

Mothers of invention:  
Commercial content on mother blogs and perceptions of credibility  
A pilot study

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## Abstract

The popularity of mother blogs is increasingly attracting sponsors looking to market their products to mother blog audiences. This combination of commercial and informational content calls on readers and writers to distinguish between informational content and commercial activity. This thesis examines how mother bloggers integrate sponsored content into their blogs and how both writers and readers interpret the credibility of these posts. The study takes place within a conceptual framework of source and message credibility. Using a qualitative and interpretive approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with readers and writers. Although the results are not generalizable, they suggest determining the credibility of these posts is a social process, informed by participants' existing knowledge and framed within the community of mother bloggers. The results add to our understanding of credibility perceptions when commercial and informational content come together and have implications for other online communities that require ongoing information evaluation.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview**

### **1.1 Defining the Problem**

In a winter 2013 television advertising campaign for President's Choice food products, a man sits across from two women in a suburban kitchen, asking them questions about their meal preparation and food buying habits. It is a familiar folksy convention often used in television commercials, with one key difference: the women featured in these commercials are not actors, they are mother bloggers, women blogging about family and parenting issues. Without intimate knowledge of the company's marketing strategy, we cannot know exactly why these women were chosen to appear in these commercials. However by choosing to feature mother bloggers in a major advertising campaign, President's Choice is bringing mother bloggers to a national television-viewing audience. If these commercials are not enough to show how mother bloggers are becoming embedded in our culture, consider the parody of these same advertisements on the Canada Broadcasting Corporation's television program, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, that plays on the notion these women are bored by their domestic duties and looking for diversion (CBCtv, 2013).

President's Choice is not the only corporation that uses mother bloggers for marketing purposes. Companies are increasingly paying these bloggers, either in-cash or in-kind, to review products, in part because the sheer abundance of mother bloggers, but also because of their perceived influence. Reliable Canadian statistics are difficult to obtain, but a Google search on "mommy blogs Canada" returns 2.3 million results. Some estimates put the number of mother bloggers in North America at 4 million (Laird, 2012). Of mothers who say they use social media daily, 55% of them say they have made purchases because of a recommendation from a personal review blog (Egan, 2010). Perhaps because of this influence, mother bloggers are 21% more

likely than the general blogging population to be approached by a brand (Sobel, 2010). When mother bloggers write about products for which they have been paid in cash or in kind, readers are called on to distinguish between informational content and commercial activity.

## **1.2 Background to the Problem**

Sharing experiences online has its roots in the electronic bulletin board systems of the 1970s where participant discussions centered mostly on technical issues (Friedman, 2010). As the World Wide Web gained momentum in the early 1990s, people began crafting personal home pages that included links to other sites accompanied by brief, irreverent or sarcastic commentary. These sites, arranged with new additions at the top and older entries archived by date, were eventually known as “weblogs” or “blogs.” Writers with shared topics of interest, formed “webrings” of links and blogging became characterized as a participatory endeavour (Friedman, 2010).

Early blogging technology was limited, inviting participation only from those with technical expertise. By the late 1990s however, commercial applications were developed that made it faster and easier to create blogs without having an intimate knowledge of web development (Blood, 2002, p.5; Friedman, 2010). This simplified the process of blog creation, expanded the market and introduced more possibilities for communication online. The lists of links, or filter blogs, were still popular but a new form of blog that included more personal reflection began appearing that allowed writers to form social connections online and build communities of like-minded writers and readers (Friedman, 2010): one such community revolved around motherhood and parenting.

Although mothers were blogging in the earliest days, several key events helped to define the concept of an online maternal community. A 2005 *New York Times* article written by David

Hochman, entitled *Mommy (and me)*, characterized blogging on parenting subjects as an “online shrine to parental self-absorption” and writers of these blogs as insecure and “in need of validation.” The article caused a flood of discussion in the blogosphere and women bloggers writing on parenting issues began to mobilize around their shared sense of online community (Yonker, 2012; Friedman, 2010). Soon after in 2005, the first BlogHer conference for women bloggers was held, at which a small discussion space was allotted to women who blog on maternal and family subjects. Attendance to this session was greater than expected and the assembled argued over questions of legitimacy and identification. It was during one of these sessions that Alice Bradley, author of the early mother blog *Finslippy*, notably said “Mommy blogging is a radical act” (Lopez, 2009). Academic interest soon followed as evidenced in part by the Southern States Communications Association Convention in 2007, where a group of bloggers and academics presented a panel called “Mommy blogging: Communal Activism or Self-Centered Blather?” They argued that mommy blogs are a mutual and dialogic process where distinctive identities and communities are produced (Connors, 2007).

Academic analysis and media coverage of the mother blogging phenomenon has helped give rise to the idea that mother blogs are a new genre – one that warrants critical analysis (Chen, 2013). Defining mother blogging as a genre can be useful by helping bloggers to “locate their experiences of motherhood in a wider context, find a community, and share experiences” (Chen, 2013).

Corporate sponsorship of mother blogs has complicated the discussion around identity building however. Organizers of the 2009 BlogHer conference invited commercial partners to help defray costs, resulting in “swag nights” where participants were given free merchandise from the sponsors. This reignited the discussion of what it meant to be a mother blogger and how

to maintain an authentic voice in the face of brand promotion (Friedman, 2010). The debate continues today with some mother bloggers saying these commercialized posts are antithetical to the sincere expressions of motherhood these blogs are supposed to represent (Connors, 2009, p. 94) while others argue women who write well and develop a following deserve to be compensated for their efforts (Friedman, 2010). These questions have yet to find definite answers either in the blogosphere or in the media as seen in the 2013 *Wall Street Journal* article that characterizes “mommy business trips” as opportunities for bored mothers to “attack the minibar” and satisfy cravings for “toon-free tv” (Rosman, 2013).

The issues surrounding the mix of information and commercial content is not limited to mother blogs. Research in this area draws from multiple disciplines and includes studies about advertorials (e.g., Van Reijmersdal, Neijens & Smith, 2005), product placement (e.g., Gupta & Gould, 1997) direct-to-consumer prescription drug information (e.g., Poe, 2007) and the perceived effectiveness of public policy in this area (Newell, Blevins & Bugeja, 2009). Readers of these types of information have an increased need to critically evaluate the messages they are receiving and making credibility judgements is one way they can assess the value of the information they are accessing. Existing models of credibility assessment (e.g., Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Lankes, 2008; Lim & Simon, 2011; Rubin & Liddy, 2006) serve to situate this study in the informational domain.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

This thesis is situated at the intersection of commercial and informational content and looks at how users interpret these types of posts. Specifically, the goal of the study is to explore how mother bloggers write about commercial products and how both writers and readers interpret these posts using credibility theory as the framework. This study includes an

exploratory investigation of the characteristics of commercial content on mother blogs and writer and reader perceptions of credibility. Two dimensions of credibility form the framework for this research: message and source (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). Although credibility has been explored across many disciplines, this study looks at message and source credibility through an information lens, placing the emphasis on the user's evaluation of the information.

#### **1.4 Defining the Research**

This study aims to increase understanding of how commercial and informational content co-exist in personal space online and how readers and writers interpret these types of content. Mother bloggers are a relatively understudied group yet they blog in high numbers and attract large audiences. The ability of readers to accurately interpret online information raises questions about adult media literacy and has implications for educational institutions including schools and libraries. There are public policy implications for this type of content as well. If audiences cannot distinguish between commercial and informational content, we need to ask whether they have the right to know when, and by whom they are influenced (Balasubramanian, 1994). This is especially true of more vulnerable audiences such as those less conformable with the online environment or those who have a high information need that might make them less likely to expend the necessary energy to fully evaluate online information.

The results of this research will contribute to our understanding of user-generated content and reader and writer responses. Although mothers are blogging in high numbers online, they are relatively under-researched in current academic enquiry. What research does exist approaches the subject from feminist or autobiographical perspectives and does not look at the content through an informational lens. This research also contributes to our understanding of how credibility is assessed online specifically where advertising and information co-mingle. These

results add to our knowledge of adult readers' abilities to analyze and evaluate online messages and can help illuminate public policy implications of this type of communication, for example, whether or not and through what means bloggers should disclose their connections with marketers when they have received free products in exchange for posts. While there is research around online reviews, mother blogs and audience perceptions of online content, the connection between these concepts has not yet been made.

### **1.5 Research Questions**

Interdisciplinary scholarly literature from the fields of communications, information studies, psychology, women's studies and marketing on the subjects of user-generated content, mother blogs and online credibility assessment inform the research questions for this study. These questions address the unique nature of commercial content on mother blogs and the perceptions of credibility they generate.

The research questions guiding this study include:

1. How is commercial activity represented in the content of mother blogs?
2. How do readers perceive and interpret these posts?
3. How do bloggers perceive and interpret these posts?

### **1.6 Methodology**

This research study used ethnographic techniques framed within the constructivist paradigm, an approach that enables perspectives of participants to be studied in depth and uses their words to convey meanings. It also provides greater opportunity for exploring and generating ideas and as such can elicit "serendipitous findings" through its empirical research (Williamson, 2006, p. 94). The research unfolded in two phases. The first involved an in-depth qualitative content analysis of 40 randomly selected commercially sponsored posts. The second

phase involved semi-structured qualitative interviews with three mother blog readers and three mother blog writers, following the “responsive interviewing” model developed by Rubin and Rubin (2005). This model allowed prepared questions to serve as starting points but left the interview structure flexible to give participants the opportunity to clarify and reflect as necessary. The model is well suited to the interpretive constructionist philosophy by aiming to provide depth of understanding rather than breadth.

Interviews were conducted and transcribed by the researcher followed by iterative analysis to identify themes, patterns and concepts. Analysis was ongoing during fieldwork to create a progressive development of understanding that illuminated new issues to inform further data collection (Bradley, 1993). Memos were created during and after each interview allowing ongoing analysis and refinement of the research process.

### **1.7 Definitions of Terms**

Although the rise of Twitter and other forms of social media has ushered in a new form of condensed blogging, the “micro-blog” (Kopytoff, 2011), this paper focuses on the conventional form of blogging, done on blogging platforms. As such, the use of the term “blog” can be taken to mean “frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence” (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004). The term bloggers is used to denote the creators of these blogs.

