

“Only to you, Internet”: Blogging as a Radical Redefinition of Motherhood

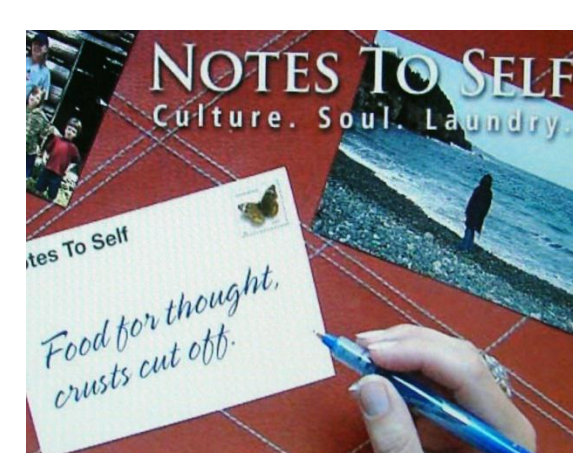
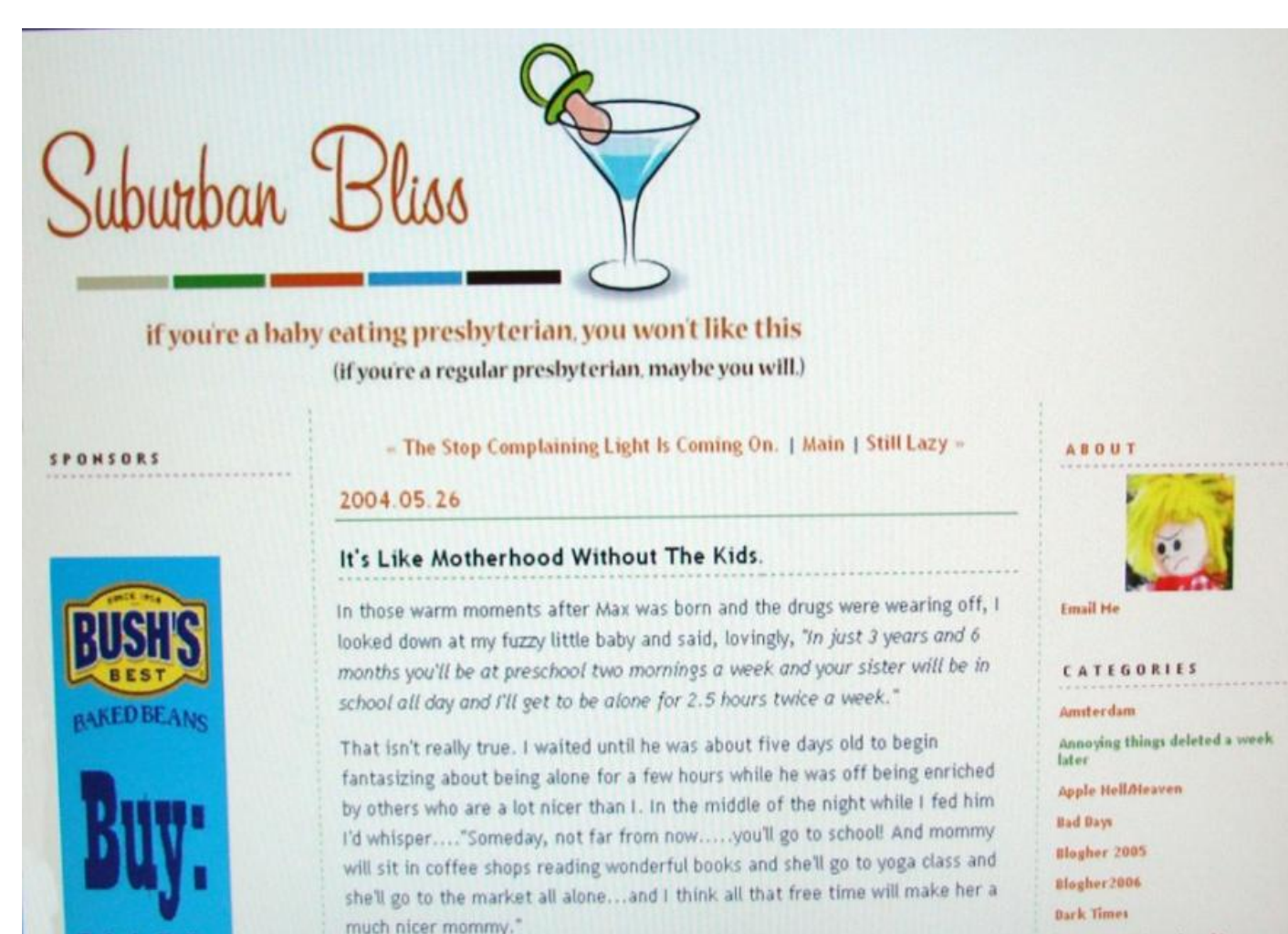
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Abstract

