

Pregnancy in the Blogosphere: an exploratory study of authorship in online pregnancy and parenting communities

by

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Research Methods.....	3
Reflexivity and Methodological Concerns.....	4
Theoretical Framework.....	8
1. Reasons for Participating.....	11
Social Support and Community.....	11
Knowledge Sharing and Production.....	13
Documentation.....	15
Blogging for Therapy or Personal Growth.....	15
2. The Enculturation of Peripheral Members: learning the practice of pregnancy and mommyblogging.....	17
Learning the Language.....	18
Learning the Rules of Interaction.....	19
How Newbies Become ‘A-Listers’: from the periphery to the core.....	21
3. Structural Challenges to Full Participation.....	25
Table 3.a. [Website Profile and Registration Features].....	26
Babymed.com.....	27
Babycenter.com.....	29
Storknet.com.....	31
Blogger.com.....	34
4. The Transformative Nature of Blogging: meaning and identity as a mommyblogger.....	36
Transformation through Shared Experience.....	36
Self-Identity and Reflection through the Writing Process.....	38

The ‘Dark Side’ of Mommyblogging.....	39
5. Conclusion.....	41
Works Cited.....	44
Appendix A [Glossary of Terms].....	47

## Pregnancy in the Blogosphere: an exploratory study of authorship in online pregnancy and parenting communities

Emily Kippels

**Abstract.** This study explores communities of pregnant women and mothers in online social networking sites. It addresses why women write about their pregnancy and motherhood experiences online, how website structure moderates that experience, and how participating in these communities influences the way women experience pregnancy and motherhood. Research for this paper was conducted from October 2009 to April 2010, based off of recorded observations from forums, online journals, and blogs of four popular pregnancy and parenting websites: babymed.com, babycenter.com, storknet.com, and blogger.com. Findings are analyzed using Wenger's concept of *communities of practice*, which asserts that individuals become members of informal learning communities through active participation and knowledge contribution. This study finds that women join online communities seeking pregnancy and parenting information from experienced women, social support and acceptance, and therapeutic release. They report that blogging overcomes feelings of isolation, and provides an opportunity for reflection through the process of writing. Some women acknowledged the costs of blogging, including too much time spent away from children and separation from the real world. Free websites with simple registration processes, more options for personalization, and more support for new members while they learn new online vocabulary and language serve to encourage new member participation. In light of other studies, these findings suggest that some websites may be emotionally beneficial to pregnant women and mothers, especially those experiencing complicated or stressful pregnancies and could perhaps increase positive birth experiences and health outcomes of both mother and baby.

### Introduction

Until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, pregnancy and birth in the United States were firmly located in the female realm of knowledge and responsibility. An expectant mother was routinely accompanied and cared for by female friends and relatives while she gave birth in the home, and knowledge sharing between women was essential for safe delivery. Eventually, this experience was displaced by a male dominated one, where pregnancy and birth were viewed as dangerous and in need of medical intervention; birth moved away from the home (and other women) and into the hospital. Today, modern technology provides women with alternative birthing options, allowing them a more active role in shaping their own childbirth experiences.

In the summer of 2009 I found myself staring at pictures, mouth agape, of the crowning and delivery of my boyfriend's sister-in-law's second child. She chose to deliver out of the hospital, without any pain medication, and to document her experience with a black and white disposable camera. Coming from a very medicalized and private understanding of pregnancy and childbirth, viewing these graphic pictures and hearing about her experience highlighted for me our very different social contexts. It also raised a lot of questions regarding what I wanted my own pregnancy and birthing experience to be like. I was interested academically in how women speak about their own diverse experiences, and what communicative platforms might be available for this type of talk.

I began my research by searching for women's stories about their own pregnancies and births, which in an increasingly technology-dependent society, brought me straight to the internet. What I found surprised me: thousands of women sharing their pregnancy experiences online through personal blogs, pregnancy forums, and online journals on larger host websites. While my original focus was on how women described their birthing experiences in terms of pain, the more I read, the more I realized that these discussions were situated within a broader social phenomenon that merited recognition and closer examination. I was not originally looking for online communities of practice, but when I encountered them they transformed my research approach and the questions that I sought to answer:

*Why do women use blogs and online journals to write about their experiences of pregnancy and motherhood? How do these communicative platforms influence feelings of connection with other women? To what extent does the structure of websites/blogs/forums influence how women can talk about their experiences? How does the act of blogging influence the way women experience pregnancy and motherhood?*

## Research Methods

This paper is based on internet research and observations conducted from October of 2009 through April of 2010, including three major commercial pregnancy and parenting sites as well as the interconnected independent personal weblogs and forum discussions of a community of women. I chose to research babycenter.com, babymed.com (formerly babydata.com), and storknet.com because they were outlined by contributor Janet Clum in *Women's Health on the Internet* as three of some of the “most useful” commercial pregnancy and parenting resource websites available (102). Because the internet is vast and the online resources available to expectant mothers can be overwhelming and difficult to navigate, choosing which website to join is likely a difficult decision. Given the popularity of these websites and the ease of comparison provided by their similarity in format, I decided to research their structures and the communities that use them. I chose these sites specifically because they each feature a collection of women's personal online journals and community forums, all similarly formatted, and focused on women's experiences of pregnancy and motherhood.

Women who want to participate in these forums and journals must register with the host website and are provided with a profile template which they then may personalize to varying degrees. Because these websites also contain information on health and wellness with regard to pregnancy and birth, women seeking this information are more likely to encounter these websites than others, which also made them a relevant choice for analysis. Although it was not featured in *Women's Health on the Internet*, I also included Blogger.com because it is a popular site that connects independent bloggers who have previously established blogs, through their participation in shared pregnancy and parenting community groups and forums. As this website

is an intermediary between completely independent blogs and those provided through a parenting and pregnancy website, it allows for a comparison of how structure affects community.

I recorded the structure and spatial layout of each site, taking note of the registration process for new members, user accessibility, and options available for members to customize their profile and experiences. I also researched information that the websites provide about themselves, such as ‘about us’ sections, marketing or advertising information, mission statements, website contributors/founders/CEOs/Presidents, disclaimers, user agreements, codes of conduct, and resources available to new members. I took special care in documenting the process of how to become a contributor or journalist under each website, as well as information concerning how each addresses and describes their particular ‘community.’

Finally, I followed women’s voices in their journals, blogs, community forums, and comments in an effort to reveal how women’s lived experiences of pregnancy and motherhood are shaped through their particular communicative platforms and their relationships with other women in online communities.

### Reflexivity and Methodological Concerns

Seemingly cold and impersonal technological advances have the capacity to perpetuate relationships, create new ones, and to build feelings of community. I grew up in the age of technology and have become accustomed to the conveniences of the internet, frequently using it as an information resource, but also for maintaining and creating relationships through the recent explosion of social networking sites. I have also authored a blog about my travels abroad, and understand what it is like to be writing for an expectant group of blog ‘followers.’ I understand the desire to write something important and meaningful, and have felt the intimacy that bridges long physical distances through others’ responses to my words. I have felt the anxiety that comes

with not writing as frequently when life gets in the way; the guilt of not communicating with my loyal following. It is this experience that I share with the women whom I am writing about.

On the other hand, although I have been involved in the experiences of close family and friends, I cannot speak personally of pregnancy, childbirth, or motherhood. I am confident that no amount of reading or research could translate to the embodied experience of pregnancy, and that all subjective experiences are also certainly distinct between women. What I consider to be important findings as a white, middle-class, twenty-three year old anthropology student are bound to be different than what the women who are the focus of my study do. Moreover, although I will try to represent the emic perspective as much as possible through women's own words, my own interpretation of those words as well as how I choose to categorize them will necessarily, through their own diversity, require taking some liberties in writing.

I am also a woman and through my coursework in anthropology have developed a sensitivity to the ways my voice and experience have been underrepresented. Technology in general is a gendered realm, typically associated with white men, and the internet is no exception. My own analyses of the boundaries of these internet sites in terms of exclusivity/inclusivity may not be felt or agreed upon by the women who use them, but I will attempt to incorporate these views throughout my paper.

As I have not participated in the online communities that I am studying, my researcher roll as a complete and unobtrusive observer allows me a wider spectrum of creative interpretation. This position of observation has both its strengths and weaknesses. Adler & Adler write of the advantages of direct observation:

Instead of working with predetermined categories, observers construct theories that generate categories and posit the linkages among them. At any point in the process, observers are free to alter the problems and questions they are pursuing as they gain greater knowledge of their subjects. Compared with more structured methods, then,



observation has the flexibility to yield insight into new realities or new ways of looking at old realities (89).