In understanding what is meant by mother blog, it is first important to understand what they represent culturally and to situate them as an emergent category of blogs, different from other types of personal blogs. The common term adopted to describe the blogs women write about family and parenting is "mommy blog." Yet writers of these blogs have ambivalent feelings about a term that both subjects and empowers them (Chen, 2013). For some, the term

“mommy” is seen as diminutive and assumes a patronizing level of familiarity that does not have the same authority that “mother” implies, evoking a debate reminiscent of the difference between “girl” and “woman” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 34). Other bloggers describe the term as “distasteful” (Marriott Kennedy, 2011) or “infantilizing” (FeMOMhist, 2011; Marriott Kennedy, 2011), believing the term makes them appear less credible (Rainsinger, 2009) or that it reinforces the stereotype of mothers who are defined only by their roles as parents (Brodeser-Akner, 2011; Rachele, 2013; RedneckMommy, 2009). Chen analyzed blogs posts and comments written by women around the term “mommy blog.” She found these women often described the term as reductionist, defining them by only one aspect of themselves. She argues using the term “mommy” marginalizes women and promotes a stereotype of the ideal mother that reinforces women’s hegemonic roles as nurturers and consequently casts these women in roles of “digital domesticity” in the blogosphere. She concludes with the idea that the label promotes a singular definition of mommy blogs when the reality is “this is a fragmented corpus with divergent experiences, ideas, and understandings” (Chen, 2013, p.522). Other bloggers however, embrace the term, seeing it as secondary to the strength of the community itself and an opportunity to reclaim the term, thereby further empowering the community through a shared label (e.g., Dorf’s Daughter, 2009). Those who use the term in this way may recognize that calling themselves “mommy bloggers” is another way in which mothers “act out” different cultural roles of motherhood (Chen, 2013). On a more practical level, "mommy blog" provides a distinct term to search for in Google (Chen, 2013) which can help identify the community, target marketers and draw readers (Thompson, 2007).

The debate continues in the academic literature, with many researchers choosing not to use the term (Yonker, 2012) with others opting to use it if only in an ironic display (Friedman

and Calixte, 2009, p. 25) or simply because it is the term most in use (Connors, 2009, p. 106). This study uses the term “mother blog” to refer to all women who write blogs about parenting and motherhood to address the concerns of some bloggers while retaining some of the term’s descriptive and informal nature. For the purposes of this study, mother bloggers are defined as those who blog about their personal experiences as they relate to parenting and child-rearing (Morrison, 2010, 2011). As such, we assume mother blogging to be a “purposive and deliberate social engagement, a creative as well as interpersonal practice that mitigates the assorted ills (physical isolation, role confusion, lack of realistic role models, etc.) and celebrates the particular joys of contemporary mothering” (Morrison, 2010, p.38). Readers of these blogs are defined as those who read at least one mother blog at least two times per week to try to capture active readers who are regularly exposed to the community.

Commercial content is defined using the Federal Trade Commission’s (2009b) concept of online endorsements: “any advertising message ... that consumers are likely to believe reflects the opinions, beliefs, findings, or experiences of a party other than the sponsoring advertiser” (para.255.0b) and “material connections” are defined as “any relationship that materially affects the weight or credibility of any endorsement and would not be reasonably expected by consumers” (para. 255.5).

This study employs the credibility framework of Flanagin and Metzger (2007) which uses a broad definition of credibility that includes the concepts of believability (Metzger, 2007; Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Moore & Rodgers, 2005); fairness, completeness, trustworthiness (Moore & Rodgers, 2005) and objectivity (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008).

## **1.8 Scope and Limitations of Study**

This unfunded study was undertaken as part of the requirements for the master's degree in the School of Information Studies at the University of Ottawa. The project was necessarily limited by the volume of mother blog content on the internet and the multitude of platforms available to access the content. As a result, the method chosen did not include mobile devices but focused only on information accessed through a computer. The study was also not exhaustive, neither attempting to describe objective reality nor generalizing to the broader population. Instead, the study explored the problem in depth, collected data in the participant's own words and considered what the implications might be for online credibility assessment

## **1.9 Outline**

The thesis is organized as follows. Chapter One presents an introduction to the problem and provides background information on bloggers in general and mother bloggers in particular. This chapter also states the problem and the research questions this study is designed to answer. Chapter Two helps situate the problem in the scholarly literature and provides a rationale for the study. This chapter also explores the conceptual framework presented by Flanagin and Metzger's online credibility assessments. Chapter Three presents the methodology used in the study and its limitations. Chapter Four outlines the findings in terms of the conceptual frameworks of credibility. Chapter Five discusses the findings and draws some overarching themes. Finally Chapter Six summarizes the research and considers its implications. It also offers a critique of the methods used.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The scope of literature relevant to mother bloggers, the impact of online reviews and online credibility assessments touches on many disciplines. This chapter summarizes the literature on online reviews, emphasizing the impact they have on readers. It then looks at the research around mother bloggers and online endorsements and disclosures of material connections and finally it reviews the theory of online credibility assessment.

### **2.1 Online Reviews**

Many interrelated and overlapping terms are used to describe the content users create online. “User-generated content” (UGC) is a broad term that refers to content that is “created outside of professional routines and practices” and can be individually or collaboratively "produced, modified, shared and consumed" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Word-of-mouth (WOM) or electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is a form of UGC that includes any positive or negative statement made online by customers about a product or service (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). WOM should be distinguished from word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) or “promotional chat” which involves professional marketing communications intended to influence consumers (O’Reilly & Marx, 2011). Online reviews and ratings are a particular form of eWOM that have a more structured style and whose specific intent is to advise the reader (Zhang, Ye, Law & Li, 2010). The specificity of these terms speaks to the import placed on these forms of communications. Even the term “blog” lacks consensus (Garden, 2012). As Garden says as new technologies such as Twitter emerge, the concept of blogging is less clear, inspiring some scholars to suggest readers should decide for themselves what constitutes a blog, while other scholars still try to formulate more formal definitions (Garden, 2012).

To gather research for this study, we use the term “online review” for all types of user-generated content about specific products and services. Given that blogs are by nature expressions of opinions, and the blog posts included in this study focus on products or services, these posts fall into our broad definition of online review.

Studies around online reviews often come from the marketing domain and focus on their profound effect on the consumer. Johnson and Kayne (2010), found that consumers trust online opinions more than other forms of media, Mangold, Miller and Brockway (1999) found that consumers can form favourable brand attitudes based on a single message and Pruden and Vavra (2004) document how users assume messages to be truthful and sincere. There are also challenges associated with measuring WOM including how to gather the data, what to gather and how to position online reviews when they can be both a precursor as well as an outcome of consumer actions (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004).

These difficulties point to underlying assumptions behind the study of online reviews. Broad statements about the population at large should be avoided as several researchers have shown that reviewers are not a randomly drawn sample of the user population, because they are more likely to be either very satisfied or very dissatisfied with a product or service (Anderson, 1998). Also, the anonymity afforded by online communities creates the possibility that firms can disguise their promotion as consumer recommendations and manipulate these online forums (Mayzlin, 2006). As Koh (2011) also notes, an underlying belief behind the research is that online consumer reviews can significantly influence consumers’ purchasing decisions.

Much of the literature on online reviews evaluates their effect on sales. Koh (2011) applies a multi-point scale to perform a sentiment analysis and then studies these reviews’ impacts on sales. Godes and Mayzlin (2004) also adopt a quantitative method to measure a

review's impact on sales based on volume (number of reviews) and dispersion (the extent that product-related conversations are taking place across platforms and communities). Other research has adopted a qualitative method and has looked at consumer motivations in taking online recommendations and the ways in which technically proficient readers assess the credibility of these reviews (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011). Zhang et al. (2010) looked at the differences between editor and user reviews in restaurants to find that consumer reviews were positively associated with the popularity of associated restaurant websites while editor reviews had a negative relationship with consumers' intention to visit a restaurant's site. In all cases, the focus appears to be on corporate outcomes, presumably in an effort to inform market research and thereby increase the value of online reviews to corporations.

A growing body of research focuses on the use and abuse of online reviews by professional marketers. Writing of legitimate online reviews tends to focus on how marketers use reviews to create positive buzz about their products and whether firms choose to devote more resources promoting their inferior or superior products (Mayzlin, 2006). The abuse of online reviews by marketers has revealed that an increasing number of service firms now disguise some of their promotional elements as genuine word-of-mouth (Magnini, 2011) to the point where consumers often cannot tell the difference between consumer-to-consumer and anonymous firm-to-consumer communications (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Magnini (2011) expands on this research by looking at marketing, psychological, and sociological reasons to explain why firms disguise their messages as WOM and the harmful consequences for the consumer who assumes the reviews to be genuine. He points to a set of heuristics that could be applied to help delineate ethical and unethical behaviour in disguising corporate-sponsored messages as customer-originated reviews.

Research around the credibility of user-generated content, suggests these judgements may be moderated by volume, valence (positive or negative orientation) and consumer characteristics so that greater feelings of trust develop when there is a high volume of user-generated content or when users are more familiar with user-generated content or social media (Flanagin & Metzger, 2013). Other research shows that eWOM credibility is based on four factors: the polarity and quantity of posts, the logic and articulation of posts, the ability to find corroborating sources, and the previous experience of participants with the particular source (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011). The apparent credibility of online reviews raises questions about readers' abilities to evaluate the information however. If we accept that these reviews are more persuasive than traditional advertising (Mayzlin, 2006), then marketers can take advantage of online tools to proactively induce consumers to spread the word about their products (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Users may not be able to distinguish between informational content and commercial activity. Even if they see the difference, reading corporate-initiated reviews on personal blogs may impact their sense of trust in the blogger, particularly mother bloggers, with their particular focus on social and intimate online engagement

## **2.2 Mother Blogs**

Research into mother blogs as a distinct genre within blogging is scarce and adopts a mostly political frame. Many approach the subject through the lenses of feminism and autobiography to argue these types of blogs challenge traditional cultural representations of motherhood (Chen, 2013; Friedman, 2010; Friedman & Calixte, 2009; Lopez, 2009; Lövheim, 2011). Lövheim (2011) looks at all women-authored blogs to show how they constitute ethical spaces that challenge social norms and cultural values. Chen (2013) looks at how mother bloggers define themselves to argue that in sharing their personal narratives they are exploring

the boundaries of cultural expectations and their own experiences of motherhood. Lopez (2009) describes blogging as an extension of women's earlier attempts to "narrativize" personal experience through diaries and journals. She argues that mother blogs present a distinct forum to redefine conventional notions and assumptions about what it means to be a mother. She ends by arguing the potential of these communities to tackle social justice or political issues has not yet been explored and exploited. Friedman and Calixte (2009) caution any challenges to traditional notions of motherhood are limited, given mother bloggers are mostly white, able, middle class and heterosexual. In this way, mother blogs only challenge traditional notions of motherhood for very particular mothers, while simultaneously reinforcing constraints for mothers who parent outside normative society (p. 30).

Building on the notion that women are reconstituting the myths of "good mothers" through the blogosphere, Friedman analyzed the content of mother blogs and found five key characteristics. She finds mother blogs are diverse (in location and experience); multitudinous (in sheer number of blogs); relational (in how they interact across blogs); atemporal (going past and forward) and performative (in sharing experiences that are not prescriptive) (Friedman, 2011). Yonker's (2012) content analysis revealed four patterns of content types from mother bloggers: the negotiation of their mothering inexperience; the negotiation of their identities; the struggle with body image; and, the judgement of other mothers.

