very selective as to where I'm going to spend my time." Mommy blogs were something that these mothers were willing to make time for because of their content. Also making the time to read mommy blogs was not challenging because they are convenient. Participant 2 said,

One blog that I follow in particular had done a ton of research on car seats and the toxins and finding the best car seats that don't have the high toxin levels. So I took into consideration what car seat she had purchased, so on her blog it sounded like she had done a ton of research. I don't have that time to spend a ton of hours looking for the right car seat. She pulled all this information, it was literally like don't buy these, buy these.

Many mothers explained situations where they did not have to do the research on their own, but blogs made it convenient. Participant 8 said, "As a full-time working mom I don't have time to search out things on the Internet."

Participant 5 explained, “It’s a way for me to actually be able to share in that experience, to learn and talk about things I can’t do, like I literally can’t do in my personal life.” The focus groups articulated that one form of communication is not better than the other but something is better than nothing and convenient is even better.

Community

To these mothers, community is a group sharing common characteristics or interests and perceives itself as distinctive in some regard from the larger society within which it exists. Among these participants there are two different societies. The first being their physical society and the second the blogosphere. When there was no physical community to join many of the participants were able to find a community online. The sense of community was a very dominant theme among most of these participants because they had the ability to join a specific community that in many cases was not readily available to them outside of the blogosphere. Some of these mothers had needs that their real life community was not providing them but were able to find gratification within the virtual community. Participant 3 said, “ Finding a mom close to me who has an autistic child is tough but on the Internet finding mothers like me is really not hard.”

When looking back at Armstrong & Hagel’s (1996) study on online communities, the two of the four communities that were most coveted by the participants were the community of relationship and the community of interest. Participant 5 explained, “I don’t have a mom network. I have not been able to create that in my actual real life.”

Most of the participants explained that because they do not have a motherhood community in their real life they would experience feelings of loneliness and isolation. They referred to mommy blogs as offsetting some of those emotions. Participant 1 said,

I mean my friends are all single, not married, with no kids ... there is that sense of a bond where I can finally have someone that I can talk to in a way that I can't with my friends.

Supplementing communication and friendship online with what was not available in the real world was seen as extremely positive. Communication through mommy blogs adds to the social life of a mother and does not take anything away from it. Participant 11 expressed, "When I don't feel like I can talk to anyone in my real life about my struggles, I can go to the blog and post, and get immediate feedback to help me relax."

This group of mothers needed relationships that were not being gratified in their real life. If given the choice, they unanimously said that they would rather be able to create these relationships in their real life, but they realize that with their specific needs that creating those relationships is not always a possibility. Through media choices mommy blogs are the closest to fulfilling that desire for specific relationships. The online community of mommy blogs is seen as beneficial and socially positive. Participant 12 said,

I like mommy blogs because other moms in the Internet community can provide you a pillar of support when you need it or offer you advice that is out of the norm. I've found that I can share more candidly with the moms I know through the Internet than I can with those I know in real life. There is less judgment from them.

Entertainment

To most of these participants entertainment was an escape from real world reminders. Entertainment was a chance for their brain to relax from their duties and obligations. The participants described themselves as overextended individuals often needing a mental break. Being able to read something just because they wanted to and not because they had to was comforting. Reading mommy blogs was often the form of media they chose to gratify this need. Participant 9 said,

At _____ we work really hard. Our workloads are really heavy. It's a very busy day. So for me when I am pumping it is nice outlet to just go on there rather than reading a leadership form (work literature) or something. It gives me a mind break you know?

It was also noted that blogs are there when you need them. Participant 6 said, "I really like to just escape in the humor." The participants reported that there are numerous mommy blogs available for entertainment purposes exactly when they are wanted. It was mentioned many times these participants could not plan their schedules around entertainment and could not predict when they were going to need or be able to have their mental break. Participant 6 explained that it, "Serves as an outlet for those days that being a parent is challenging and exhausting."

Also, due to these mothers being able to relate to the authors of the mommy blogs they choose to read, when it comes to motherhood issues many of them explain them as hilarious, participant 4 noted, "I really want humor. If I'm reading it I want to enjoy reading it." They also said that mommy blogs are, "an opportunity to think about other things besides work." Said participant 7. Participants expressed this as a need that was

gratified and therefore one of the reasons they continue to read mommy blogs, “I like checking in because of the relevancy to my life,” said participant 12.