Furthermore, because direct unobtrusive observation can be conducted inconspicuously, the performative aspect inherent in traditional interactive research methods is greatly reduced.

However, internet research becomes more complicated because bloggers often write for an audience of dynamic followers who may negatively judge or alternately praise their experiences and reflections.

A disadvantage of unobtrusive observation is that I cannot ask participants to provide their own analysis or clarification of their own words. While the uniqueness of the internet research experience also allows for the voices of research subjects themselves, their own interpretations would likely be different from my own. My perspective is shaped and challenged by the many women bloggers and journalists whose stories I have followed, however my position as a researcher requires that I choose which voices are represented according to what I believe is significant or representative. It is my duty as an anthropologist to attempt to recognize what experiences are hidden or underrepresented, however my social positionality, insofar as it is impossible to fully escape, will only bring some of these disparities to my attention.

Moreover, it is imperative to note that my findings are not statistically significant and caution should be used in generalizing the findings of this paper to the diverse population of women bloggers. Furthermore, even while controlling for internet access disparities, studies have found that most women who use the internet to seek out health information are of a higher socioeconomic status and are more educated than those who do not (Pandey et al. 185). Because most websites that offer pregnancy journals primarily serve as health information providers, it is not unreasonable to assume that women who blog about their pregnancies are likely to do so from a position of privilege. Insofar as socioeconomic status is still deeply entwined with race, it

is also likely that the experiences of women of color are underrepresented in the online blogging community.

Many of the independent bloggers who I include in my analysis have continued their blogs after pregnancy and delivery, and into the writing community popularly known as ‘mommybloggers.’ In this paper I will not differentiate between ‘pregnancy bloggers’ and ‘mommybloggers’ because pregnancy, insofar as it is experienced as a separate state of being and a rite of passage, is continued up to a few months after birth and into the postpartum period (David-Floyd 41). While the embodied experiences of pregnancy and non-pregnancy are more distinctly felt, the cognitive transformation may not be and will not be a focus of this study.

Lastly, as the internet is simultaneously a public and private space, users require more careful consideration of anonymity. The Association of Internet Researchers state that “authors whose texts/artifacts are intended as public” such as e-mail postings to large listserves, public webpages, weblogs, chat exchanges in public chatrooms or forums, etc. are to be considered at “minimal risk” (Ess 7). However, to protect the identities of women in this paper who may not have intended their writing to be public, I do not identify them by name or username<sup>1</sup>.

This paper is meant to shed light on the ways the structure of community based pregnancy and parenting websites both allow for and restrict the ways women can participate as full members of an online community. It explores why women choose to write about their lives in such a public space, why they continue to do so, and in what ways writing and participating affects their lived experiences. The internet as a public space has been perpetually growing and changing since its inception in the public sphere, and new ways of expression are constantly

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<sup>1</sup> In an effort to create a more polyphonic account of women’s online experiences, I included as many voices as possible and the same woman is seldom quoted twice. For consistency in format and simplicity, I did not use unnecessary pseudonyms.

emerging. While it is not intended to be inclusive or representative of all women bloggers' experiences, this study also examines the possibilities for community that blogs and networking sites uniquely offer to pregnant women and mothers within the public domain of the internet. In this paper, I aim to provide an in-depth analysis of what pregnancy and motherhood blogging has meant for a particular community of actively blogging women reflecting on their pregnancies and motherhoods.

### Theoretical Framework

For online communities of pregnant women, the domain of interest is pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. Women contribute their knowledge and share their expertise through personal narratives and story-telling, asking and answering questions in forums, and responding to each other's posts and inquiries. Although women's *expertise* about their own experiences may not be acknowledged as such, their tacit knowledge is revealed through their participation, and their in-group identity affirmed. Through these interactions with one another they develop a trust and respect that fosters community and allows for an openness not available to outsiders. They develop a special language, and a base of stories and experiences that are shared and maintained through active participation which can be drawn upon in the future. It does take time and practice, however, to learn the rules and language of participation, as each community has its own pattern of socialization.

Wenger defines *communities of practice*<sup>2</sup> as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" such as "a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers

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<sup>2</sup> The three defining components of a community of practice include "a *domain* of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a *community* of people who care about this domain; and the shared *practice* that they are developing to be effective within their domain (Wenger, "a guide", 27).

working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, [or] a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope” (Brief Introduction 1). Such knowledge production has been actively used in informal learning communities since the beginning of human language and story-telling<sup>3</sup>. This theory is useful for examining online pregnancy and parenting websites because it addresses why informal and self-organizing communities gather and how individual and communal identities are (re)produced through participating in them.

Some women in my study are explicitly ranked and marked as community ‘newbies’ or ‘experts’ according to how many times they have participated in forums or answered others’ questions. The process by which one learns to become a member of a community of practice was coined by Wenger as *legitimate peripheral participation*<sup>4</sup>. It asserts that community newcomers, or ‘newbies,’ learn to become full, competent, and contributive members through peripheral participation in smaller, low-risk tasks, such as observation (Learning, Meaning 153). Eventually peripheral participants become familiar with the way the community works, become acquainted with the technology or structure, learn the vocabulary, and participate in a meaningful way to themselves and to the development of the community as ‘expert’ members (Lave). The structure of a website, however, can greatly determine to what extent individuals can acquire the community identity by limiting the access to participation of some members. Some women, for example, are limited through the structural barriers of participation, such as membership fees or required writing samples before they are allowed to become pregnancy ‘journalists’ and share

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<sup>3</sup> Although community of practice theory has typically been used to analyze knowledge management and learning theory within professional contexts, with the increase of internet accessibility many informal learning groups are turning toward online networks as a resource for their potential to increase information sharing and development between individuals (Gray 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Wenger later revises these components to include the concept of legitimate peripheral participation as part of the four dualities within communities of practice: participation-reification, designed-emergent, identification-negotiability and local-global. Because this work is more oriented toward business aspects of knowledge management, I will continue to use the older term for its more general application.

their experiences with the community. Because structure is so important in determining access to legitimate participation and community identity, in this case as pregnant women and mothers, differences between host websites will be elaborated on when appropriate.

In the next pages, I will apply Wenger's theoretical framework of communities of practice to reveal to what extent these online communities are communities of practice, why women participate in online pregnancy and motherhood communities, the process by which women become active community members, how these platforms influence how women experience pregnancy and motherhood, and what structural elements mediate participation in these experiences. Drawing from women's own conversations and explanations, I will divide my findings into the following four sections. Chapter 1, *Reasons for Participating*, addresses the four most commonly cited reasons why women initially chose to join and participate in online communities, as well as why they continue to blog. Chapter 2, *The Enculturation of Peripheral Members: learning the practice of pregnancy and mommyblogging*, investigates the process by which newly registered members become full members of pregnancy and parenting websites. It includes how that process is learned, what elements are involved, and to what degree websites aid new members in their transition. Chapter 3, *Structural Challenges to Participation*, describes the unique registration process of each website and what they communicate about who can become a full member and who cannot. Chapter 4, *The Transformative Nature of Blogging: meaning and identification as a mommyblogger*, addresses how the process of writing a journal or blog changed women's lived experiences, and introduces some of the less mentioned negative aspects of mommyblogging.

## 1. Reasons for Participating

Women typically stated they were motivated to participate in online communities for four main reasons: community and support, documentation, therapeutic value or personal growth, and knowledge sharing and production. While many women's responses overlapped and some were difficult to categorize, these larger themes emerged and were often repeated.