Many researchers point to the inclusive communities that emerge from the practice of mother blogging (Lövheim, 2011; Yonker, 2012; Chen, 2013) and how this relationship works to connect both writer and reader (Yonker, 2012; Fleming, 2008). Morrison focuses her research on the unique communities or "intimate publics" created by motherhood bloggers, based on the "emotional, physical, and intellectual labor of parenting" that differentiates these blogs from the

broader scope of personal blogs. She speaks of the bond of trust and support that develops between blogger and reader that becomes a meaningful friendship within these communities (Morrison, 2011). Yonker (2012) warns however that while mother blogging is a social practice, it cannot replace the intimate ties created in off-line relationships. Research into the comments readers leave on mother blogs reveals they are a largely supportive audience who perform a “support group” function for the blogger and for each other, creating an environment of trust (Yonker, 2012). In some cases readers feel a closeness and a loyalty to the mother bloggers and begin to see them as friends and not strangers (Lopez, 2009).

### **2.3 Online Endorsements and Disclosures of Material Connections**

The co-mingling of advertising and informational content and its effect on audiences have been identified as an ethical issue. Balasubramanian (1994) looked at the trustworthiness of paid messages that use non-commercial tactics and questioned whether audiences who were continually exposed to this type of advertising would experience an “immunization effect.” He identified a need for research into public policy that would require advertisers to disclose their intent to help audiences understand the context of these messages. Newell, Blevins, and Bugeja (2009) surveyed audience perceptions of “stealth” advertising and their views on government, industry and self-regulation. They found individuals showed high levels of cynicism towards the ability of governments and corporations to regulate advertising while considering themselves highly capable of “seeing through” (p. 214) marketing claims. Despite this confidence in their ability, the research suggests that individuals may overestimate the effects of mass media on others, and underestimate the effects of mass media on themselves. Spence and Quinn (2008) argue that information commits both creators and consumers to epistemological and ethical standards and thus disseminators of information need to commit to certain ethical principles and

values, namely honesty, sincerity, truthfulness, trustworthiness, reliability, and justice. They argue these ethical principles are intrinsic to the normative structure of information and thus are rationally unavoidable, not optional. Given these types of ethical considerations, it is valuable to look at the current regulatory environment where commercial content on blogs is being produced to see if it does enough to protect the reader.

In Canada, the regulation of advertising falls under the *Competition Act* (1985), which applies to all representations that directly or indirectly promote business interests, regardless of the medium used. The act includes provisions to prevent deceptive marketing practices characterized in part as false or misleading representations. The act is supported by enforcement guidelines including the *Enforcement Guidelines on the Application of the Competition Act to Representations on the Internet* last updated in 2009. Although the guidelines state online advertisements must be free from ambiguity and connections to advertisers must be disclosed, it does not specify that sponsored blog reviews are advertisements nor does it set out what form disclosures should take. While it has become common for marketers to approach bloggers to post reviews, the question of whether these reviews are advertisements is not necessarily clear. Some say the products bloggers receive are for review purposes only and that journalists have received similar products for years without needing to disclose their relationships with the marketers (Basen, 2012; Gillmor, 2009). Nowak (2009) believes the lack of specificity in the Canadian regulation is a jurisdictional issue given that online advertising in Canada is overseen by three government agencies: the Competition Bureau, the Privacy Commission and the Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission. Regardless of the reason, the result is vague public policy that leaves industry and bloggers largely self-regulated.

In that respect, some voluntary codes have been drafted. The Advertising Standards of Canada is a self-regulatory body for the industry, which includes guidance on endorsements and disclosure in its *Canadian Code of Advertising Standards*. Like the *Competition Act*, these standards broadly define advertising as “any message (the content of which is controlled directly or indirectly by the advertiser) expressed in any language and communicated in any medium ... to Canadians with the intent to influence their choice, opinion or behaviour.” These standards also include a clause prohibiting “disguised advertising techniques” and deceptive testimonials, but clear definitions of these terms are not provided (Advertising Standards of Canada, n.d.). In some cases, bloggers themselves have begun trying to address the ambiguity of existing regulations by drafting their own disclosure statements or pitch policies (e.g., see Trgovac, 2010 and Arsenault, 2010). In these statements, the bloggers pledge to disclose their relationships with advertisers but stress the opinions expressed in the post content are their own. Despite these claims, some feel the opinions of bloggers cannot be unbiased in the face of these commercial inducements especially given that similar statements in mainstream media would be met with scepticism (Basen, 2012). Ginosar and Levi-Faur (2010) say this patchwork of regulatory regimes is typical of advertising policies that tend to focus on the medium, the audience or the type of product instead of taking a systematic and comprehensive approach.

In contrast to Canada, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the United States clearly states how these types of blog posts should be governed through the *Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising* (2009) supported by the *.com Disclosures: How to Make Effective Disclosures in Digital Advertising* (2013). The former describes endorsements as “any advertising message ... that consumers are likely to believe reflects the opinions, beliefs, findings, or experiences of a party other than the sponsoring advertiser” (para.

255b). Key to the current discussion is that the guide expressly states, "The post of a blogger who receives cash or in-kind payment to review a product is considered an endorsement" (Federal Trade Commission, 2009a). This concept is explored through straightforward examples.

| Scenario   | Application of regulation                          |
|--|--|
| A woman tries a new brand of dog food and blogs about it   | Not an endorsement                                 |
| A dog food company that tracks customer purchases rewards a customer with a free bag of dog food. The customer then blogs about the experience | Not an endorsement                                 |
| A woman joins a marketing program where she gets free products she can choose to review  | Endorsement. These posts fall under FTC regulation |

In defining online ads, the FTC says basic principles of advertising apply including:

1. Ads must be truthful
2. Ads must have evidence to back up claims
3. Ads cannot be unfair (defined as likely to cause consumer injury)

The guidelines also state that advertisers and endorsers are both equally liable for statements made even if the advertiser has no control over the final content. This shared liability extends to disclosures as well, leaving both advertisers and endorsers legally responsible for failing to disclose material connections.

This idea of disclosing material connections between sellers and endorsers is a key element of the guidelines. The *Guide* clearly states these connections can be made through cash payments, the offer of free products or connections made in any way that might materially affect

the credibility that readers attach to his endorsement. The guidelines explicitly state how these disclosures should be made in regards to:

1. Proximity and placement
2. Prominence
3. Distracting factors in ads
4. Repetition
5. Multimedia messages and campaigns
6. Understandable language

The guide includes mock ads to illustrate these principles. While the text appears prescriptive, the guidelines stress that the test of whether disclosures are effective is not based on these specific rules, but on the basic principle that the disclosure needs to be “clear and conscious.”

The FTC has acknowledged that social media marketing has become so common, it risks eroding consumer skepticism and damaging our ability to evaluate these types of messages (Dunaway, 2010). Their guidelines stress the need for readers to evaluate the credibility of these types of messages especially in a social media environment that depends on a writer’s ability to retain his or her credibility as a reliable source (Federal Trade Commission, 2009b). Little research has been done, however, to understand readers’ perceptions of credibility in these online spaces. As Kuhn, Hume and Love (2010) say, although regulation has evolved to regulate the “subconscious coercion of consumers” there is a lack of research to quantify these potential effects.

In March 2013 the FTC released an updated version of their disclosure guidelines adding greater clarity around smaller screen devices and changing social media platforms. Given the

global nature of the internet and the commonality in advertising practices between Canada and the U.S., any changes in U.S. practices and increased disclosures as a result of the new FTC guidelines are likely to become the standard practice in Canada (Weinrib, 2011). With this in mind, this thesis will use both the FTC's principles of advertising as they relate to endorsements and the disclosure measurement principles to guide the content analysis of Canadian mother blog posts to help develop a broader understanding of commercial content on Canadian mother blogs.

## **2.4 Online Credibility Assessment**

A review of how credibility is conceptualized and preceding models of credibility assessment serves to situate this study.

**2.4.1 Related concepts.** Credibility has been studied broadly across a number of disciplines including communications, psychology, marketing, management and information studies. Its multidisciplinary nature means that scholars approach the field with different goals resulting in different but related concepts of credibility such as authority, quality, trust and persuasion (Rieh & Danielson, 2007, p. 309). These scholars apply varying definitions of credibility generally drawing on the concepts of believability (Metzger, 2007; Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Moore & Rodgers, 2005); fairness, completeness, and trustworthiness (Moore & Rodgers, 2005); and objectivity (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). Researchers generally agree the concept is multi-dimensional (Lim & Simon, 2011; Metzger, 2007) and multi-disciplinary (Rieh & Danielson, 2007) with two key contributing factors: expertise and trustworthiness (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Lim & Simon, 2011; Metzger, 2007). Expertise refers to the source's qualifications or competence on a topic, while trustworthiness refers to the source's motivations to tell the truth (O'Keefe, 2002, p.183). Therefore, assessing credibility relies on both subjective and objective judgements – subjective judgements of the source's trustworthiness

as well as objective judgements of their expertise (Lim & Simon, 2011; Metzger, 2007). In information studies, credibility has been studied in relation to relevance, or the perceptions of the potential usefulness of information. This concept is often interlinked with assessments of information sources since people are more likely to find information useful if it comes from a credible source (Rieh & Danielson, 2007, p. 310). Credibility has also been found to be moderated by a user's experience and knowledge and by the types of information they seek (Lim & Simon, 2011). To reflect the key concepts of trust as well as how users bring their own experiences to their assessment of credibility, this study uses Rieh's (2010) definition of credibility judgements as "people's assessment of whether information is trustworthy based on their own expertise and knowledge" (p. 1338).

**2.4.2 Credibility and electronic information seeking.** Online information seeking is informed by the idea of everyday information practices where people identify, seek, use and share information to make sense of world and its events (Savolainen, 2008). In this way information practices are embedded in everyday life and are therefore "invisible" and hard to see in great detail (Savolainen, 2008, p. 3). The term "credibility" began appearing in information studies literature in the 1990s likely as a result of the web, which challenged traditional forms of information and source assessments (Rieh & Danielson, 2007, p. 316). Danielson (2005) outlined four characteristics that complicate credibility assessments on the web: the lack of a gatekeeping mechanism; the form of the web; the difficulty in attributing the source; and the novelty of the web. One of the first studies on credibility and information seeking looked at the electronic information habits of Finnish bank employees and found that information sources ranked high in credibility and influence, but that the electronic information itself, while perceived as relevant, ranked low in credibility and user friendliness (Olaisen, 1990). Rieh's early work looking at

authority on the web found source characteristics were the primary criteria people used when making credibility judgements, assigning higher levels of credibility to academic and governmental institutions (Rieh, 2002).