Information

Finding information about concerns and issues related to parenting was important to most of the participants. They sought the answers from mothers who have actually been through that same issue or had the same concern. The participants had a wide variety of information they were seeking that all related to motherhood and raising children. The answers to their questions and the validation that they were not alone was the information that gratified this need.

These participants explained that the reason they found mommy blogs or started to follow them is because they were looking for an answer to a specific question. Some of the information needed was of great importance to the mothers such as health issues.

Participant 1 clarified,

I use blogs as a starting point for other information, so, for example, now we’re looking for childcare for my son. So I don’t necessarily expect this one person to have all the answers on the blog, but, you know, if she can say go to these five resources like childcare.org or all these different sites, it compiles it all for me.

It was clarified that the mommy blogs are a great place to start exploratory information such as, should I go to the doctor, what questions do I ask, should I get help for this, and where do I go for help? Other information is more trivial. Participant 8 described,

For me it’s inquiries about everything. Just last weekend we had a 1st birthday party and I have no idea how to throw a 1st birthday party. So it’s helpful to see other people who are blogging or posting. What should I do? What should I

avoid? What am I not thinking of? Also hearing about things you didn't even know existed, like baby consignment sale for clothing. I found out just before my son was born and I was like this is the best thing ever, why didn't anyone ever tell me about this?

There is a lot of trust among the mommy blog community, participant 7 shared, "(Mommy blogs are) more real and authentic. Other sources often give you the fluff and medical language. Mom blogs share the truth and their experiences straight up." The readers respect this aspect of mommy blogs and explained that if they ever feel that their trust is violated they get very irritated because their specific need cannot be met. It was specified that not all mommy blogs are created equally and that common sense is needed to know what seems reliable and what does not. On the factor of trust, advertising was brought up. The participants had no problem with mothers being profitable from blogs, but wanted the ads to stay on the sidebars. They did not want to read a review just because the blog author received a free product.

Another reason information was such a strong theme was because they needed, "for someone to compile all the information I don't have time to get myself. I'm interested to see if there are other avenues that I haven't realized that were there," shared participant 12. Since other mothers had already gone through or researched the needed information and were able to share it with many people, the participants thought it was a great resource.

Ability to Relate

It was important for most of the participants to know that they were not alone and that their feelings were normal; someone who could relate to their specific journey in

mothering or just someone to validate that they were a normal mother. Participant 3 said, “ I was at the grocery store with my kids and my son just lost it. So I lost it too. Feeling really embarrassed about what happened I got on the blogs and found out moms lose it from time to time.”

It is not always attainable to find someone relatable in mothering situations. In this niche blogosphere category there is usually a blog relatable to everyone’s needs.

Participant 2 said,

You check out and you kind of date those blogs for a little bit and you follow them for a couple weeks, then you decide if they are relatable or if you like their writing style. I think there are a lot of personalities out there.

When this need is met, it brings great relief to mommy blog readers. Participant 5 explained “Mommy blogs are written by other moms, sometimes in the exact same situation I am in. That keeps them interesting, and applicable to my life.” Most of the participants agreed with that statement. Participant 6 said, “It is nice to have assistance with issues I may have and that I can relate to.”

“It (mommy blogs) makes me yearn for more mommy friends in real life,” said Participant 9. Since that is not their reality, they create this relationship online. Many of the participants thought it was nice to relate to another mother who had children the same age and were going through similar stages in their children’s lives. Participant 11 explained,

The two that I follow more closely, the two women had babies. One was a week before I had my little girl and the other one had her son about a month before I had my daughter. So just checking in to see where their daughter is at in regards to my daughter. Tracking progression and also relating, that relate-ability to what they’re going through is similar to what I’m going through.

Other participants liked being able to relate to hobbies and other interests of mothers. “Seeing that she’s (mommy blog author) vacationed where I’ve vacationed, it’s something we have in common,” said participant 10.

They also explained that when reading a parenting article or book there is no place to post a question or comment and consequently there is no place to get an answer. “It is very nice to be able to find someone to identify with in parenting,” said participant 8 about what she explained was the hardest and most significant job they will ever have.

The participants said that if they could not relate to the blog they would not read the blog. When searching for the right mommy blog, many asked themselves, “Can I get something out of it?”