### Social Support and Community

The most often cited reason for joining online communities was for social support and the feeling of community. Online communities allowed women to connect with women in similar situations whom they would otherwise not be in communication with. For some this was more important than others, especially for women experiencing infertility or child loss. The majority of those who cited community as motivation for blogging were independent bloggers whose pregnancy and motherhood blogs often overlapped into all other areas of their lives. Many claim certain camaraderie with women whom they have never met in person because they feel they can divulge very personal experiences to a supportive community of followers. As community takes time to develop, these responses should be read as reasons for *continued* blogging once a community has already been established. The following are typical examples from independent bloggers:

*Three things I love about blogging: the sense of community, the connection with other people, and the chance to tell my stories to a receptive audience.*

*Heck, isn't the whole blog a testament to my love of blogging and especially my love of you, my bloggy peeps? I think it's safe to say, with no amount of hyperbole, that blogging has completely changed my life.*

*It's the friendship, the camaraderie [sic], the commiseration. It's the friends from the real world who came online to play, and the friends from the computer who manifested into real people. It's the laughter we have shared, and the tears. It's the chance to peer into the windows of your life, to sit down and chat over virtual coffee, and to share a part of your world. It's the fact that any time anything happens in my life, from the most momentous to the most painful, from the most embarrassing to the most mundane, I've*

*wanted to share it with you. I've been honored to have been given the chance to share your lives through your own blogs and your comments, but I have been truly gifted with your presence here.*

*My readers can share in my joys and struggles. I have a lot of non-parent readers and they love hearing about my kids' lives. And I've already been nominated as being a surrogate auntie when/if one of my readers ever has a baby. This blogging world is such a funny thing.*

*I was so tired, so frustrated, so overwhelmed by everything, and just sending it out into the blogosphere helped me get it off my chest. Then so many people responded, either with a 'there, there' virtual pat on my shoulder, or a "me too", and I felt so relieved. It was okay to be overwhelmed, and having you all acknowledge it helped me be okay with it too.*

Responses from women from larger host site communities generally differed from those of independent bloggers. For example, many of them claimed to feel the most support from other women's acceptance of their 'silly' questions. They felt community when other women answered their questions, took them seriously, and normalized an otherwise scary or embarrassing private experience. This is likely because larger host websites are also providers of health information, which is why women are drawn to them in the first place. A study conducted in 2004 by Margareta Larsson revealed that as many as 70% of women who sought information about their pregnancies on the internet did not discuss the information they found with their health care providers (17). The following typical responses suggest that this may be due to women feeling too embarrassed to ask health professionals 'silly' questions, and that larger host website communities offer an outlet for these types of questions:

*I decided to join a forum group to help me find answers from women who have been in my shoes. I was pregnant with my twins when I joined and found a lot of moms who were willing to answer all my "silly" questions here.*

*I read through posts and replies and felt like everyone was accepting and genuine and no one seemed to be negative or rude. This helped me open up and feel like I couldn't ask any "stupid" questions regarding my pregnancy or post-partum concerns.*

*I felt like I could come here and ask questions that I would feel too silly to ask my doctor. I would just confirm with the other ladies if things were normal or if they thought I*

*should bother my doctor with it. They helped me maintain my sanity and let me know that I was normal despite what I thought.*

*Knowing that this person is 2 weeks ahead of me, and this one is 3 weeks behind me. Asking them how they are feeling, are they feeling the baby move, are they over their MS, are they having BH [Braxton-Hicks contractions] yet. Knowing they are going through some of the same things you are.*

*If you have a question you need answered, there is almost always someone around, to hand you a bit of info, offer the support.*

On the other hand, women also expressed feelings of separation from the community or talked about negative experiences. Although larger host websites provide a ‘profile’ for each registered member, they may choose an avatar and/or pseudonym to participate anonymously<sup>5</sup>. While anonymous participation has its advantages (less inhibition for asking ‘silly’ questions, more honest answers), many women mentioned the downsides stemming from unaccountability. The following responses illustrate this sentiment:

*It [anonymity] can and has hurt people. You think you know someone for a year or 2 and then it turns out they are not who they say. It does hurt, but there are more good honest people out there than there are trolls. You have to listen to what they say all the time, use your head, ask yourself if everything they are saying makes sense.*

*Why I started Blogging was yout [sic] old me about it and I felt I was boring my friends and felt I was not fitting in with the Boards anymore. (And some of those boards are pretty narsty [sic])*

### Knowledge Sharing and Production

The second most common reason women cited for participating in online communities was for knowledge sharing and production. It is through this process of sharing information that members of a community of practice learn from each other and develop their knowledge for the future on both a personal level and the level of ‘practice,’ in this case, of pregnancy and motherhood. The following examples are typical:

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<sup>5</sup> Independent bloggers are not required to give out identifying information, however most choose to start blogs to write about and share details of their personal lives.



*I love learning about new things (news/products/etc.) and sharing it with others. Blogging is such a great way for me to do so with other moms/parents.*

*I'm not narcissistically writing about myself; I am recording my personal narrative and contributing to a collective, descriptive understanding of contemporary motherhood.*

*We have a ton of ladies, and gentleman, who have lived many different lives. They can offer so many different opinions and points of view, that is what make [sic] a forum like this tick. I can say yes and you say no, but we still respect each other and maybe even learn from each other. After all we all want the same things. To have healthy happy children, families, spouses, and our own lives. What I learn from you today, may help me tomorrow or 10 years down the road.*

*Blogs give you thousands of stories to sift through and apply the details to your own life.*

Responses from independent bloggers and those from the larger host websites did not show many differences, however those women who have experienced both community settings expressed a frustration with bulletin boards, features typical of larger host websites:

*It's like the backyard fence that mothers used to stand around when we were growing up, trading information. Now people trade information on the Web. Or set that information out there in case it helps someone else. When we were going through infertility the first time around, there were only bulletin boards and chat rooms. And as much as I thought that made my journey easier, it's nothing compared to the blogs that I read now. People set all the details of their story out for your perusal. It makes you (1) not feel so alone when you're going through something alienating and (2) gives you information to apply to your own life.*

*I think one reason blogging is so popular with women is that we keep the details of other people's lives in our heads and blogs (unlike frequented bulletin boards)[which] remove that task. All the details are kept and archived in one place. I think women also tend to gather information in order to be their own advocate (at the doctor, at the pediatrician, etc).*

Women who use independent blogs found the organization of them more attractive than forums or chat rooms because all of the information from a single person's similar experience is localized, and therefore easier to draw upon and relate to on a personal level. This is important to women who feel 'alone' or 'alienated' by their experiences with pregnancy and motherhood, who find comfort in other women's *stories*. Because larger host websites have many different conversations going simultaneously, information is more fragmented. Women often expressed

difficulty in finding all of the information they were looking for from a particular experience in a single space, instead receiving a multitude of *answers* to a posed question.

### Documentation

Women also reported a desire to document the details of their lives, essentially using blogging as an online journal. Some mentioned the ease of typing instead of handwriting, and the ability to supplement entries with digital images. Several women from the larger host websites mentioned initially using blogging for more practical reasons, as a means to monitor their fertility or pregnancy progress, taking advantage of the fertility monitor applications and ‘tickers’ supplied by these sites. The following reactions were commonly expressed:

*At first it [joining] was for the ticker, I had never been into forums. But I had a few questions and decided to stick around and ask them.*

*One thing I know I definitely love about blogging is being able to document the funny moments (and struggles) of my children’s lives. Previous to blogging, I would always catch myself saying, “I need to write that one down”, but never did. Now my blog is the best place to do that.*

### Blogging for Therapy or Personal Growth

Finally, many women also claimed that blogging had a therapeutic value or provided them with opportunities for personal growth and reflection. Writing is often cited as being a private therapeutic exercise, however it is surprising to encounter this sentiment in such a public domain as the internet. It appears that the opportunities offered by the internet to connect with women going through similar experiences acts out in a form of group therapy as well, where the interaction with other women itself is useful. These common viewpoints are stated below:

*Writing is therapeutic. Even if you're only keeping a personal journal, remember that your paper is your friend. You can sometimes write the things you'll never be able to say. You can trust your journal with the things you may not be able to trust your friends with.*

*Blogging has inspired me to push my own limitations, to be brave, to be creative, to have the courage to try new things . . . blogging has given me the opportunity to learn new skills, hone old ones, and take personal risks that I might never have otherwise imagined.*

*Mostly I find blogging to be an outlet, a way to talk my way through some of the ups and downs of life. Being that I struggled with infertility, multiple pregnancy losses, and the death of my first born I find that blogging helps me find the humor in the daily situation with my kids now that I finally have some here! I love the quirky little things they do and I love being able to blog about them and laugh about them.*

*I've always loved to write. I was shy as a child (times have changed!) so it was a great way to express myself. Still is. Some days it's just great therapy....it's like talking to myself but better....so many times I write something (even foolishness) and women will write and say "YES!!! That was my day, too." They get it.*

In summary, both independent bloggers and bloggers from larger host sites are initially attracted to the medium because it easily documents their experiences and allows them to keep track of their lives and pregnancies. They also join pregnancy websites because they seek answers to real-life problems from a community of women who have experienced them. Women continue blogging because they eventually form connections with others within the community and are drawn together over their shared experiences. They find acceptance, support, acknowledgement, and relief in their virtual friendships. They also find blogging to be therapeutic and enjoy the opportunity for self-reflection that is provided by the written word. To reap the benefits of blogging and being a part of an online community, however, women first had to learn how. This process is referred to as legitimate peripheral participation.