Rubin and Liddy (2006) looked specifically at the credibility of blogs, characterizing them as a trust relationship between bloggers and readers where both groups are actively involved in information exchange and credibility building. Their work suggested blogs are a different means of online information exchange because of their distinctive features: blogrolling, their nature of inherent bias and their function as alternatives to other forms of media. They developed a four-dimensional analytic framework based on: the blogger's expertise and offline identity disclosure; the blogger's trustworthiness and value system; the quality of the information; and the personal appeals and triggers.

**2.4.3 Credibility and persuasion.** A topic related to this study is how people make credibility judgements when there is a perceived commercial or persuasive intent. Research has shown that commercial information is seen as less credible than other types of information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000) and that unexpected persuasive content will negatively impact a site's credibility (Fogg, 2003). Information seekers develop knowledge of persuasive techniques that shape how they respond to the information (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Including negative claims about a product can increase its credibility (Settle & Golden, 1974).

**2.4.4 Credibility and information evaluation.** Much research has looked at online credibility assessments and people's ability to evaluate online information. Most of these frameworks suggest users draw on peripheral cues when making credibility judgements including: message credibility, sponsor (source) credibility, and website (medium) credibility (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). Message credibility includes aspects of the content itself such as:

information quality and accuracy; sponsor credibility looks at the creator of the website and may draw on a user's personal experience with the person or group; and website credibility includes visual elements and the amount of information provided (Westerwick, 2013).

Westerwick (2013) looked at the effects of sponsorship, web site design and Google ranking and discovered that sponsorship was a high indicator of credibility assessment and that a high search-engine ranking added to the perceptions of sponsor credibility, whereas an appealing web design could not compensate for low sponsor credibility. Metzger (2007) found that user motivation moderated how readers critically evaluate information online, suggesting that credibility assessments are not single evaluative processes, but that users may apply different processes at different times to evaluate the credibility of online information. Similar research by Westerwick (2013) found that when the level of a user's topic involvement (personal knowledge or relevance) was high, the likelihood that they would scrutinize the message content was also higher.

Lankes (2008) found that users are increasingly shifting models of credibility from the traditional authority of trusted sources to a “reliability approach” where users synthesize multiple sources to make credibility judgements. As the internet becomes more of a place for community participation, different models of credibility will apply and that digital networks that invite community participation will become the predominant model.

Content types also affect user's perceptions of credibility with research showing that news organization websites are perceived as more credible than other site genres because they employ editorial control and fact checking (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). Similarly, Moore and Rodgers (2005) looked at credibility assessments of advertising across five genres and found that credibility was highest for traditional media and lowest for the Internet. Moreover the reader's

suspicion that the content was advertising reduced the credibility of the content in each medium. Lim and Simon (2011) compared students' perceptions of credibility in Wikipedia articles on different topics and found that the subject of the entries was not related to credibility judgements.

Increasingly researchers are focusing on heuristic approaches to credibility assessment since results indicate that while experienced users are aware of systematic strategies for information processing, they tend not to draw on this knowledge in practice (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). Instead, they routinely invoke cognitive heuristics to evaluate the credibility of information online (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010). Choo (2002) identifies these types of heuristics as "tacit knowledge," a class of implicit knowledge implicit based on shared experience. While difficult to formalize and articulate these strategies can provide the creative impetus necessary to solve complex problems. The research of Hilligoss and Rieh (2008) reveals a combination of strategies for assessing information that includes three levels of credibility assessment: construct (how a person conceptualizes credibility); heuristics, ("general rules of thumb" used to make judgements); and, interaction (judgements based on peripheral cues).

Although a large number of previous studies have looked at the multitude of factors that affect credibility assessments of online information, further study is needed to see how blogs and blog posts fit into this framework.

## **2.5 Conceptual Framework**

Given the paucity of research on the credibility perceptions of blogs and mother blogs in particular, this study adopts an exploratory approach to conceptualizing the research. Flanagin and Metzger's framework serves as a starting point for this research (2007). Although they

propose a three-dimensional framework of message, sponsor and site credibility only message and sponsor will be used in this study. This is further to Wathen and Burkell (2002) who propose that when users find information particularly relevant to them, they overlook weak peripheral cues, such as poor design, and rely more on the information itself. Focusing on the message (or the text) is one way to ground this research in the information studies domain while recognizing that information source and message are profoundly linked and credible messages are seen to come from credible sources (Fragale & Heath, 2004).

The items that make up sponsor and message credibility, according to Flanagin and Metzger, are provided in Table 1. Approaching the subject from a communications perspective as these researchers do, focuses on source and media and views credibility as perceived characteristics that “engender greater or lesser credibility” (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). The current research will apply an information lens to this framework (see Table 2) placing the emphasis on the user’s evaluation of the information and thereby viewing credibility more as a criterion for relevance judgement (Rieh & Danielson, 2007, p. 308) rather than a characteristic of the source or message itself.

Table 1: *Flanagin and Metzger’s sponsor and message credibility framework*

| Sponsor   | Message (as communication)  |
|---|---|
| <p>The extent to which the sponsor is perceived as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a person of high integrity</li> <li>• possessing a positive reputation</li> <li>• successful</li> <li>• trustworthy</li> </ul> | <p>The extent to which the message is perceived as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• believable</li> <li>• accurate</li> <li>• trustworthy</li> <li>• biased</li> </ul> |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• offering products or services of superior quality</li> <li>• prestigious</li> <li>• possessing a sincere interest in important affairs</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• complete</li> </ul> |
|--|--|

Table 2: *Flanagin and Metzger's sponsor and message credibility framework as seen through an informational lens. Changes appear in italics*

| <i>Source (in this case, the blog writer)</i>  | <i>Message (as information)</i>   |
|--|---|
| <p>The extent to which the sponsor is perceived as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a person of high integrity</li> <li>• possessing a positive reputation</li> <li>• successful</li> <li>• trustworthy</li> <li>• offering <i>information</i> of superior quality</li> <li>• prestigious</li> <li>• possessing a sincere interest in <i>the information</i></li> </ul> | <p>The extent to which the message is perceived as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• believable</li> <li>• accurate</li> <li>• trustworthy</li> <li>• <i>objective</i></li> <li>• complete</li> </ul> |

As seen in Table 2, this study's conceptual framework mainly follows that of Flanagin and Metzger (2007) but with some modifications to reflect the informational focus of the research. "Sponsor" becomes "source" to reflect this study's focus on the site authors (the bloggers) and

not at their sponsors. "Message" becomes "information" to focus less on the characteristics of the text and more on its function as a tool for credibility assessment. Finally "bias" becomes "objectivity" recognizing that blogs are inherently biased (Rubin & Liddy, 2006) and that participants may employ other means to assess the independence of the blogger. This framework offers a novel way to conceptualize, categorize, and analyze commercial content on mother blogs through an information lens.

## **2.6 Summary**

This chapter examined selected literature around online reviews, mother blogs, online endorsements and online credibility assessments to identify concepts that could be used to inform the design of this study. From these concepts, a conceptual framework for the research was identified. The following chapter outlines the methodology used in this study.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter describes the qualitative research design, sample selections, data collection, and data analysis strategies for this study. The goal of this study is to explore how mother bloggers combine commercial and informational content on their blogs and how writers and readers perceive the credibility of these posts. As seen in section 2.5 credibility is a user-based judgement of information quality, and source trustworthiness and expertise (Flanagan & Metzger, 2007), therefore a qualitative and interpretive research method was deemed appropriate to develop a more complete understanding of the phenomenon. In their research, Flanagan and Metzger (2007) suggest that online credibility assessment should include both observational studies combined with self-reported data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the question. Fogg (2003) further delineates this idea by suggesting online credibility assessments are made in two phases: firstly, the readers notice an element and secondly, they make judgements about it. Both these phases are necessary for credibility assessment. For these reasons, this study's research unfolded in two stages. The construction of sponsored posts was examined using the framework of the FTC's guidelines around online endorsement to offer insight into how these types of messages are situated on mother blogs. The results of the analysis were used to inform in-depth interviews with bloggers and readers to develop an understanding of the perceived message, and source credibility.

### **3.1 Introduction and Research Design Summary**

This research project uses ethnographic techniques framed within the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism in this context follows the position of Talja, Tuominen and Savolainen's (2005) "cognitive constructivism," the idea that humans construct their own knowledge through their experiences, "an information user is not a passive information processing system but actively makes sense of the surrounding reality and attaches personal

meanings to information" (p.83). This approach enables perspectives of participants to be studied in depth and uses their words to convey meanings. It also provides greater opportunity for exploring and generating ideas (Williamson, 2006). The constructivist paradigm is used in the library and information studies context to show how information users are not passive recipients of objective information but active participants, attaching personal meanings to information (Bradley, 1993, p. 432). This approach has been applied to studies about information needs and information seeking, information retrieval, internet search behaviour and conceptualisations of information literacy (Talja, Tuominen & Savolainen, 2005). In the context of online information credibility perceptions, the constructivist paradigm emphasizes participant experience where judgements lie "within the individual receiving the information" and are "not an intrinsic quality of the information being transmitted." Assessments may be implied by the source of the information, but are not conferred by it (Lankes, 2008, p. 669).

Adopting this approach raises the argument between technological determinism, the idea that technology is the key determinant for effecting cultural change; and social constructivism, the idea that culture shapes technology. In her work on virtual ethnography, Hine (2000) argues that cyberspace provides a unique area for ethnographic research that can help develop meanings of technology and "the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it" (p.8), but that these results can only happen when beliefs about technology's relationship to culture are made explicit. Given this need for precision, it should be stated that this project adopts the view that blogs are both a culture and a cultural object, simultaneously creating and reflecting the culture of the moment.

In addition, this study looks at credibility perceptions within the context of Savolainen's (2008) concept of everyday life information seeking. Savolainen defines everyday information

practices as “a set of socially and culturally expressed ways to identify, seek, use and share the information available in various sources such as TV, newspapers and the Internet” (p. 2). This type of information seeking has two purposes: to orient one's self in the world and to seek practical information (p. 83). Applying this idea to the web and given the medium’s ever-changing nature, online information activities therefore should be seen as “a process of interaction and interpretation rather than mere access and retrieval” (Chandrashekar, 2010).

To explore the research questions, a two-stage process was followed that included content analysis and exploratory interviews. The first phase involved a qualitative content analysis of mother blog posts to see how commercial and informational content are represented. For the purpose of this study, content analysis can be understood as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). Content analysis is a term widely used in LIS research in quantitative, qualitative and mixed modes of research (White and Marsh, 2006). A systematic reading of the mother blog posts was followed by categorization and analysis to make inferences about the messages within the texts; the author; and/or, the audience, to help understand the social interaction that takes place (Busch et al., 2012). The second phase looked at perceptions of these posts through the administration of semi-structured long-form interviews with mother bloggers and readers to explore the concept in greater depth and to collect data in the participant’s own words (Kolb, 2012). Collecting, analyzing, and cross-checking data from the content analysis, and the interviews using multiple perspectives triangulated the study to heighten its credibility and confirmability (White & Marsh, 2006). The content analysis followed Maxwell’s (2005) interactive qualitative method, incorporating the flexibility of the constant comparison method while focusing on data interpretation and not emerging theory. The

interviews followed a model of “responsive interviewing” developed by Rubin and Rubin (2005) which relies on an interpretive constructionist philosophy and aims to provide depth of understanding rather than breadth.