Amid these participants, this need was very prominent. Mommy blog readers are looking for specific needs to be gratified. Their motivation for going to these blogs often times are because they can find someone out there they can relate to. Participant 3 enlightened, “I’m looking for blogs written by other moms whose children have PDD-NOS (a mild form of autism).” She expressed that she could read all the medical information she wanted, but when it came to what type of challenges she would face and what she could do to make her child’s life easier, mommy blogs were the only thing that satisfied those needs because she could not find anyone else who could truly relate in her non-virtual world.

Inspiration and Motivation

By reading mommy blogs some of the participants got the desire or inclination to do something that they currently were not doing. Simply by reading their mommy blogs

of choice (their entries on daily activities, undertaking projects, or views and thoughts) the participants could be inspired and/or motivated. Participant 11 mentioned, “ I was not sure I was ready to balance my career and motherhood, looking at some mommy blogs I saw that people were making it work, I needed that encouragement.”

Many of the participants said that through mommy blogs they were able to become the parent they wanted to be or at least begin to strive for it. “Some blogs I read to get motivation to tackle more in my day-to-day life.” These mothers said that if other mothers can accomplish things that they have desired to do, they could do it too and that blogs give them, “some things to think about as I raise my family.” The participants defended mothering as a difficult job and that it was nice to get that extra motivation, “blogs are my main source of connection, validation, and learning.”

Some of the participants also revealed that just because they are mothers it does not mean that they lose their identity and it is okay to still have other interests and hobbies of their own. Participant 7 described,

Most of them have some element of human interest ... emotion or universal truth that I can relate to, and it gets me thinking about my style of parenting and/or the way I'm conducting my life. Essentially, mommy blogs are a fun way to connect with other moms out there; yet, the ones I follow regularly are good food for my head.

It was stated by the participants that many of them were scared to take certain actions and found the motivation through a mommy blog. Participant 3 shared with the group that, “It was through interaction with a mommy blog that I decided to have my son tested for his delays.” Participant 4 expressed that she always had a desire to travel, but thought it was a rare possibility with children.

An aspirational one that I look at all the time is a traveling one. Because I would love to travel and I would love to someday be able to have more of a career that travels more, so I like to follow those blogs to see how they do it. You know my little guy just turned a year old...it's great to read blogs from all the other people out there who manage to work and live abroad and still have young children, so that's more of an idea generator, aspirational blog.

Sometimes the participants found motivation and inspiration as a gratification that they didn't even know they needed, but stumbled upon, leading some to stand up for themselves. Participant 6 shared,

I started doing research online and then I'm finding blogs from parents with kids who have acid reflux. And they're like here are the questions you need to ask, here is what you need to do, here's how you find the right doctor. I was following their advice about how to deal with the problem. Then I basically went back to the doctor and put my foot down and said we're doing this; we're trying this medicine.

Getting the motivation and inspiration advocate for themselves and for their children was mentioned multiple times. Participant 1 said,

It was after I went through labor with my daughter and reading (in a mommy blog) about a similar situation about how they had their birthing planned prior to. I just think over all with my labor and delivery, I needed to be a bigger advocate for myself and so reading her experience and how she advocated for herself more, I wish I would have. Just knowing in the future that it's ok to push back on the doctors and that they aren't the decision makers.

Also many times these mothers just needed to know that there was someone out there who has been through it, has done it, and has overcome it. Many mentioned that when it seems too tough or too scary seeing someone else who has made it though is all the inspiration and motivation they need. Participant 5 expounded,

It has helped give me much needed perspective and support during times of need. My family has faced some big obstacles the past three years and I found that there were other young moms who were going through the same thing.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

As noted earlier, mommy blogs are growing in the blogosphere. Their presence is noticeable and therefore worth studying as a niche category. This study was designed to understand why mothers read mommy blogs and what the uses and gratifications are for these participants. The uses and gratifications theory created the lens in which to examine the data. The categories that emerged during the data analysis through Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method were (1) convenience, (2) community, (3) entertainment, (4) information, (5) ability to relate, and (6) inspiration/motivation. The results had similarities to past research on blogs. However, mommy blogs are different and serve different purposes than other blogs therefore the results did vary. Also this study cannot be generalized to all mothers who read blogs.