## **2. The Enculturation of Peripheral Members: learning the practice of pregnancy and mommyblogging**

Learning how to become a pregnancy or mommy blogger takes time and practice. To begin, one has to be familiar with and have access to computer and internet technology, learn how to navigate the host website, and create an online account to become a community member. Beyond these structural tasks, becoming a full member requires actively participating, mastering and using a new shared vocabulary, and learning how to appropriately interact with other community members. Each host website offers different resources to help new members establish themselves as a part of their community.

Through beginning levels of engagement such as ‘lurking’ or observing, and interacting with core members, new members learn the practice of blogging. As new members ask and answer questions in forums, comment on other women’s blogs and posts, and reflect on their own experiences, they contribute to and redefine the knowledge and experiences shared by their community. A study of informal online communities of practice by Zhang and Storck suggests that over 90% of all members participate peripherally, which they defined as any member that contributed less than an average of about 3 posts over 4 days. Although individually they contribute relatively little, collectively they contribute almost half of the knowledge producing posts in community forums, and therefore play a significant role in online communities of practice (5). Although some members may never contribute more than peripherally, over time many take on more active rolls and become full members or core members who are, by definition, more influential in shaping their online community practices. The following section addresses the main components of peripheral member enculturation in online communities, paying particular attention to how women describe their own experiences. It additionally

identifies the resources that host websites provide for new members to ease their introduction to online journaling and forum participation.

### Learning the Language

One of the first things a new user notices on Babymed.com (a host website community that focuses on women trying to conceive) is the overwhelmingly abundant use of unfamiliar acronyms and abbreviations. Due to the often very technical nature of the infertility experience, Babymed.com provides an obvious link on the top of their ‘community’ page to an alphabetized list of the most commonly used ‘pregnancy acronyms and abbreviations’ that is hundreds of words long. Storknet.com and Babycenter.com also offer shorter lists in their help sections. These acronyms are used throughout independent blogs as well, and questions about their meanings are common, however because Blogger.com serves more than the pregnancy community they do not provide a key. The following reactions are typical of women who are newly registered with larger host websites:

*There are so many abbreviations it takes a while to learn them.*

*There is a huge set of abbreviations that I still haven't mastered yet, but I think that everyone here is very welcoming and are never judgemental [sic].*

The next example illustrates common vocabulary use patterns for a learning member. It also shows a common interaction between new members and full members. The user asks technical questions specific to a temperature tracking application provided by the website that can only be answered by more experienced members, displaying how one learns to participate more fully as a community member:

*Hi, I am new to this website, but ttc for about 4 mos. now, but truly [sic] consistently trying for 2. I have been temping on a monitor I purchased, but the chart seems to help to understand it all better. I am still definitely learning. I was late couple days on getting my AF [Aunt Flo (menstrual period)] and was very hopeful, but today it came ;(. After looking at posts on this webpage, it has lifted my spirits and will go full force on the BD*

*['Baby Dancing' (love making)]! I have warned my DH [Dear/Darling Husband] ;0) Sorry for the long post! Questions: I feel like my chart looks up/down/up/ down.....is this normal? Is there a way to merge the cycles into one Fertile chart to see a continuing [sic] graph in between the cycles? Thank you!*

This example also reinforces the importance of a feeling of community and shared experience in influencing the *lived* experience. The new user had just learned that she was not pregnant, but after reading hopeful posts from other women that had 'lifted her spirits,' she again was inspired to try to conceive with her husband.

In addition to specialized vocabulary, new users must learn the shared language of online pregnancy communities. For example, 'TTCers' (women Trying To Conceive) refer to each other as 'cycle sisters' or 'cycle buddies' as a term of endearment when they share menstrual cycle dates. There are also 'hypothyroid sisters' and 'natural buddies' with their own respective niche memberships. The following example illustrates TTC language use by a new member:

*TRICIA-- i got AF[Aunt Flo (menstrual period)] as well... i am on CD1 [Cycle Day 1] today... so we're cycle sistas again! => come on, MEL, join the gang! AF [Aunt Flo (menstrual period)] dust your way! ;)*

It is also both common and expected of members to wish each other 'BFPs' [big fat positives] or magical 'babydust' sometimes abbreviated 'BD' on Trying to Conceive forums. Many members end their posts with a general wishing of 'babydust to all!' in place of 'God Bless' or 'Good luck!' when signing off. Generally, the use of this shared language and vocabulary by members act as visible signs of community belonging and identity. Within online communities, it is not simply knowing the vocabulary itself, but knowing how to apply it that is reflective of community membership; its value comes from its inclusive use.

### Learning The Rules of Interaction

Learning how to appropriately interact with other members as part of an online community also requires adopting a set of social rules through learning the 'online etiquette.' For

someone new to social forums, as many pregnancy and mommy bloggers are, this can be a difficult task. Communicating with others without the aid of body language or voice cues is not always intuitive and if done incorrectly can lead to hard feelings in the blogosphere. To avoid this, most social websites employ moderators to not only tend to technical glitches, but to address unanticipated social disputes as well. In addition to terms of use, most social websites also provide explicit and enforced rules of interaction. For example, Blogger.com offers a page of community guidelines that focuses on tolerance and respect for the diversity of viewpoints that are expressed within their community. Members are encouraged to sign a pledge as a symbol of their commitment to trusting and respecting other BlogHer members and may even display a 'blog with integrity' badge on their personal blog spaces.

Aside from these general rules of interaction, Storknet.com provides a 'Rules of Netiquette' section within their terms of use that are specific to respectful internet interactions. For example, they write that although new members unfamiliar with online forums may want to type in all capitals to get attention or sound important, they insist that writing in all capitals is considered 'shouting'. They remind users that although internet communication seems impersonal, to "never forget that the person reading your post or chat comment is, indeed, a person, with feelings that can be hurt. On the other side of the coin, remember not to post 'flame-bait' [purposefully provocative material]. Be patient, apologize and move forward. Remember, we were all new to the Internet at one time." They recognize that new members only learn the rules of online interaction through participation, and that this takes time.

Members also discussed the unwritten rules of interaction on the internet. Women often expressed rules of common courtesy that one should follow, most often citing the importance of participating by responding to others' posts and questions:

*as for rules....Mainly use what you teach your kids, don't be rude, use your common sense. If it sounds nasty or mean, find a better way to say it. And don't run people in to the ground.*

*I try to use it all, I try to encourage the TTC'ers, answer questions about feeding solids BF[breast feeding] and FF[formula feeding]. If I feel I can answer a question from my life experience's [sic], I will in hopes that it helps someone else.*

*I always read and respond to the new forums each day that I feel like my advice would be beneficial.*

*I am learning more about blogging etiquette each day--which is good considering how a great deal of my posts are about etiquette!. . . On each of my posts, I ask specific questions and I encourage comments in the closing of each post. . . If I have something to say, I'll comment. I won't just say "Great post!" without backing it up with evidence.*

*There are a lot of first timers, [you should] offer help, don't make them feel worse for asking. In the beginning there is some separation, yes, but that only lasts a few posts. Once you jump in your [sic] in! We love it when someone joins, and really starts posting, sharing things, asking advice, taking advantage of all we offer.*

#### How 'Newbies' Become 'A-Listers': from the periphery to the core

As the last woman mentioned, there is a separation between peripheral members and full members, however it 'only lasts a few posts.' New members become full members of the community through asking and answering questions, which also requires the cooperation and participation of others. Larger host websites ease the technical challenges to participation by providing links to active blogs or forums on the community welcome pages of their websites. For instance, the community homepage of Babycenter.com greets users with the words "meet people from our community" accompanied by four member photos and usernames with hyperlinks for immediate access. There is also a "browse members" option that displays recent community activity, such as new members who joined the community, members who have added photos or created new posts, or recent comments on others' posts. Storknet.com also provides active hyperlinks to updated pregnancy journals for immediate access.



Full members are encouraged to interact with newly registered members and vice versa by visibly separating the two populations. For example, through the ‘people’ tab in the community section of Babymed.com, users encounter the day’s 12 ‘top contributors,’ 12 ‘new members,’ and up to 12 members who are currently online and logged into the website. They also display the top 4 ‘popular journal entries,’ so named because they have received the most views and comments from other members. At Babymed.com, users are actually *ranked* in order to “recognize you as the authority that you are,” in which authority is achieved through the act of frequent posting. Depending on the number of posts submitted since registration, ranging from 0 to over 2,000, a member’s level and corresponding status (displayed under their profile picture) is assigned as either Newbie, Advanced, Regular, Pro, Authority, Ace, Star, or Superstar.