### **3.2. Ethics Review**

This project was reviewed and approved by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board in accordance with university policy, the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable regulations in Ontario (Appendix M). Included in this review were issues of data handling, confidentiality and the storage and destruction of files at the end of the study.

### **3.3. Phase 1: Content Analysis**

**3.3.1. Sampling of blog posts.** Using the FTC's definition of online endorsements, this study set out to find blog posts that resulted from remuneration by sponsors. Because a random sampling of the blogosphere is a practical impossibility (Herring, 2010) and given the exploratory nature of this study, this project employed a purposive sample, starting with the “ShesConnected Directory of Women Bloggers” (n.d.). ShesConnected is one of a number of companies whose purpose is to connect marketers with bloggers. Given the commercial nature of the business of the parent site, the directory seemed likely to yield bloggers who accept payment in exchange for reviews. The site also originates in Canada and so was thought to be likely to list a high number of Canadian bloggers. Lastly, the searchable directory sorted entries into a "Family and Parenting" category, which seemed likely to produce a high number of mother bloggers.

Another criterion of this method of sampling was looking for blogs that were firmly in the public space. In part this was a response to the “creepy thesis” debate, an online discussion that arose when a mother blogger stumbled on an academic thesis that used content from her

blog without her consent (Donders, 2010). Mother bloggers taking part in the discussion were divided over whether their writings should be considered public or private. The current study therefore attempts to include only those writers who situate themselves in the public space. By adding themselves to the ShesConnected directory, it was assumed the writers were choosing to promote and share their blogs. The researcher did not contact the writers of these blogs in case it made her more sympathetic to the writer or made the writer delete or change their posts knowing they were being watched by a researcher.

Sampling began with a list of the 842 bloggers downloaded from the directory under the “Family and Parenting” category. An online random number generator was used to select entries for potential inclusion in the sample. Each randomly identified entry was evaluated based on the following selection criteria. Bloggers needed to be:

- Single authors of personal reflection type blogs as described by Friedman (2010)
- Active – posting at least 1 time per week
- Enduring – writing for at least 1 year
- Female – to be representative of the bulk of parenting bloggers
- Self-identified as mother bloggers – through blog name, profile information or clear focus on parenting, family and lifestyle issues
- Writing and living in Canada – to control for any regional bias

The directory contained many blogs that were not part of the study such as corporate blogs or those that originated outside Canada. Also, a larger number of entries were excluded because they did not fit this study’s definition of mother blogs as a “purposive and deliberate social engagement ... that mitigates the assorted ills ... and celebrates the particular joys of contemporary mothering” (Morrison, 2010, p. 38). Excluded bloggers included those that were

not clearly on the subject of parenting and child-rearing (for example, recipe blogs) or those that did not exhibit at least some degree of social engagement (for example, blogs that posted exclusively on coupons or giveaways). Blogs that were accepted into the study included one written by a “non-mom” who despite not being a mother, still wrote on the topic of motherhood and parenting and wrote in a socially engaged manner. The process of selecting what to include was therefore in some cases subjective which may point to the need for a more clear and nuanced definition of mother blogs than what exists in the literature to date. Also, sifting through the directory to find suitable blogs was time-consuming and there are likely to be more efficient methods that could be explored in future studies.

There are many ways to study blogs (Yonker, 2012) and multiple ways to define what to study in the web context. As Chandrashekar (2010) points out, information activities of a web user involve interactions with both website (the structural perspective), and web content (the semantic perspective), and so both should be included in the study on online information interactions. The proliferation of web-enabled devices however problematizes the definition of website, when one site can appear in multiple iterations on different devices. Furthermore a study of both website and web content would be time and resource intensive. As a result, this study was designed specifically to look at blog posts only, thus it did not include website design, blog rolls, hyperlinking protocols, comments left by readers or peripheral information, such as sidebar text, that accompanied the posts.

Once the sample was established, 40 posts written from October 1, 2012 to November 27, 2012 were identified for inclusion and the text of these posts was saved for analysis. These dates reflect the months with the highest retail sales in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2012), and as such were deemed to be most likely to include commercial content. Only those posts that met the FTC

endorsement guidelines, i.e. "the post of a blogger who receives cash or in-kind payment to review a product" (2009a) were included. Determination of endorsement came from the bloggers themselves who identified whether payment was received either within the text or as a separate disclosure statement accompanying the post. To ensure a cross-section of bloggers was included in the sample, a maximum of ten posts was accepted per blogger. If a blogger had more than ten commercial posts in the two-month period, the first ten were included before moving to the next blogger on the list. Only English language posts were included because of the limitations of the researcher and to control for cultural or linguistic bias. Finally, for inclusion in the study, posts needed to be at least 300 words in length, to ensure enough content for analysis. Once completed, the sampling and unitizing yielded a list of 40 posts, from 8 bloggers. The greatest number of posts attributed to one blogger was 9 and the least was 1. The list of blog posts and their URLs can be found in Appendix L.

**3.3.2. Data Analysis.** One aim of this study was to examine how commercial activity is represented in mother blogs posts. To that end, a content analysis of mother blogger writing was conducted following Maxwell's (2005) interactive qualitative method. This method was chosen as an analytic strategy because it focuses on data interpretation rather than emerging theory; that is, it accommodates a coding scheme that draws on existing theoretical models but is largely informed by the data itself. This provided the researcher with the flexibility to draw from existing knowledge in the field while adopting an unstructured approach to accommodate emergent insights informed by the dataset (Maxwell, 2005, p. 80). The method is appropriate for descriptions of what can be observed in a given setting regardless of the theoretical relevance, answering questions of "how" and not "by what action" (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 74-75).

Maxwell (2005) argues that traditional research design adopts a linear approach starting with a clear goal and following a one-directional sequence of steps. He argues this approach does not fit qualitative research where any component of the research design may need to be reconsidered or modified at any point during the study. In his view data collection, analysis and validity happen simultaneously and this process cannot be represented in a more prescriptive model. He proposes instead a model of research design that is ongoing involving interconnection among the design components including considering how the design is influenced by its environment, constantly making adjustments and changes. This is what he calls the "interactive" model with an interconnected and flexible structure.

Following Maxwell's content analysis method, the blog posts were first read and some initial observational notes were taken. The posts were then reviewed and more closely analyzed to create lists of repeated themes to facilitate comparison and aid in the development of categories. Category creation focused on identifying repeating groups of substantive or descriptive themes, that reflected core concepts but that stayed close to the data without implying abstract theory that might produce results outside the scope of this study. The content was then analyzed further to create more entries and to refine categories. Throughout the process, memos were written to develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships (Maxwell, 2005). The content analysis was informed by key concepts identified in the literature review including the FTC's concept of online endorsements and "clear and conspicuous" (2013) disclosure of material connections as well as Toder-Alon, Brunel and Fournier's (2013) repertoire of electronic word of mouth rhetorical models. Although these researchers provided some areas to consider when beginning the analysis, the coding sheet expanded as more topics emerged (see Appendix J for a sample post showing initial analysis and secondary analysis conducted after the categories were

defined). The analysis ended after all 40 posts were coded and little new information was emerging.

### **3.4. Phase 2: Interviews**

**3.4.1. Sampling and recruitment of participants.** To date, most mother blog research has been conducted at the textual level, whereas credibility research is often based on survey or experimental evidence. This study sought to perform an empirical investigation of the credibility assessments of commercial content on mother blogs using semi-structured interviews. This approach was deemed to have some advantages over other methods. First, interviews provide a nuanced view of participants' experiences. Secondly, they require interviewees to reflect on their experiences rather than respond to experiments created by the researcher. They also allow for continuous refinement of the research process as the interviews progress and different themes appear. During the research process, this became evident as cognitive heuristics became an emerging theme (see Findings chapter) and the interview process was able to adapt to incorporate these ideas. The interview approach became a useful means to identify cognitive heuristics that are not easily measurable using conventional methods (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010).

Participants were selected by the researcher using purposive sampling, identified through snowball methods, to find regular readers and writers of mother blogs. Snowball sampling allowed participants to refer others who might be likely to participate in the study (Patton, 1990, p. 182). This approach produced a deliberate sample of participants chosen based on criteria that was relevant to the research rather than criteria of randomness (Patton, 2002, p. 176). This is a valid approach to take when information richness is the most important factor, not sample size (Patton, 1990, p. 182).

Blog readers were recruited through an invitation email distributed to a small group of friends and acquaintances of the researcher (Appendix A). This approach was chosen as the researcher is the mother of a young child, a blog reader and a person who is comfortable with technology. It was believed that targeting certain friends and acquaintances who matched the researcher's profile would be helpful in identifying participants for this study. The email summarized the goals of the research, outlined the selection criteria (see question 3.1), described the extent of participant involvement and provided the researcher's contact information. The email asked recipients to forward the message to contacts unknown by the researcher but thought to be interested in participating. Five volunteers who met the selection criteria contacted the researcher. Two did not respond to follow up emails and subsequently three were accepted for inclusion in the study. The interview process was explained to all volunteers in the initial response from the researcher (Appendix B).

Readers were selected purposively on the basis of the following criteria. In order to participate, they had to be:

- Active readers of mother blogs (at least twice a week)
- Female (as they are representative of the bulk of mother blog readers (Thompson, 2007) )
- Older than 18 years
- In the Ottawa-Gatineau region
- Available and interested in participation

Blog writers were chosen from the Ottawa area. They were recruited through individual invitation emails that summarized the goals of the research, outlined the selection criteria for bloggers (see question 3.1), described the extent of participant involvement and provided contact

information of the researcher (Appendix C). Five bloggers were contacted and three agreed to participate in the study. One never responded to the initial request.

For the blogger interviews, participants were approached purposively on the basis of the following criteria. They were:

- Active bloggers (posting at least 1 time per week)
- Single author of a personal, diary-style blog
- Older than 18 years
- Long-term bloggers (writing for at least 1 year)
- Female (this study focuses only on female parenting bloggers)
- Self-identified as motherhood bloggers (through blog name, profile information or clear focus on parenting, family and lifestyle issues)
- Informed about the issue of advertising on mother blogs (as seen through blog content, speaking engagements etc.)
- Well known and respected in the mother blogging community (as seen by number of comments on posts, number of Twitter followers, appearance in other forms of media such as print, radio and television)
- In the Ottawa-Gatineau region
- Accessible to the researcher, and available and interested in participation

Any potential blogger or reader who was known personally to the researcher was deselected.