Kaye's (2010) study found the two main factors of why people access mommy blogs, because they are uncomplicated and undemanding. Also in past literature the ability to easily access blogs through mobile devices has been mentioned (Sobel, 2010). This study had the same results. Convenience was an overwhelming theme. Many of the participants said that they had little time for media, but because mommy blogs were convenient and could be accessed anywhere at anytime, they were desirable. These participants needed to be able to gratify their needs conveniently. Many said that if they

were not convenient then maybe their needs would never be gratified because they would not ever have the time to find information they needed. These women continually brought up all the duties they have throughout the day, e.g. work, meals, cleaning, homework, and the pressure they feel to get them done. They are not the general population and therefore the reason the need convenience is different. Participant 4 explained,

I just don't have a ton of time. I am a full time working mother of two. I have a kindergartner who has homework every night, a 10 month old who is trying his hardest to walk everywhere and is super independent. I have two cats and a dog, and a husband who always is on the backburner. All of those beings want/need a piece of my time in the few hours we have each evening. I get home from work and have 1.5 hours to spend with my children before they need to be tucked in bed. That time is off limits for anyone but my family. After they're in bed I'm beat, but that's when all the cleaning needs to be done. Then, my husband and I may have a few minutes alone together before one or both of us crash. It's an exhausting balance, but one I wouldn't trade for the world.

As mentioned earlier by Armstrong and Hagel (1996) there is a strong need for community online. The communities that stood out the most in mommy blogs were the community of relationship and the community of interest. According to these mothers, they can be anywhere, even in a bathrobe, while using mommy blogs. This is in line with Williams et al. (1994) who state that the limitations of creating a motherhood community in real life are supplemented by creating an online community through mommy blogs.

Kraut et al. (1998) found that increased Internet use contributed to reduced communication in the home, smaller social circles, and a greater sense of depression and loneliness. This was not true among this group of mommy blog readers. In fact many of them expressed that they already felt some of those emotions and the community of mommy blogs helped them to feel less alone.

The finding differed from both Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire (1984), arguing that online communication lagged behind face-to-face communication, and Walther's (1995) study stating that online communication is rarely impersonal. The results concluded that one was not better than the other, but a way to create a community that did not exist in their real lives. The participants made clear that simply some form of community is better than no form of community. Participant 3 said, "There is that sense of bond where I can finally have someone to talk to in a way that I can't with my friends."

Ferguson and Perse (2000) brought about the idea that blogs could be used much in the same way television is used for entertainment purposes. The participants expressed that they liked the humor in mommy blogs and found it a great form of entertainment. They also expressed that while at work or with their children, being able to quietly access and read the blogs was very important. The fact that they did not have to add anything else to their briefcase or diaper bag such as a book or magazine was another reason they liked mommy blogs as a form of entertainment. "I do everything on my smartphone anyways, using mommy blogs is just another thing I am able to do on it," participant 1 said.

Like much of past literature one of the main reasons for using blogs was to gain information. The first reason most of the participants went to mommy blogs was to gain information that they were having trouble finding in other, more traditional places. They were having a trouble, a concern, or were just curious about information regarding motherhood and parenting. When these issues arose, the participants' needs were most frequently met by accessing mommy blogs. They also explained that getting information

from someone who has been in their shoes was comforting. Trust and understanding were two of the main reasons these participants accessed mommy blogs for information.

Ability to relate was a theme that has not received attention in past blog research. These participants sought out mommy bloggers they could relate to and shared something in common. They were able to relate to the blogger, which was a main factor in reading the blogs. There was a wide range of things in which the participants were able to relate to, from the age or number of children to health and developmental issues. The ability to relate cannot just stop at mommy blogs. Like Walther (1992) mentioned in his study, people are eager for gratifying, personal, and involved relationships. Among the focus groups, it was key that the readers had to be able to relate to the blog author before any relationship could form. If the participants had nothing to relate to with the blogger, they would merely not read the blog. “I twiddled through the ones (mommy blogs) that had something to do with me.”