Members of larger host websites often had positive initial experiences with their communities, and felt encouraged to participate with more experienced members in spite of their visible separation. The following responses illustrate this common sentiment:

*I read through posts and replies and felt like everyone was accepting and genuine and no one seemed to be negative or rude. This helped me open up and feel like I couldn't ask any "stupid" questions regarding my pregnancy or post-partum concerns.*

*So I found that I really like having someone to talk to and I was able to answer others questions. Why this one, the ladies were so helpful, friendly, supportive. They took me in, answered my questions, allowed me share my options and thoughts.*

Women who created independent blogs and participated in forum discussions on Blogger.com however, often reported having more difficulty interacting with other members. This is likely because member blogs are not as easily accessed being external to the website itself, which primarily supplies links to community groups rather than individuals. One mommyblogger from Blogger.com reflected on her own experience as a new independent blogger:

*Every blogger out there was a “newbie” once . . . pretty much all bloggers start at the same place. Where you have no readers except for a handful of people that you have to force/bribe/promise your firstborn to get them to read your blog. I went months and*

*months with my sister being my only reader . . . All bloggers are not equal, despite what the fairy tale says. You may never get to be one of the A-listers. And to survive and keep blogging you have to be ok with this to some degree.*

To help socialize new members, Blogger.com offers a “how to blog (better)” section to help “develop your blogging skills” within their community section. They also provide links to basic blogging terms and comment etiquette created by experienced core members in their community building section. In this section, one BlogHer member offers her advice on blogging mistakes to avoid in order to socialize/familiarize new members, faster. She likens these mistakes to “rights [sic] of passage” that new members experience before becoming “seasoned” bloggers. Even after following these guidelines, however, very few independent bloggers actually become ‘A-listers’ which requires creating and maintaining a strong and loyal community.

Perhaps the internet’s most well known blogger is Heather Armstrong of Dooce.com, a full-time mommy, pregnancy blogger, and 2008 Lifetime Achievement Award winner. Her recent book about her natural birth experience, ‘It Sucked and Then I Cried’, became a New York Times bestseller, and her blog website is unsurpassed in readership, receiving *millions* of views every month from her large and loyal following (“Federated Media”). Armstrong’s level of popularity sets up high expectations for bloggers, the majority of whom will never reach this type of A-list status. In the independent blogging world where readership comments are often users’ only interaction with other members, many women mention the downside to mommyblogging that lies in equating readership size with blogging (and blogger) value. The following blog excerpts discuss the issue of popularity in the independent blogosphere:

*Being new to the world of blogging, I loved that it was a way to meet other people. I loved that it gave me a voice. It was something that I could do as often or as little as I wanted. I quickly found myself wanting more blogs. I could see it being a popularity contest for some. I found myself wondering how to attract people. How to get them to leave comments? Sometimes I still do. But it is what you make it. You get what you give. I*

*think it's a neat community. A whole new way of reaching people. A way of not feeling so alone.*

*This way [blogging] I can write and keep track of what is going on in my life, my kids lives, and in my head and people can read or not as the need be. As you can see by the amount of comments I get not many read my site but that's ok too. It's not a popularity contest for me or a "SEE ME! I'M HERE" type of attention getting.*

*As we climb, fall, & climb again up the Blogger ladder . . . It's a mixture of always wanting to be accepted to the cool kids' lunch table.*

*I love the point you make about everyone wanting to be liked and valued because that's exactly it. It's easy to see one person with 9,000 followers (commenters [sic], what have you) and someone else with 100 and think the first person is better liked. And it's easy to get really down about that if you're not in that camp, but I think if you're doing something fulfilling online (or off) and you can find value in your community, whether it be made up of 2 people or 2 million, you'll find peace with it.*

*This might come off mean but sometimes I'm browsing through a blog with a few hundred or thousand readers and find myself thinking, "What's the big deal? This person's writing is junk!" Sometimes we need to be reminded that quantity [sic]  $\neq$  quality. And hell, there's room for all kinds of interests and people out there.*

In larger host websites, full members and moderators encourage new members to contribute their knowledge and ask questions. Their expertise as pregnant women and mothers that comes from their own unique experiences is valued and reinforced by their interactions with other women. In the vast independent blog world where blog readership ranges from zero to several million, some women may not experience the interactions necessary to reinforce their knowledge or give them confidence in their performance as pregnant women and mothers.

Becoming a full member of the pregnancy and mommyblogging community calls for a mastery of specialized vocabulary, a competency in its application, and perhaps most importantly, participation through reciprocally interacting with other women bloggers. These skills are more easily accessed through participating in larger host websites where resources are more readily available and communication between newly registered members and full or core members are encouraged and structurally organized.

### 3. Structural Challenges to Full Participation

The first step toward becoming a mommyblogger is to join a host website to interact with other women and share your expertise. In addition to internet access limitations previously discussed in the introduction, there are also challenges to full membership and participation posed by the registration process each website requires before allowing individuals access to their online community. The registration process varies greatly between websites. Some websites only require a valid e-mail address and a username to completely register, leaving the amount of personal information viewable by other members up to the discretion of the user. Other websites require complete demographic information, writing samples, and some even require payment for access to full membership. The amount of information required by host websites or the options presented in a drop down menu for non-required information can make some members feel more accepted while others may feel more alienated. In this section I will explore the ways each host website I investigated structurally allows for or alternatively excludes particular experiences and identities.

According to the Quantcast media agency website, [babymed.com](http://babymed.com), [babycenter.com](http://babycenter.com), [storknet.com](http://storknet.com), and [blogher.com](http://blogher.com) all experienced demographically similar user traffic from November 2009 to April of 2010. People who visit these websites are 61-70% female, primarily between the ages of 18 and 49, are 80-91% Caucasian, and between 46% and 53% have received some college education (Daily Traffic). These demographics alone suggest that users come from a privileged experience, however because of their similarities, a comparative evaluation is appropriate when considering the structural challenges that users experience between websites. My analysis lies in the assumption that users who do not feel welcome or accepted by their host website are less likely to fully participate and become full and active members of that community than those who do.

## Website Profile and Registration Features

Website				
Features	Babymed.com	Babycenter.com	Storknet.com	Blogger.com
<b>Free Registration</b>	Yes	Yes	\$15-\$50 per year	Yes
<b>E-mail</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>First Name</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Last Name</b>	Yes	No	No	No
<b>Username</b>	Yes – allowed to edit	Yes – cannot edit	Yes – must first request	Yes – allowed to edit
<b>Geographic Info</b>	State and country optional	Zip required, others optional	Optional	Free response optional
<b>Gender/Sex</b>	Optional – male/female	No	Optional – male/female	Optional – male/female/N/A
<b>Birth Date</b>	Optional	Optional – child’s estimated due date, ‘I’m a dad’, or ‘I’m trying to conceive’	No	Optional
<b>Relationship Status</b>	Optional – single, dating, seeing someone, living with someone, engaged, married, or divorced	No	No	No
<b>College/Education</b>	Free response optional	Can add child’s school	No	Free response optional
<b>Displayed Picture</b>	Optional upload	Optional upload or select an avatar	Optional upload	Optional upload
<b>Other Languages</b>	Spanish community forum	Seven including Spanish	No	Several language forums
<b>About Me</b>	Free response optional	Free response optional	Free response optional	Free response optional
<b>Child’s Name/Sex</b>	No	Optional boy/girl/I don’t know	No	No
<b>Privacy Options</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Interests/Favorites</b>	Free response optional	Suggestions and Free response	Free response optional	Free response optional
<b>Custom Features</b>	FertilChart, Signature, Ticker	Kiddisms	Signature	Link websites, update status
<b>Journal/Blog/Forums</b>	Forum participation displayed	Journal and blog import option	May apply to submit birth story or pregnancy journal, blog or website import option	Blog or website import option
<b>Friends/Groups</b>	No	Yes	No	Yes

Table 3.a. Displays registration requirements and profile customization options for each website.

Babymed.com

Babymed.com is a free website that primarily serves the pregnancy and fertility communities. The website, started by practicing Ob-Gyn Dr. Amos Grunebaum, provides medical explanations and information and assists women by providing personalized and interactive fertility and pregnancy tools designed to document fertility and ovulation. The main website activity surrounds the special topic forums where users ask and answer questions, share stories, and can interact with Dr. Amos himself.