The samples were small due to the exploratory nature of the project and the limited time and resources available. These numbers were deemed sufficient, however, to provide enough data to make inferences about the messages within the texts and to create a general

understanding of the issues faced by mother bloggers and their readers. It is understood the small sample means the process is inherently subjective and cannot describe objective reality or be generalized to the broader population however, the qualitative nature of the project provides in-depth understanding of participant's perceptions of commercial and informational content on mother blogs.

**3.4.2. Initial connections/correspondence.** Initial contact was established with all participants through email. The researcher used the opportunity to answer any questions the participants had and to arrange an appropriate time and place to meet for the interview. The nature of semi-structured interviews requires a certain trust and rapport between the researcher and the participants and these initial messages provided a means to start building this relationship to help the participants feel at ease about the process.

**3.4.3. Interview design.** The study involved individual long-form interviews with mother bloggers and readers. Interviews were semi-structured including open-ended questions and were designed to last no longer than 45 minutes. The interviews followed a model of "responsive interviewing" developed by Rubin and Rubin (2005) where prepared questions served as starting points but the interview structure was flexible to give participants the opportunity to clarify and reflect as necessary. The model relied on the interpretive constructionist philosophy and aimed to provide depth of understanding rather than breadth. The interview guides (Appendix G for blog readers and Appendix H for bloggers) therefore were designed as general points of departure and the questions, their order and levels of specificity changed as the interviews progressed.

**3.4.4. Pre-test.** The interview guides were tested prior to the interview using acquaintances of the researcher who closely matched the recruitment criteria but who could not participate in the study given their association with the researcher. These pre-tests revealed areas

that needed to be clarified such as re-organizing the questions to provide a more logical sequence and including broad questions around the types of blogs participants read to provide context to the responses.

**3.4.5. Interviews.** Interviews were conducted in English in the Ottawa area, Canada. Interviews with bloggers and readers took place at a time and place convenient and comfortable for the participants and included coffee shops. One reader and all three bloggers asked to be interviewed over the telephone or through Skype and these requests were granted. Although telephone interviews lack the same visual cues that face-to-face meetings provide, they were deemed acceptable in this study because they were the preferred method of contact cited by these participants and not a method imposed by the researcher. In addition these participants were deemed likely to feel comfortable with mediated communication as blog readers and writers would necessarily regularly use technology to access and create information.

Interviews generally lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were audio recorded by the researcher using Quick Time on her MacBook computer or Call Recorder, a Skype add-on. The interview guides set the direction of the interview (Appendices G and H). Throughout the interview process, the researcher created memos to record the evolving understanding of the research problem. The interview guides were then adjusted to include emerging themes from previous interviews. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher who subsequently conducted iterative textual analysis to uncover themes as they emerged.

Rubin and Rubin's model of interviewing was a starting point using a semi-structured focus that is especially effective for describing social processes (Rubin and Rubin, p. 3). General questions were prepared in advance but their order and wording were adapted as the interview progressed. Probes were added to add clarification to responses. An attempt was made to let

participants describe their experiences in their own words and to discuss any subject they felt was relevant, even if it did not appear to be on topic. Analysis was undertaken while interviews were underway to look for core concepts and to adapt and design follow up questions.

Before each interview, participants were reminded of the purpose and goals of the research project. They were told they could end the interview at any time or choose not to answer questions. They were asked to read and sign a consent form (Appendices E and F). The telephone and Skype participants signed their consent forms and emailed them to the researcher before the interviews. All interviews ended by asking the participants if they had anything else they would like to add. The researcher then thanked them, and invited them to contact the researcher if they had any further thoughts. One reader followed up by sending a link to a post she had referenced in her interview.

**3.4.6. Data analysis.** The data were analyzed to identify themes, patterns and concepts. Acknowledging that credibility is a multidimensional construct and situation-dependent (Rieh & Danielson, 2007, p. 316), attempts were made by the interviewer to adopt the terms used by the participant. This approach follows a method of uncovering candidate terms outlined by Rieh and Danielson (p. 314) that accepts participants own terms and then summarizes them to provide a more nuanced understanding of credibility. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the tight timeframe this method was deemed adequate despite the inherent subjectivity of the researcher when interpreting results (Rieh & Danielson, 2007, p. 315).

Analysis was ongoing during fieldwork to create a progressive development of understanding that illuminated new issues to inform further data collection (Bradley, 1993). Ongoing analysis techniques included writing up notes after each interview and memoing (writing periodic summaries by the researcher). Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed

using the constant comparison method of Maxwell (2005) where similar themes were grouped together and unique responses were isolated for further analysis. To understand how credibility judgements are enacted and understood by participants, the transcripts of their interviews were studied in detail. The words were analyzed as they were stated without trying to uncover symbolic meanings (Garfinkel, 1996). Once the interviews were completed and the data were collected, they were broken down into smaller pieces and grouped into categories to show patterns. These categories were tested against the full range of data to ensure meaningful patterns were identified and supported. The analysis was interpretive rather than focused on theory-building, letting the formation of categories emerge from observation (Bradley, 1993).

**3.4.7 Participants.** Participants were recruited based on the selection criteria outlined in section 3.3.1. Although specific demographic and profile information was not collected, this information often came up during the interviews. The three readers interviewed were all female and living in the Ottawa-Gatineau area. All were mothers of children ranging in age from approximately 12 months to 10 years. Although age and employment status were not directly questioned, the data can be gleaned from the results of the interview. One worked part-time as a consultant and the other two worked full-time outside of the home. One participant had just returned to work after a one-year maternity leave. Age data were not gathered, but the age range of participants can be broadly characterized as being from 30-45, this is deduced from the conversations with the participants. Readers generally said they had started reading blogs around the time they got married or had their first child. In one case, this meant they had been reading mother blogs for 10 years, others reported reading them for closer to 2-3 years.

Similarly, the three bloggers interviewed were all female and living in the Ottawa-Gatineau area. They were also all mothers although with somewhat older children, ranging in age

from approximately 5 to 12. In addition to their blogs, all worked in the communications and research field and none depended on their blogs for their entire income. One worked full-time outside of the home, while two worked full-time as consultants. One of the selection criteria was that bloggers needed to be informed about the issues surrounding advertising in posts. In this regard, the three bloggers were selected for their varied experience and opinions on the subject as depicted on their blogs. One blogger had been blogging since 2005, before advertising became commonplace on mother blogs, but had since accepted both advertising and sponsored posts onto her site. A second was a relatively recent blogger, blogging since 2009 and had always accepted sponsorships. The third blogger had been blogging since 2008 but chose not to accept sponsorship for posts although she did accept advertising on her site and she acted as an affiliate for an online retailer. Their varied experiences with blogging and sponsorship may have diffused the results more than necessary. Further study could investigate this experience of mother bloggers more to see if it affects the results. To protect their identity, readers in this study will be referred to as R1, R2 and R3. Similarly, bloggers will be referred to as B1, B2 and B3. All identifying details will be omitted from the analysis.

### **3.5. Validation**

Qualitative research requires rigorous criteria to assess the trustworthiness of the methods. This study used the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to guide the trustworthiness of the project. The study was designed to include three areas of data collection: text analysis, blogger interviews and reader interviews. This triangulated the study by introducing multiple data sources to support the analysis.

Textual analysis is inherently subjective however, inviting interpretations based in the researchers own biases and history; however the researcher attempted to be non-judgemental when compiling the data. Being outside the community of mother blogs - i.e., not being a producer or current reader of mother blogs - gave the researcher a detached perspective that those more familiar with the community might not have.

In selecting participants for the study, the researcher use purposive sampling. In the case of bloggers this meant the researcher could seek out participants with a broad range of experiences with commercial content. The interview guide was also pretested to note and correct any biases. Audio recordings of these interviews ensured that participants' experiences were described in their own words. Transcription of these interviews provided the means to analyze the text, but also ensured the text was as the speakers had provided. Regular contact with the researcher's supervisor added another layer of transparency by ensuring analysis was consistent and impartial.

Lastly, in terms of transferability, the findings presented in this study included thorough documentation of the methodology, data collection and data analysis to help provide background to the research methods. Direct quotes from participants are included and provide the reader with alternate ways to interpret the data. In addition, the results of the research are grounded in previous scholarly research on the topic.

### **3.6. Study Limitations**

The researcher conducted a series of semi-structured interviews, which provided rich and nuanced data on credibility judgements online, specifically in the social space of blogs. This type of research is not often found in the current literature on mother blogs, which relies almost exclusively on textual analysis, nor is it often found in the literature on credibility judgements,

which tends toward survey and experimental data. The researcher acknowledges, however, that the results should not be seen as an objective “truth” but rather a “construction resulting from an interaction of the researcher and research participants” (Williamson, 2006).

While not being part of the mother blogging community may have increased the impartiality of the researcher, it is possible that nuances were overlooked that would not have been missed had she been more familiar with the intimacies of this community. In addition the tight timeline of the study did not allow for lots of reflection time between interviews nor did it allow for a wide circle of interviewees. Furthermore, interviews depend on participants perceptions of a concept and are not always reliable (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010). Given more time a larger study could have been designed and executed. However, given the exploratory nature of the study, while the results cannot be generalized, the study hopefully provides enough information to see if further research in this area is warranted.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

This chapter describes the findings of this study. The first research question this study seeks to answer is "How is commercial activity represented in the content of mother blogs?" As discussed in Chapter One, a mix of commercial and informational content increases the need to critically evaluate information to assess its value. To examine how bloggers write about commercial content on mother blogs, a qualitative content analysis was undertaken on a sample of posts fitting the FTC's description of online endorsements. By first determining the topics these bloggers chose to write about, the methods they use to frame these topics and how information is exchanged therein, we characterize these posts as having a dynamic and multidimensional nature.

The next research questions asked in this study are "How do readers perceive and interpret these posts?" and "How do bloggers perceive and interpret these posts?" A series of semi-structured interviews was undertaken to answer these questions. The concept of credibility can be hard to put into words and so these types of interviews can be particularly useful in identifying common aspects of understanding that emerge from a flexible interview structure (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011).

### **4.1 Commercial Content on Mother Blogs**

**4.1.1 How is commercial activity represented in the content?** To understand online information credibility assessment, it is necessary first to examine the information interaction that takes place between a mother blogger writing sponsored content and the reader. This was examined largely in the context of the FTC description of online endorsements and the rhetorical framework of social media talk developed by Toder-Alon et al. (2013). The latter's focus on social media and advice-giving in a parenting context was deemed to have relevance and

implications for this study where information and marketing meet. Mother bloggers use a variety of means to represent commercial content in their posts. An analysis of the data generated the following six components that promote understanding of information credibility assessment in online endorsements: review object, material connection, sentiment orientation, knowledge approach, foundation of authority and information orientation (see Table 3). Each category is described in Table 3 and examples are provided in the following discussion.