There are blogs that post inspirational quotes, poems, and sayings with a goal of helping readers see the glass as half full. With mommy blogs, inspiration and motivation was not always intentional. The inspiration and motivation theme did not get much recognition as being a need or a gratification in past research. However, this theme was significant within the focus groups. These mothers did not begin going to blogs to seek out inspiration/motivation, but in many cases respondents discussed finding it in one form or another as an unanticipated benefit. The participants expressed that many times they felt they were characterized by what they were and not who they were. That being a mother and all that it entails was all they could be. By looking at other mothers like them,

it was conveyed by the majority of the participants that it was like looking at a mirror and seeing who they were and their potential. That if they were unhappy, scared, or frustrated in their situation, they could look to other mothers in similar situations being happy, daring, and fulfilled. These were mothers getting inspiration and motivation through other mothers' blogs about their experiences, struggles, and triumphs, leading many mothers to ask the question if they can do it why can't I? Participant 2 said,

A blogger that I follow very closely read a book called *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*. It's basically about how to live a better story. She kept posting about it and it struck conversation between my husband and me about how do we live a better life with our family? What memories do we have? It's taking trips, it's having game night, it's not sitting around watching TV. It made us realize what is important to us.

Other characteristics concerning the inspiration/motivation theme were discussed.

For every participant it was not just about becoming a better me, but also about more serious issues. It often times involved the motivation to face the truth and proceeded with the inspiration to deal with the truth. Whether that involved a diagnosis from a doctor or unwanted information from someone close, many found comfort in knowing someone else has been through a similar situation and has overcome it, which in turn gave them the motivation and inspiration to do the same.

Many times these mothers went to blogs because they were convenient, entertaining, and had specific information. However, upon going there, they often found unexpected gratifications such as inspiration/motivation. This was an unanticipated gratification that none of the participants sought out but many ended up receiving as an extra benefit.

It is important to note that all of the six themes were needs that were gratified. The most prominent way the mommy blogs were used was in a supplemental fashion. When these mothers were not able to fulfill their needs from their community or other media they often looked to mommy blogs to help fill that gap. The only time that the use became substitute and not supplemental was in very specific situations i.e. the mother trying to figure out how to raise an autistic child. These findings support the uses and gratifications theory, that the audience is able to find and use media that best helps them gratify their needs.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Many of the themes that emerged are dependent on one another and are virtually causal in nature. Mommy blogs are accessed because they are conveniently obtained. Since they are so easy to indulge, it is a preferred way to get needed information. This is done because the readers trust the information of the blog author they relate to. Because it is relatable, a sense of community is formed. When a sense of community is instilled motivation and inspiration can come from other mothers like them. All of these needs are met through an entertaining format and simply gratified at a one-stop shop.

These participants are educated and computer savvy women with very little time to spare. They understand what a mommy blog can and cannot provide and therefore understand when and when not to access them. What they are able to gratify through mommy blogs actually guides their needs. These goal-oriented participants also realize that specific needs that relate to a niche blogosphere group can only be satisfied through a mommy blog and do not go elsewhere to satisfy the need.

Various participants discussed that they would miss mommy blogs if they were no longer around and suggested that if mothers do not currently read them, they should. The prevailing attitude of the participants was that their needs were successfully fulfilled through mommy blogs, not other media.

This study does have its limitations. There are obvious biases due to the participant requirements. The criteria brings along its own set of biases because it is already known that users of blogs have a higher education and income level (Sobel, 2010). The location brings along biases related to the Midwest and suburbs. That is why it is important not to generalize this study.

By qualitatively researching the readers of mommy blogs it has given new awareness to this niche blogosphere group. The themes that emerged through the uses and gratifications theory were insightful and will add to the literature on blogs and most importantly begin the academic literature on mommy blogs. Though this study is a good start, it will always continue to require further research.

CHAPTER VII

FUTURE RESEARCH

The two themes that have not gotten much attention in past research with the uses and gratifications theory were the ability to relate and inspiration/motivation. Because these themes are adolescent within this theory further research is required. Could these themes occur with other types of blog readers, such as political? Do political blogs or any other types of blogs produce inspiration/motivation or the ability to relate amongst its readers?

Also, when looking at mommy blogs in the future, working and stay-at-home mothers should be separated for research. When discussing the theme of ability to relate to the blog author, both working and stay-at-home mothers agreed to its importance; however, what they related to was very different.

Even though many of the themes that emerged from this study were similar to those in other research, it was interesting to discover not just that they emerged, but why they emerged. There are different reasons to why the theme of convenience, community, information, and entertainment surfaced in mommy blogs when comparing them to other types of blogs.