To participate in the community forums one must first register with BabyMed and create an online profile, however one does not need to be registered to view or 'lurk' without posting. Registration requires a first and last name, e-mail address, and original username that members are allowed to edit at any time. Upon registration, members are given the option to create a fuller profile, viewable by other members, by providing demographic and geographic information in addition to space for writing freehand about themselves and their interests. A profile may include location information, age, date of birth (separate from age), and hometown. Most users also upload a picture of themselves to be displayed in their profile and with every post, although it is not required. While the 'about me' and 'interests' sections are completed freehand without any suggestions for what to include, users are restricted in the ways they are allowed to respond to their gender and relationship status.

When responding to the gender identification option, newly registered members may choose either 'male' or 'female' from the drop down tabs, which more appropriately identifies one's biological sex rather than the social construction understood as gender. Although the potential to bear children is restricted to those who were born female, not everyone born female identifies themselves as women. Since the BabyMed website addresses a community facing both

infertility and alternative fertilization options such as IVF and artificial insemination, it is not unreasonable to assume that it would be used as a resource for lesbian, pregnant transgender fathers, or gender neutral individuals. For females who identify as men or gender neutral, this restriction would likely be viewed as exclusionary and alienating. Furthermore, because interacting with others who are sharing similar experiences is central to full membership, the notable absence of gay, lesbian, or transgender community forums would limit those users' ability to participate as a full community member.

New members may also share their 'relationship status,' however they are limited to choosing between single, dating, seeing someone, living with someone, engaged, married or divorced from a drop down tab. Although there are many option to choose from, having to identify your relationship, presumably with the father of the child you have or are trying to conceive, may be uncomfortable for those who do not fit into these categories. For example, the 'single' option may describe someone's situation in a word, however the progression of the options from the least committed to the most committed communicates the American family standard that pregnant women ought to be in married relationships. Similarly, the free response 'college' information section may be intimidating to those who have not attended higher education institutions.

One unique element of the BabyMed website that is especially inclusive of the Hispanic community is the forum "*Para Todas Las Personas Que Hablan Español*," or 'for all those who speak Spanish'. This forum community invitation is offered to every newly registered member, however the majority of the site is only offered in English.

Babycenter.com

Launched in 1997 by Tina Sharkey, former senior executive of America Online, BabyCenter is the number one ranked parenting website for offering “trustworthy, medical advisory board-approved information and real-world, parent-to-parent tips from pre-conception through age eight” (babycenter.com). The website offers resources for parents through individualized parenting information and the BabyCenter community forums, online journals, private messaging, and interest groups. With 8.1 million distinct monthly visitors, Babycenter.com is ranked 201 by Quantcast in the list of the most trafficked U.S. websites (Quantcast.com).

Although pregnancy and parenting information is free and open to the public, as are group and forum browsing, to leave a comment or contribute to community forums one needs to register with BabyCenter.com. Registration requires an e-mail address, first name, screen name that cannot be changed later, and zip code. After registration you are allowed immediate access and are provided with options to customize your user experience and set up your personal profile and journal. You are first asked to enter your child’s due date so you can be presented with articles and information appropriate to your stage of pregnancy, however you may also select that you are ‘trying to conceive’ or ‘a dad.’ While these labels are only meant to customize the information presented to you by BabyCenter (which they mention), it may make those who do not fit these parameters feel initially unwelcome. One of the following suggestions, however, is to enter your “spouse or partner’s” e-mail address to invite them to join the BabyCenter community. Additionally, within these BabyCenter communities there are many easily accessed groups concerning gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members as well as other ‘alternative family’ groups.



New members are prompted to enter optional general information such as birth date, current city, or child's school. Members may also check boxes for suggested 'tags' which flag your family status, interests, work status, etc. so that other members with similar interests and experiences can find you more easily. Unlike the drop down options provided by Babymed.com, BabyCenter is more inclusive to alternative experiences; members may add their own tags if they feel the provided options are inappropriate. Links to edit your profile allow you to free respond to an 'about me' section, or add photos, join a group, or make new friends. BabyCenter also provides two options for sharing online journals with other members: you may either complete journal entries from the template provided by BabyCenter, or you may import your existing independent blog so entries are visible to other members within your profile. Finally, members may choose to keep their entire profiles, or certain aspects of them, private.

Although 77% of unique visitors to Babycenter.com are from the U.S., San Francisco based BabyCenter L.L.C. has 21 outposts around the world and the entire website is available in 7 different languages, including a Spanish site for Hispanic users in the U.S. (Quantcast.com, Babycenter.com). According to an AdAge.com interview with Tina Sharkey in 2009, in an effort to reach parents without internet access or literacy, BabyCenter is also piloting a program in which information from newsletters normally delivered by e-mail are sent as voice recordings to mobile phones, offered in Hindi, English, and Spanish ("Chairman and Global President"). As BabyCenter receives its funding from paid advertisements, it is in their best interest to reach the largest possible global audience and to retain those users. Consequently, the BabyCenter website structurally provides for a welcoming and inclusive community with a relatively simple registration process.

### Storknet.com

Storknet.com was created by writer Maribeth Doerr in 1996, offering information on family planning, pregnancy, and parenting. Registered members with StorkNet are allowed access to participate in and view message boards and forums, many of which are private and cannot be browsed by non-members. Members who submit a writing sample and follow a separate registration process may become ‘StorkNet Journalists’ who are allowed to submit stories about common experiences, among them birth, breastfeeding, and pregnancy loss. Other selected ‘journalists’ keep regularly updated accounts of their pregnancies up to delivery, which are then added to the pregnancy journal archives for browsing. StorkNet is also the only website within this study that requires members to pay for access to forums, and the only website that does not allow immediate forum access upon registration<sup>6</sup>.

Before registering with StorkNet, users are required to read and agree to the member guidelines/rules, rules of netiquette, and the user agreement, all of which emphasize maintaining a friendly and safe community environment. StorkNet moderators are so committed to these guidelines that they actively terminate memberships of users who violate them. In the message board registration form, users are required to disclose whether they are a returning StorkNet member, and whether they have previously been banned from the StorkNet message boards, since they insist “all bans are final.” While this thorough screening acts to assure the maintenance of a positive community environment for current users, it also greatly slows the registration process for new members; a disadvantage when compared to the ease of registration of competing pregnancy websites.

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<sup>6</sup> StorkNet has been in the process of changing their membership plan at least since February of 2010 when research for the registration process of this website was gathered. On the message board registration page, StorkNet warns “**If you are a new member**, feel free to complete the form below. We will be in touch as soon as our membership plan is finalized for new members.” As of April 25, 2010 the membership plan still had not been finalized.

Initial registration with StorkNet requires a valid e-mail address, a first name, two requested screen names, and a \$15.00 payment for premium memberships. StorkNet registration is not automated, and they write that they will typically get back to you within a few days or over the weekend to be sure your screen name is not already taken. Before receiving access to message boards, new members must also wait until their payment or check has cleared. An upgraded membership, which costs more, offers more private messaging and photo gallery space, as well as the option to 'participate in invisible mode' and browse the website 'Ad-free.' This process for becoming a fuller member is inherently limiting simply because women must pay to join, and pay more for fuller membership benefits.

The greatest challenge to becoming a full or core member is the very selective and intimidating process for submitting a piece of writing to be published in the archives of birth stories. To submit a birth story to be posted by StorkNet, women must follow a lengthy set of directions, frequently reminding them that spelling and grammar are important and will be edited by StorkNet if not up to their standards. The following excerpt from the guidelines to submit a birth story highlights its intimidating quality:

*Be cautious of words like "cause" (should be "because"), "til" (should be "until"), "doc" should be "doctor") "I seen" (should be "I've seen" or "I saw") etc. Your story will be much more interesting if you take just a few minutes to edit: read your story a couple times after you have written it. It sounds very basic, but it is important and it saves us time.*

To anyone unaccustomed to writing in Standard American English, this requirement may seem targeted and insulting. The use of 'I seen' as the past participle form of 'I saw' is typical of both Southern and African American Vernacular English, and StorkNet's discouragement of it suggests that communication in this form is 'uninteresting' to other readers and unwelcome within the StorkNet community (Wolfram 129).