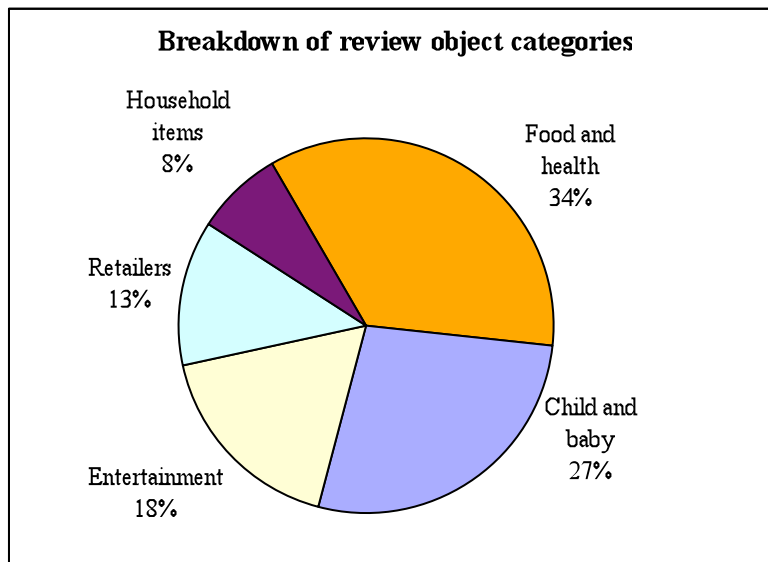
Table 3: *Characteristics of commercial activity in mother blog posts*

| Category                | Attributes   | Description                                       |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| Review object           | Food and health care<br>Child and baby<br>Individual retailers<br>Household items<br>Entertainment | The type of product being reviewed                |
| Material connection     | Implicit<br>Explicit   | How connection to marketer is presented           |
| Sentiment orientation   | Positive<br>Negative<br>Neutral  | Positive, negative or neutral orientation of post |
| Knowledge approach      | Relational<br>Informational<br>Persuasive<br>Interactional<br>Reproductive                         | How information is relayed                        |
| Foundation of authority | Writer<br>Group<br>Expert<br>Marketer  | How believability is conveyed                     |
| Information orientation | Writer<br>Reader   | To whom the information is directed               |

**4.1.1.1 Review object.** The review objects addressed in the sample mother blog posts

include at least one of the following: food and health care products; child and baby products; individual retailers; household items; and, entertainment. It should perhaps not come as a surprise that baby products and food items account for almost two thirds of all items reviewed. In some cases separate bloggers wrote about the same product suggesting there may have been a concerted online marketing campaign taking place in this particular time period. In other cases, especially in the case of bloggers serving as ambassadors<sup>1</sup> for certain brands, the same blogger may have written about the same product in multiple posts. A breakdown of the review object categories can be found in Figure 1. For a full description of the products represented in the sample posts, refer to Appendix K.

Figure 1: *Breakdown of review object categories in mother blog posts*



**4.1.1.2 Material connections.** FTC guidelines (2009) require bloggers to disclose connections between themselves and the advertiser sponsoring the post. For the purposes of this study, only posts that met the FTC endorsement guidelines, that is, posts for which the blogger received cash or in-kind payments, were included in the sample. By necessity, these posts were identified based on the blogger’s disclosure which meant this process necessarily excluded from

<sup>1</sup> A brand ambassador is person employed by a company or organization to provide sustained promotion of its products.

the sample posts where the bloggers have received something in exchange for writing, but did not disclose it. According to the FTC, disclosures need to be "clear and conscious," as measured in part by the proximity to the post, the prominence of the disclosure and the ability to understand it. The sample posts in this study used different methods of disclosure. In 29 cases the disclosures were explicitly stated in separate text appearing at the end of the post; while in 11 other cases, the disclosure was implicit in the text of the post itself.

In the case of 19 sample posts, writers made explicit reference to the free products they had received in exchange for the post. In one case, the blogger put a monetary value on the products received, "PGX® provided me with \$150 worth of PGX® product to facilitate my review/post, along with \$50 worth of coupons for a giveaway prize. I have not been paid for this post" (MyBitsAndBleeps, 2012a). In 8 posts, writers explained their review was fulfilling part of their obligations as part of an ambassador program. These ambassador relationships were often referred to in ambiguous terms so the reader would not know the exact terms of the exchange. For example, Nurse Loves Farmer obliquely refers to the "perks" she received for her review, "I am part of the Sears – The Baby's Room Ambassador program with Mom Central Canada and I receive special perks as part of my affiliation with this group" (Schultz, 2012b). In the case of this blogger, the relationship between blogger and sponsor is potentially complicated by the mention of Mom Central Canada, a company that acts as broker between bloggers and marketers. In these cases, readers may not be able to determine with whom the blogger has a commercial relationship.

Explicit disclosures were also often used as a means for a blogger to assert the impartiality of the supplied information. In twenty posts bloggers made statements about how the opinions expressed in this post were their own (see *Surviving in the Suburbs* and *Nurse Loves*

Farmer for examples). One blogger goes further to say her relationship with the marketer does not bind her to making a positive review, “Hallmark Canada has provided me with promotional item(s) for review; I have not been paid for this post. All opinions expressed (if any) are mine alone; positive comments or review is not required” (MyBitsAndBleeps, 2012e). In another post, this same blogger writes, “Gravol® Natural Source® Multi-symptom® Tablets has provided me with the complimentary above-mentioned product, in exchange for my review (no further compensation has been received). I am not required to give a positive review” (MyBitsAndBleeps, 2012b). The desire to confirm the lack of bias may suggest the bloggers recognize that some people might find sponsorship antithetical to trust. This theme was investigated further in the interviews with bloggers (see section 4.2.2).

In the 29 cases of explicit disclosures, the statements were made at the end of a post, often appearing as part of the footer information and accompanied by signature lines, tags and comment information. The placement of these disclosures at the end of the post may not meet the FTC’s guidelines in terms of prominence and lack of distracting features. This was identified as a factor to investigate in phase two of this study when interviewing blog readers.

While many posts included explicit disclosures, 11 described relationships with sponsors in the text of the post itself. These statements were often included as part of the post’s narrative and were accompanied by positive statements about the products, such Gomez (2012b) who writes, “I was absolutely delighted to have been chosen by Samsung Canada to attend the Mercedes Benz Start-Up National Finals and Melissa Nepton's Show” (n.p.) or Hamilton (2012c) who writes, “Asking me to be a Hasbro Brand Ambassador? An honour!” (n.p.). As with the explicit disclosures, writers who were part of a brand ambassadorship program at times explained their relationships as “perks” received in exchange for writing (e.g., Holmes, 2012d).

In contrast to the explicit disclosures however, none of the implicit disclosures made statements about the writer's neutrality.

In four cases, sponsorship was gleaned from supporting elements such as sidebar advertisements declaring the writer's role as a brand ambassador or links to previous posts that mention the writer's relationship with sponsors. These sidebar advertisements and previous post links were too numerous to be consistently followed by the researcher so some posts may have been incorrectly excluded from the initial sampling. The possible exclusion of those posts however was not deemed to have significant impact on the sample. It is likely this method of implicit disclosure would not be deemed "clear and conscious" by the FTC (2013) and in fact, their guidelines provide a sample of in-text disclosure to show that it is not sufficient to establish a relationship between the writer and the sponsor (p. A-25). In practice however, the spirit of the rule appears to be to ensure readers understand the material connection between writer and reader and it is possible that this relationship can be understood in ways other than those outlined by the FTC. This could be especially true in the mother blogging environment where sustained relationships develop between writer and reader, which could result in either the reader knowing that the writer has a relationship with a sponsor without needing to be reminded every time they review a product, or the reader not caring about the relationship because their trust in the writer is so well established. Interviews with readers can help to clarify whether they understand the relationships between writer and sponsor regardless of how the disclosure is delivered.

**4.1.1.3 Sentiment.** The sentiment analysis undertaken as part of this study was not the main focus of the study, and as such it was not a fine-grained analysis, but rather an attempt to identify the overall sentiment orientation of the posts. The manual coding scheme developed by Jansen, Zhang, Sobel and Chowdury (2009) to identify sentiment in Twitter posts served as a

starting point because it is one of the few studies that provides a manual instead of an automated breakdown of sentiment in social media. These researchers identified six characteristics of sentiment in eWom based on the level of emotion expressed: neutral, where the text has no emotion; wretched, where the text is purely negative with perhaps only one slightly positive word; bad, where the text contains mostly negative words and phrases but may be countered with a few positive statements; so-so, where the positive and negative statements balance each other; swell, where the text is mostly positive and any negative phrases are outweighed by the positive ones; or, great, purely positive text.

All 40 posts included in this study were coded "great," that is they were overwhelmingly positive. In some cases these sentiments were vague expressions of emotion such as Hamilton (2012a) who writes, "When I tried the Club House Butter Chicken ... I fell in love!" (n.p.), or they were constructed using positive adjectives, specifically lauding the benefits of the product such as:

The Arm and Hammer <sup>TM</sup> Diaper Pail has to be one of my favourite must-haves (if not #1)! I'm using it now with a newborn and oh my goodness is it Godsend! Not only is it easy to use, but it really eliminates the odour and carries a lot of dirty diapers too!  
(Gomez, 2012a)

Only four posts included any kind of negative sentiment. In one case this was framed as a joke and in three cases the negative was immediately by a positive, such as Hamilton (2012a) who jokes, "The Herbes de Provence is what I decided to use, since it had fewer ingredients and ones that I always have on hand....dijon, oil, wine. My only criticism was that I had to share MY wine!!" (n.p.) or Holmes (2012c) who hazards a small negative statement but immediately follows it by a positive in her description of a HEPA air purifier:

Now when the Filter is set to III it is a bit loud. Sort of like a fan on its very highest setting [negative], but when it is on I or II it runs much quieter. I rather enjoy the sort of white noise it creates [positive]. (n.p.)

There could be many reasons which would explain why reviews are consistently positive on mother blogs. Blogging costs money (for access, domain names, hosting and time) and sponsors can help defray these costs. Bloggers may feel that negative reviews could compromise their relationships with current and future sponsors and so they choose to review only those products they feel they can endorse to ensure they continue to be approached by sponsors. Alternatively, it could be that marketers conduct sufficient research before approaching bloggers to be able to anticipate the bloggers will enjoy their product. Finally, it could be that bloggers simply choose not to review items that they do not like as one blogger not included in the sample writes, “I don’t accept products or services just for the sake of getting free stuff ... I only accept products and services I will love and know my readers will love too” (Tomkins, 2013). Research would seem to back this up as some data suggest writers are more likely to post positive eWom over negative (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006; East, Hammond, & Wright 2007;) possibly because they think it reflects well on the choices they make and therefore on themselves (Berger, 2012). The reason for consistently positive reviews on mother blogs was investigated further in the interviews with bloggers (see section 4.2.2).