Researchers should also look at this study through a feminist theory and view the data through a different perspective. This would bring insight to this study because the themes that emerged brought about the idea of empowerment. These women were limited by their circumstances, but overcame many of those limitations through mommy blogs.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP OUTLINE

Hello, my name is Holiday Samabaly. I am a graduate student in the School of Communication at the University of Akron. I have asked to conduct a focus group with you today because I would like to learn more about you as mothers accessing mommy blogs. Your name will be removed from this study to insure confidentiality. The number that you have been given upon arrival is how you will be identified for the entire study. However, I would like to record you to guarantee accuracy. You have been chosen to participate in this study because you are mothers who read mommy blogs. I appreciate you taking time out of your day to join in this discussion.

- How are you doing today?
- I hope it wasn't an inconvenience getting here?

Topic for Discussion (Keep Conversation Going)

- Blog Authors?
 - ❖ Were you a reader or a writer first?
- Reasons for reading MB
 - ❖ What are your main reasons for reading mommy blogs?
 - ❖ Why do you go back to these blogs?
 - ❖ Do you get mothering information from other sources?

- ❖ What is better or worse about mommy blogs compared to your other media sources?
- Enjoyment from MB
 - ❖ Do you get more or less enjoyment from mommy blogs than other media sources? Please explain?
 - ❖ What are your motivations for reading mommy blogs?
- Accessibility of MB
 - ❖ How do you access mommy blogs?
 - ❖ Where do you access mommy blogs?
- Wants & needs from MB
 - ❖ Do you wish mommy blogs filled other needs that they do not currently? Why?
 - ❖ What are your priorities in wants and needs from mommy blogs? Why?
 - ❖ What do you think about mommy blogs that advertise and make money? Why?
- Gratification from MB
 - ❖ What wants and needs are satisfied?
 - ❖ How are they completely satisfied?
- Importance of MB
 - ❖ How has reading mommy blogs made an impact in your life?
 - ❖ If mommy blogs were gone tomorrow would you miss them and why?
 - ❖ Please explain if mommy blogs have been involved in your decision making for life changing events?
 - ❖ Have you been prompted to action on issues concerning your children due to mommy blogs? If so what have those actions been concerning?
 - ❖ If you could give advice to a fellow mother about mommy blogs what would it be? Why is that advice important?
- Access to MB meanings to mothers
 - ❖ Why is it important to be able to conveniently access mommy blogs?
 - ❖ Could they be more convenient and why?
- Empowerment from MB

- ❖ Does reading mommy blogs empower you as a mother in any way? If so how?
- ❖ Do you think mommy blogs could be used as a tool for further empowerment? How and why?

Closing

- Is there something that I should have asked? Is there something that you would like to share?

Probe Questions (will be used as needed throughout the conduction of the focus group to get more information)

- Would you give me an example?
- Can you elaborate on that idea?
- Would you explain that further?
- I'm not sure I understand what you're saying.

Thank you very much for participating in this focus group!

APPENDIX B

SURVEY OF DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Age: _____

Race: _____

Level of Education: _____

Occupation: _____

Household Income Class: lower lower-middle middle middle-upper upper

Number and age of Children: _____

At what frequency do you access mommy blogs? _____

APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP CONSENT

Mommy Blogs: Uses and Gratifications from a Niche Blogosphere Group

Principal Investigator: Holiday Samabaly

Contact information: [REDACTED]

You have been invited to take part in this study, Mommy Blogs: Uses and Gratifications from a Niche Blogosphere Group, which will be utilizing focus group interviewing of adult women who read mommy blogs on a weekly basis. Interviews may be conducted in groups and will last approximately 2 hours. The purpose of the study is to examine why mothers read and use mommy blogs to gratify their needs. Your involvement is completely voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable, and you may withdraw your participation at any time.

Focus group interviews will be audiotaped using assigned ID numbers instead of names. Participants' names and identifying information will not be used in any report resulting from this study. Unauthorized persons will not have access to the taps or records from interviews. All data will be processed by the principal investigator, and destroyed after a period of 2 years. Analysis will be shared with the thesis advisor and committee members.

There are no perceived risks or discomfort associated with your participation. There is no tangible reward offered in association with your participation in this study. However, your time and effort in contributing to the study are greatly appreciated and will contribute to a greater understanding of the topic.

Questions or comments regarding your rights as a research participant can be directed to the Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs, The University of Akron, Akron, OH 44325-2102, (330-972-7666).

I agree to participate in this focus group setting and to be audio recorded.

Signature: _____
Participant Date

I have explained in detail the research proceedings in which the above participant has consented to:

Signature: _____ Date _____
Principal Investigator