The application process for becoming a StorkNet journalist throughout your pregnancy is similarly intimidating. Applicants must submit a writing sample and are warned about the required one entry per week commitment and good writing quality before completing the application. StorkNet also highlights the type of people who they are *not* looking for in the following excerpts:

*If you have a tendency to get bored with projects or not follow through with things, please don't sign up for this. It's really frustrating when ladies have signed up, and a few months down the road, just disappear because they don't want to do it anymore.*

*Please don't sign up because you'll think it'll be fun without really asking yourself if you can do this for the entire pregnancy plus birth story (if you're doing a pregnancy journal).*

*If you tend to be a private person, will you have plenty to discuss in your journal that will hold readers' attention? Think about these issues before you committ [sic] to being a journalist. One does not need to share private things to make a journal interesting, but they need to have plenty of pregnant/parenting moments to hold the attention of the reader.*

*You don't have to be a Pulitzer [sic] prize winning author to write a journal for StorkNet. However, if you struggle with writing, grammar, capitalization, etc., this won't be a fun project for you or for me. You must spell check your work and not write your entry full of slang words. Nobody thinks it's cute in a journal.*

*If you write a short paragraph, all in caps that isn't proofread so it's full of grammar and spelling mistakes, you will not be accepted so be mindful of how you write your information in the miscellaneous area of the form.*

*Do you foresee problems that may arise that could prevent you from updating/completing your journal? Here are examples of some things you may know already could be foreseeable problems and interrupt your journal: marriage problems, depression, illness in the family. It is important to think about whether you could write through these issues. If your computer gets a virus or dies, do you have ready access to other computer? If you end up on bedrest, do you have a laptop/internet connection so that you could still send in updates?*

In these condescending excerpts, StorkNet discourages many types of women from becoming full members by contributing to archived pregnancy experiences, namely: women who tend to be

private, who use slang, who struggle with formal writing, who experience marriage problems, depression, or family illness, who are on bedrest, and who do not have reliable internet and computer access. These rigorous requirements communicate that those who experience these things are inherently lazy, uninteresting, uneducated, and unqualified to be an integral member of the knowledge producing StorkNet community.

### Blogger.com

Lisa Stone, Elisa Camahort Page, and Jory Des Jardins founded Blogger.com in 2006 after organizing a conference of the same name for women who blog. The free website serves a diverse and mostly female audience, providing information, news, and entertainment written by women bloggers 'living in the real world'. Of the total 19,155 independent blogs connected through the BlogHer network, 5,880, or about 30%, fall into the category of mommy and family blogs. The website's 'About Us' section describes their mission as "helping you tell your story and get it heard. You're one of us. Get started now" and their fast and unassuming registration process reflects that sentiment.

After providing only a username and valid e-mail address, users become BlogHer members, are granted immediate access to all website content, and are able to comment on blogs and community forums. Afterwards, new members may provide as little or as much personal information as they would like to publicly appear on their profile. Nearly all sections, such as 'about me,' first and last name, profession, location, contact information, favorites, etc. are in free-response format. Like BabyMed and StorkNet, BlogHer provides 'male' and 'female' options for 'gender' identification, however they also allow members to select 'N/A' if they so choose.

BlogHer reminds members to customize their profile by uploading a profile picture and creating a unique signature that appears on all user created content, such as posts and comments. Users may also upload external blogs to appear on their profiles, or they may participate exclusively through posting in groups and forum discussions. Although BlogHer does not provide any notable challenges to becoming a community member through their registration process, users who are unfamiliar with the blogs and social networking may find this site overwhelming, as it is designed for individuals with existing blogs to connect with each other. To make the new member experience as smooth as possible, BlogHer provides a help section complete with website tours, frequently asked questions, and community guidelines.

In brief, each website poses specific structural challenges to full member participation through their unique registration processes. Overall, websites that are free and open to the public, require less demographic information, and provide more options for alternative self-identification (such as free response rather than drop down menus), communicate acceptance and encourage new members to actively participate. To the contrary, websites with challenging or intimidating registration processes exclude certain identities and discourage the participation required to become a full member. Because full members are more influential in shaping their respective communities, a website that discourages certain identities through their registration process is unlikely to have those identities reinforced or reflected in their shared knowledge and experiences.

#### **4. The Transformative Nature of Blogging: meaning and identity as a mommyblogger**

Women often cited the therapeutic value of blogging as a reason for continued participation in online communities. They describe how writing offered the opportunity for personal growth and reflection, hinting at the transformative power of blogging and online journaling. Here, I will elaborate on those experiences, arguing that blogging shapes lived pregnancy and mothering practices outside of the internet world. In addition to the applied knowledge that women gain from asking and answering direct questions about pregnancy and motherhood in community forums, women also gain knowledge about themselves through the reflective process of blogging itself. The two largest themes that women articulated involved transformation through shared experience, and self-identity and reflection attained through the writing process. What bloggers commonly referred to as the ‘dark side’ of mommyblogging as it is manifest in the lived experience will be addressed as a third theme.

##### Transformation through Shared Experience

Women frequently addressed the importance of a shared experience with other women bloggers in influencing their behaviors and attitudes in daily life. Online relationships gained with women going through similar experiences gave some women the strength to tackle matters in their personal and family lives. For others, it brought the necessary perspective, levity, and intimacy to appropriately modify their actions and minds within the world of pregnancy and parenting. Many women expressed a belief that through sharing these experiences with other women and consequently modifying their behaviors, they have actually become better mothers.

The following blog and journal excerpts highlight these points:

*Imagining an audience of like-minded women gave me an incentive to follow-up and make the changes I couldn't make on my own.*

*Who knew one of my dearest friends lived in Reno and when I finally met her this past summer I can't imagine my life without her. . . the blog world has given me so much...when all I wanted was to write for me.*

*Bloggging is one of the most valuable achievements of our time that changes our lives in an unknown up to now way. It is communication. And human beings obviously need that.*

*We're not perfect, and I don't think mothers have ever been perfect. But I think the truth is that bloggging does have an impact on mothering. (Granted a far healthier impact than soap operas or noon-hour sherries.)*

*Bloggging and reading other blogs reminds me of how fun (and funny) being a parent is. I've read about things that would have made me think I was insane and laughed out loud at it anyway... Parenting is a serious business, but being able to laugh at yourself and with others is an invaluable parenting skill that has been reinforced here in blogland.*

These common responses emphasize the importance of connection with other women as a benefit to the experience of pregnancy and motherhood bloggging. It is reminiscent of Betty Friedan's feminist theory critique, 'the problem that has no name', which describes the isolation felt by many full-time homemakers of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century United States. The emphasis on communication through bloggging, and its comparison to 'soap operas' and 'noon hour sherries' in their impact on mothering suggests that bloggging is a form of coping with the isolation that modern day stay-at-home-mothers continue to feel. This pattern is observed in pregnancy experiences as well. In a recent study of women and internet use, Lowe et al. 2009 argue that informal sources of information are becoming more important now that antenatal testing is revealing more abnormalities than can be covered in traditional informational texts, "Learning how others have coped or are coping in similar situations can help alleviate feelings of isolation, and also places women back in a familiar territory of shared pregnancy narratives" (Lowe et al. 1476). In their capacity to connect women from the home then, women value online communities because they address the isolation of the motherhood and pregnancy experience.



### Self-Identity and Reflection through the Writing Process

Women also noted the unique opportunity for reflection that the act of writing provides. They explain that writing offers you a more objective and balanced look at your own experiences, allowing for a more focused awareness of what is important to them. In turn, women felt more 'at peace,' more fully capable of addressing life's challenges, and more appreciative of their good fortune. Writing for its cathartic release was also frequently mentioned, however disproportionately so by the independent blogging community. Although reasons for this are unclear, it may be because women in the independent blogging community interact with others outside of pregnancy and parenting groups and therefore write and reflect on other areas of their lives. Women's common sentiments are expressed below:

*Blogging has changed how I think; it's a lens and filter on how I see the world. In blogging, I've captured snapshots of my life and of the boys' childhoods that might have otherwise been lost. It's a lovely gift to myself to be perusing my own archives and stumble across vignettes of life that I'd captured and promptly forgotten – vignettes that would surely otherwise be lost.*

*When I think of myself as a mommy-blogger specifically. . . I think more about the side benefits of reading blogs. . . Both the writing and the reading help me to slow down time long enough to SEE my children, to appreciate them differently, apart from the hectic pace of everyday life. Blogging sucks a lot of time, to be sure, but I think I'm a better mother for it.*

*Blogging is quite therapeutic for me. If I'm mulling something over in my head whether it's about parenting, or another life issue, writing it down helps me enormously and it also provides me an avenue to get some feedback.*

*The process of writing the thoughts or emotions are somewhat 'distanced' from the "I" experiencing them. There arises a tiny 'space' between the 'I' and the experience so that we can explore, study, evaluate the experience and its effects more objectively.*

*I never realized when I wrote particularly ranty[sic] posts I felt better afterward. But after this mornings [sic] musings the tears dried up and I felt a peace that I hadn't felt in a day and a half. So there you have it. . Now I can get my rants out without my children thinking that I need a padded room.*

*Blogging helped me to focus my thoughts, and to become aware of what I was experiencing.*

Blogging is appreciated for its ability to allow women to capture and organize their fleeting thoughts and memories, providing a material source of reflection to review their experiences from a more objective perspective. Women expressed that this, in turn, positively affects their lives and parenting abilities by acting as a tool to help them to slow down and become more self-aware, ask for feedback from other women after identifying an issue, release frustration and move forward, and ground their experiences to gain perspective.