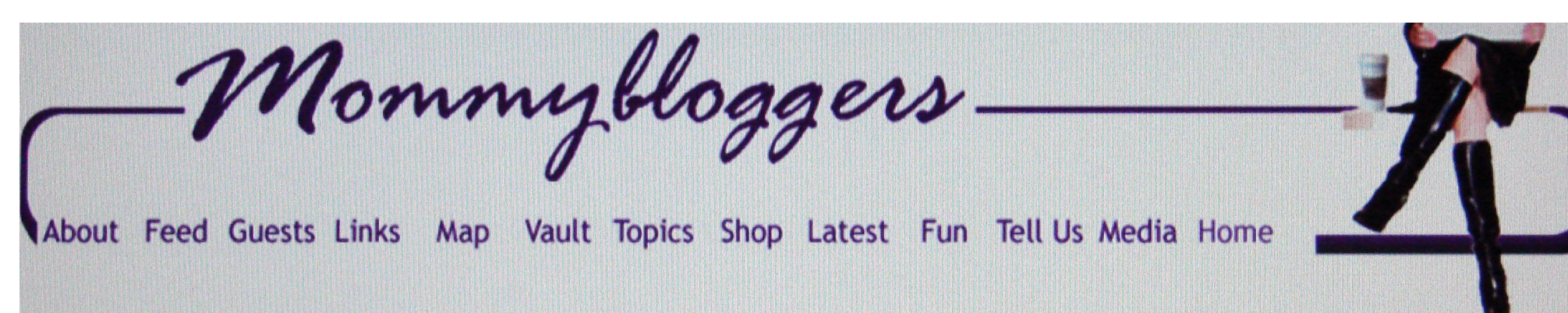
Women writing and reading about mothering in weblogs are contributing to an ongoing process of developing new cultural definitions of motherhood, definitions that are both individual and also political and communal in nature. As women publish these loosely connected, often fragmented narratives of their lives in blogs, they situate their experiences as mothers in an overtly public forum, writing with the intent of reaching readers, and often for specific political purposes. Many bloggers appear to be writing specifically to debunk contemporary mythologies of motherhood and to create alternate individual and community conceptions of maternal identity.

We readers and authors of parenting blogs are looking for a representation of authentic experience that we're not getting elsewhere. We sure as hell aren't getting it from the parenting magazines. If you want to find out how to make nutritious muffins that look like kitty cats, you can read those. But a parenting magazine will never help you feel less alone, less stupid, less ridiculous. This is the service I think parenting blogs provide—we share our lopsided, slightly hysterical, often exaggerated but more or less authentic experiences. If one blogger writes about, say, her bad behavior at the doctor's office, then maybe at some point, some freaked-out new mother is going to read that and feel a little better—less stupid, less ridiculous—about her own breakdown at the pediatrician's.

—Alice Bradley, author of *Finslippy*



builds on previous ones to create over time a portrait of the author akin to that presented in the traditional literary genre of the memoir. The act of reading one mother's life can create a bond, allowing the reader to understand the cultural role of mothers, the individual author's understanding of how those roles manifest themselves in her own life, and the reader's own relationship with these roles, the common elements of their lives as mothers.



Creating Community

Shared cultural identity builds slowly in traditional print genres, as a book may take a year or more to appear in print, and then reader and writer often have no interaction outside the act of reading itself. On the internet, however, weblogs allow for an immediate experience of community, unlike their paper counterparts, most especially in the ways they can serve as a foundational element for community formation, and consequently, for the formation of a community identity, a shared identification of the author with readers. Unlike diaries or journals, which generally are private or read by a limited number of known or approved readers, or memoirs and autobiographies, which typically are written to be shared in print form with a wider audience, blogs are published online for any reader with both internet access and the desire to seek out such writings.

And a blogger need not have any particular technical expertise to publish her ideas about motherhood—many blogging programs exist that allow a writer to create and maintain a blog as quickly and easily as one might send an email, with no complex technical apparatus necessary. The phenomenon of publishing one's personal musing or details of one's private life online is an interesting one, deeply immersed in the assumption that the writer seeks an audience—otherwise why publish one's work on the internet? In publishing a blog, then, most writers seek to expand their audiences, and many writers employ specific features of blogging software and conventions of blog readerships to seek out readers and indeed, to involve them in growing communities of women writing online about motherhood. Specifically, the inclusion of reader comments and blog rolls—listings of blogs the author reads regularly and recommends—facilitate the construction of communities of women writing about motherhood in ways that print memoirs cannot reproduce.

Conclusions

In "The Secret Life of Mothers: Maternal Narrative, Momoirs, and the Rise of the Blog," Andrea Buchanan (2004) explains that blogs represent a "proliferation of shared experience," "a powerful way to unite women who might not otherwise feel as though they had anything in common"; women writing motherhood in this new genre as "are real mothers struggling to create a narrative out of the often disjointed, complex, and simultaneously occurring events of their lives." While many of the thousands of women blogging their lives—as women and mothers—may not initially see the act of writing as a political one, nevertheless as their words join the multiple voices of the communities of women writing motherhood, they add their distinctive and original perspectives to a new understanding of the many roles of mothers.

For those women who become fully immersed in the weblog communities of mothers—those who post over a period of years, who read and comment on each other's blogs, and especially the very visible few who achieve national prominence through media coverage and attendance at BlogHer—the redefinition of motherhood becomes much more conscious, an overt recognition of Alice Bradley's declaration that writing about motherhood is a "radical act." The richness of this multi-voiced community continually creates new representations of motherhood, a depiction that reflects the vexed nature of mothering, how it is simultaneously funny and fearful, lonely and redemptive, mind-numbingly repetitive and unimaginably enriching. As this community continues to grow and thrive, so can we expect our understanding of motherhood to evolve, allowing mothers an unprecedented voice in our literature and history.

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Blogging Motherhood

With their episodic nature, regular dated entries, sometimes brief and other times longer, blogs resemble their paper and print cousins, the diary or the journal, and to a lesser extent, the memoir or autobiography. It may be argued that blogs share essential characteristics with each of these, and indeed the blog serves the same primary function of these more traditional genres, allowing the author the opportunity to define an individual identity, literally to write a self into being. While that creation of identity is often more fragmented, less unified than more traditional autobiographical genres, each entry posted