### The 'Dark Side' of Mommyblogging

Although women mostly talked about the benefits that come with writing about their pregnancy and motherhood experiences, negative remarks were also noticeable. For example, although most individuals would not likely publicly scold a stranger for bottle-feeding her newborn, the anonymity provided by online interactions allow for those criticisms to be harsher without the social consequences that would be present in face-to-face interactions. These feelings were expressed in independent blogs and larger host website forums alike:

*My personal experience is that the blog world can be addictive. I am ashamed to admit how many times I have ignored by child because I couldn't bring myself to leave the screen.*

*It connects us to a virtual world \*and\* it disconnects us from the real world. It can encourage us to become more activist and aware \*and\* it can encourage a level of navel-gazing that precludes meaningful civic participation.*

*I've made a wonderful group of online friends, some of whom I've met in real life and found just as fabulous there; but I don't know my neighbours particularly well. The medium can be brilliantly honest, exposing things about ourselves we would never do in person or in print; but it can also encourage us to hide our darker sides from each other and from ourselves, and lead to a kind of blind deception, or worse, lead us to reinforce the worst of the Good Mother stereotypes out of an unwillingness to confront and publicly expose the ways in which we deviate from that mold.*

*I feel fine writing for myself. A lot of the time, I feel stifled by blogging, especially now since there have been a few instances -- well publicized ones -- of bloggers criticizing other bloggers, or accusing each other of stealing ideas. There's just so much to remember blogging that it's not very freeing at all. I'm sure this gone on for some time,*

*and I'm only noticing it now. As a newbie blogger, I didn't care if I stepped on any toes because there aren't that many to step on when your readership is fewer than 10 people a day.*

Women mentioned how blogging can become so time-consuming or 'addictive' that it actually takes away from energy devoted to real lived experiences. Some feel that forms of public journaling like blogging can discourage honesty for fear of being criticized by those who disagree with others' lifestyle or parenting choices. While these types of comments were noticeable, most women felt like the experiences and skills gained from blogging far outweighed the perceived costs.

In Summary, women talked of two main ways in which blogging or online journaling changed the ways they thought or behaved in their lived experiences. First, they found that their interactions with other pregnancy and mommybloggers gave them the knowledge and confidence to address similar issues in their own lives. Second, women found release and relief through the process of writing itself, also addressed as its 'therapeutic' or reflective value, which some claimed provided more emotional awareness and control and allowed for better parenting. Some also felt, however, that the commitment to writing can become time-consuming, detract from the time they spend caring for their children, and disconnect them from the 'real world'. Finally, women wrote of the 'dark side' of mommyblogging and the harsh confrontations that comes with the anonymity and unaccountability of the internet world.

## Conclusion

This study explores the unique possibilities for community presented to pregnant women and mothers through online social networking sites. Recent studies have asserted that the internet is an especially valuable resource for women experiencing problematic pregnancies, where traditional means of seeking information are inadequate for the more complicated diagnosis afforded by modern technology. Lowe et al. found that pregnant women who accessed online social support groups felt a sense of empowerment, emotional support, and validation through reading about the bodily experiences of women going through the same pregnancy complications (1483). Similarly, this study finds that women initially join online pregnancy and mothering communities seeking real-life answers from experienced women, comfort in shared experiences, and also for record keeping purposes. They ultimately continue blogging for the social support and acceptance, feelings of connectedness with other women, and the therapeutic release and reflection offered through the writing process.

Several recent studies highlight the importance of social support in the mental and physical health outcomes of both mother and child. For instance, Collins et al. found that women who received high quality social support, including ‘confiding support,’ experienced less complications in labor, lower rates of postpartum depression, and higher infant Apgar scores while controlling for medical risk (1243). Furthermore, women with larger social support networks had babies with higher birth weights which is an indicator of good health. These findings were more pronounced among women experiencing *higher* levels of stress. The authors explain how quality psychosocial support can lead to these positive physical reactions, “For instance, social support may reduce the extent to which circumstances are appraised as stressful, or might promote positive affect by enhancing self-esteem or feelings of self-efficacy. These may in turn influence susceptibility to illness through effects on neuroendocrine or immune

system function or through changes in health-care behaviors such as decreased substance use and improved diet or exercise patterns” (Collins et al. 1254).

These patterns also emerge in a study by Mottl-Santiago et al. assessing the efficacy of the Birth Sisters program at the Boston Medical Center. This recently launched program offers “culturally competent” doula services to pregnant women free of charge, including prenatal support through labor and delivery, and up to 8 hours of home visitation after birth. The authors found that the presence and support of other women during pregnancy, labor, and birth who share the mother’s language and culture increases her own “sense of competence,” also increasing breastfeeding outcomes. Mental and physical health outcomes of both the mother and her child increased with the presence of an emotionally supportive female community during pregnancy, evidenced in shorter labors with fewer complications.

Similarly, women who blog often mentioned how online journaling transformed the way they thought or behaved in their lived experiences, giving them the knowledge and confidence to address similar issues in their own lives and providing more emotional awareness and control. Some women also mentioned that blogging acts as a way to overcome feelings of isolation, however others felt that too much time online can disconnect them from the real-world and the time spent with their children. This suggests that perhaps a culturally competent and supportive internet community may also increase the mental and physical health of mother and child if time spent online is moderated.

Structural challenges to participation in some online pregnancy and motherhood communities however, may limit the possible emotional benefits to some women by excluding or discouraging certain identities. Websites with many limitations to participation and discouragement of certain identities serve to homogenize experiences to largely white and

middle and upper class understandings of pregnancy and motherhood, leaving little room for alternative expression and identities. Further research of online pregnancy communities with consideration to demographic variables, specifically race and socioeconomic status, would be useful in highlighting these limitations for lower income and minority populations.

Becoming a full member requires active and reciprocal participation, mastery of a new specialized vocabulary, and knowledge of its application. These skills are acquired more easily through participating in larger host websites where resources are readily available to newly registered members, and interaction between new members and core members is encouraged. Furthermore, free websites with simple registration processes and more options for self-identification and expression communicates community acceptance, promotes new member participation, and allows for knowledge contribution from more diverse experiences. These findings suggest that a website with all of these elements may prove to be emotionally beneficial to pregnant women and mothers, especially those experiencing complicated or particularly stressful pregnancies, and perhaps influential in positive birth experiences and health outcomes of both mother and child.

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## Appendix A [Glossary of Terms]

- *Comment* - A written response to a blog post or forum discussion that usually appears below the blog entry or prompt.
- *Forum* - A shared online meeting space used to publically discuss an issue or receive responses to a question or prompt.
- *Homepage* - The opening page of a website or blog.
- *Host Blog(ger) vs. Independent Blog(ger)* – Within this paper, a host blog will refer to an individual blog created through the pre-established and uniform design and layout provided by a larger host website, requiring registration and membership to that site. An independent blog will refer to an individual blog created without any attachment to or affiliation with a larger host website.
- *Network vs. Community* – A network refers to the collection of individuals connected by communications channels that facilitates communications among users. Community in this paper refers to the *experience* of community rather than the form, structure, or locality in the traditional sense.
- *Post/Entry* - A single message on an internet discussion forum, blog, newsgroup, mailing list, etc.
- *Profile* – The personal information provided by a user about themselves and the reason for their blog, journal, or website.
- *Sponsors* – The people who put an advertisement on a website or blog, and pay the owner for their advertisement space.
- *Subscribers /followers*– Dedicated readers and often frequent contributors (of comments) of another's blog, journal, or website.
- *User/Username* - A username is the unique text identifier used to identify someone on an online network. The user is the individual identified by the username.
- *Weblog/blog* - An online journal where users post daily entries, usually about their personal experiences, and usually publicly accessible.