**4.1.1.4 Knowledge approach.** The knowledge approach was informed by the “Advice Framing” component of eWom identified by Toder-Alon et al. (2013); however it was adapted to include the broad range of strategies identified in the sample posts and renamed to better reflect these different forms of information exchange. The content analysis revealed the writers employ five key approaches to the transfer of knowledge: 1) relational, where the writer narrates their experience; 2) informational, where the writer presents information without applying logical arguments for or against; 3) persuasive, where the writer presents reasoned arguments; 4) interactional, where the writer invites communication with the reader; and 5) reproductive, where

the writer includes direct quotes from the marketer. In all posts, writers used a combination of approaches.

All but two posts employed at least some narrative as a means to convey the information. This is consistent with the personal nature of mother blogs and fits with their role as confessional style writing described in section 2.2. In some cases, the stories are personal narratives of the writer's experiences leading to a need for a product, such as this post about a certain brand of vitamins:

When we brought our first little one home [from the hospital], I just knew something wasn't quite right. Within 24 hours of having her home things started going terribly wrong. The scariest symptom, my Blue Eyed girls eyes were actually closer to the colour of Golden Rod in the fall than Cornflower blue. My wee babe was very jaundiced. Blood tests and Doctors confirmed that our little girl, just hours old, needed a little help. The good news, the cure for her was some time under the lights and a regular course of Vitamin D (Holmes, 2012b)

Those writers who include information might list the characteristics of the product (Holmes, 2012a) or price (Holmes, 2012e) or how to use the product (Hamilton, 2012a). In one case, the writer posted a recipe centered on the bread she had received from her sponsor (Gomez, 2012c). In these cases the information was presented without an attempt to persuade.

In just over half of the posts, writers chose an argumentative or logical style in a more persuasive approach to transfer knowledge. In the same post on bread, the writer includes her impressions of the product using a variety of adjectives and emphasizing its benefits, "It's perfect for dipping or coupled with some warm, hearty soup. One of my favourites during the colder months is French Onion Soup. This bread goes superbly with it" (Gomez, 2012c, n.p.) or Hamilton (2012b) who extols the virtues of Chugginton's movies for children, "Each episode is designed to teach simple, yet important, social-emotional lessons that help preschoolers prepare for their early learning years" (n.p.).

In almost three quarters of the posts, writers attempted to bring the reader into the conversation, such as this writer who actively seeks feedback from her readers on a product she bought from a retailer she was reviewing, “What do you think, is this too much? Seriously, I want to know!” (Holmes, 2012d). In most cases, the interactive knowledge exchange is done through giveaways that require the reader to perform some function to enter them in a contest, such as leaving a comment (e.g., Hamilton, 2012a and Gomez, 2012c) How these interactions are perceived was explored further in the interviews.

Finally, 18 posts included information provided by the sponsors of the product either by citing their website information or copying marketing text directly into the post. In half of these cases, the bloggers cite the source of the information, such as Schultz (2012a) who introduces a paragraph on the educational benefits of Lego with, “First, a little bit about LEGO DUPLO from their website...”) (n.p.). She then includes the benefits in an indented paragraph surrounded by quotation marks. Readers can likely reasonably understand the information contained comes from an outside source. But in the other half of these posts, marketer information is copied directly without citing the source, such as Bits and Bleeps who writes:

Financial expert Mary Hunt shows you how to assess your situation, commit to no new debt, and think creatively about gifts. With Mary’s guidance, you’ll discover what caused you to overspend in the past and how to approach this Christmas with a plan. It just might be the best gift you can give yourself and your family. (MyBitsAndBleeps, 2012d)

In these instances, the information came from the book author’s website.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not readers apply a similar sense to information on blog posts was identified as something to ask in the interviews.

**4.1.1.5 Foundation of authority.** The foundation of authority was identified as the

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<sup>2</sup> This was determined by the researcher recognizing a change in tone in the content and doing a Google search on the text to see its origin. This method depended on the researcher sensing a change in the content and so the method could not be applied consistently across posts. There may have been more incidents of un-cited marketing material than the researcher coded.

means by which writers attempt to convey believability in their posts. This concept was operationalized by Toder-Alon et al. (2013) who characterized authority as the ethotic arguments a speaker uses to transfer credibility to their advice. They provided four rhetorical methods by which ethotic achievement is attempted: personal knowledge, formal sources, behaviour and experience (either their own or others). The current study is not focused specifically on rhetoric and so does not require such a nuanced understanding of rhetorical devices and means of persuasion, but the informational consequences of establishing authority are valuable for our understanding of information credibility given that source is identified as a key determinant of credibility assessment in Flanagin and Metzger's framework (2007). For this reason, Toder-Alon et al.'s framework was chosen as a starting point for this study's analysis on this topic of authority. The sample posts attempted to establish authority in one of four ways: via personal knowledge, by referring to formal sources, in reference to membership in a knowledgeable group or by referring directly to marketing materials.

The posting below, shows Gomez (2012d) attempting to establish authority by describing her personal knowledge on the subject:

Before having a child with mild eczema, I was uneducated about it and really only thought that it was nothing, but dry skin or rashes that would flare up on the body from an allergen of some sort. Little did I know there was much more to this skin disorder and the effects can be extremely onerous -- to the person suffering from it and to the wallet. (n.p.)

Her experiences serve as the basis of her expertise. It is perhaps not surprising that this method of appealing to personal expertise was the most common means that bloggers attempted to impart believability to the text, given that mother blogs are based on shared experiences and come out of a tradition of confessional or online diary writing, as described in Chapter One.

Writers also try to establish authority by describing themselves as part of a category of

individuals. This practice may lead readers to make inferences about the writer's character or knowledge based on their inclusion in this group, a process Toder-Alon et al. call "category-bound inferences." The following writer defines herself as the type of mother who loves to bake, using her inclusion in this group of "Mama[s] who loves to bake" to support her review claims, implying that the writer is worth listening to because of her advanced knowledge on the subject of cooking: "You see I am a Mama who loves to bake, and on my dream list is this particular KitchenAid Artisan Stand Mixer!" (Holmes, 2012a). In another case, the writer refers to her daughter as a "Directioner" (a term used to describe fans of the band One Direction). She then describes her daughter's experience of One Direction products sent to her by her sponsor. In this case the writer tries to establish the qualifications of her daughter by virtue of her membership in a group of fans of the band (MyBitsAndBleeps, 2012c).

Other writers try to legitimize their claims by referring to an expert as either someone whose expertise is known to the reader, such as Martha Stewart, "Thanks to the Turkey bacon and little creative thinking, I felt just a little bit like Martha Stewart" (Holmes, 2012c) or as a group known to have knowledge of the subject "#1 Pharmacist Recommended GRAVOL" (Holmes, 2012c).

**4.1.1.6 Information orientation.** Again, the work of Toder-Alon et al. (2013) helped to direct the analysis of the information orientation. They found when eWom advice givers focused their advice along person-oriented lines, they either focused on the giver's experience (self-referential) or the seeker's situation (recipient-referential). This type of information orientation was also observed in the analysis for this study. The orientation was often found either in the expression of need for the product such as Gomez who describes the need for skin cream, "For those of you that have or have children that have suffered from eczema, then you know how

arduous it is just to find that perfect skin product that will help manage the symptoms of this skin disorder” (Gomez, 2012d) thereby directing her post at readers while intimating at a shared knowledge of parenting children with eczema. Alternatively, the focus of the post may be found in the concluding statements about the product such as, “I hope this post helps you in choosing something just right” (Gomez, 2012a). In most cases, bloggers employed both methods in their posts, such as Holmes who begins by framing her post around her desire for a home office makeover, “Life is busy, it’s time I start to control all the little things and stop letting the chaos slow me down!” and then turns the focus to the reader, “If you were to make over your office space what is the one thing you would be sure to include? Start here at SHOP and see what you can find!” (Holmes, 2012d).

**4.1.1.7 Summary.** As summarized in Table 3, the analysis of commercial content on mother blogs suggest a set of categories that determine the essence of these posts. This suggests a type of common model is operating in the way bloggers incorporate commercial content in their posts. Although any given post may not display all the components, similar patterns were found to operate across posts. While writers were consistent in disclosing their relationships with sponsors, they did not always indicate when they were directly quoting marketing material, potentially problematizing a reader’s evaluation of objectivity. Giveaways were a common means to include the reader in the information exchange but this may be seen to be antithetical to the sincere nature of mother blogs as discussed in Chapter Two. All posts expressed overwhelmingly positive sentiment towards the product, which may challenge the writer’s statement that their opinions are their own. Finally, the findings show writers avoid more persuasive or objective methods and choose narrative as the most common means to transfer knowledge of the product, often citing their own experiences as a means to establish the

legitimacy of their claims. This is in keeping with the storytelling nature of online blogs as described in Chapter Two. These findings suggest these posts represent a particular form of information sharing and therefore highlight the need to understand the nature of the information interactions involving commercial posts on mother blogs and the credibility perception of their readers.

#### **4.2 Credibility Assessments Interviews: Overview**

This study began with a broad understanding of credibility assessments in the online context based on a two-dimensional framework of message and source (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). This working definition provided the means to see credibility in the light of the believability, trustworthiness and accuracy of the message as well as the perceived prestige, integrity and reputation of the source or writer. While this perspective informed the initial design of the study, as themes were identified in the interviews, different dimensions began to emerge and credibility judgements were found to be linked to a broad range of information behaviours. This can happen in a constructivist framework using ethnographic techniques where themes can emerge through empirical research (Williamson, 2006).

Although the sample size of 6 was small, analysis revealed similar experiences across participants. As interviews progressed two themes emerged about the nature of credibility: firstly, credibility judgements are decision-based and perceptions of credibility are largely communicated through actions taken by both writers and readers; secondly, participants situate credibility in relation to a range of related concepts including trust, authenticity, objectivity and transparency. Analyses yielded conceptual, informational and interactional dimensions that guide credibility assessments of commercial content on mother blogs as summarized in Table 4. In terms of how they conceive credibility, readers in the sample were more likely to talk about their

trust in the information while writers talked about their desire to be authentic. Both readers and writers liked narrative approaches to the information and both brought previous experience and knowledge to the exchange. For readers, previous experience with the blogger influenced their credibility perceptions, while writers looked at their motivations for starting and maintaining the blog. Readers looked to other readers for confirmation of their credibility assessments as well as depending on their knowledge of media production techniques. Bloggers also expressed interactional factors that affected their credibility assessments but were more likely to situate those in terms of how they relate to their sponsors, their readers and the community of mother bloggers as a whole.

Table 4: *Factors influencing credibility perceptions on mother blogs*

| Dimension     | Reader   | Writer   |
|---------------|--|--|
| Conceptual    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Authenticity</li> <li>• Trustworthiness</li> <li>• Believability</li> <li>• Transparency</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Authenticity</li> <li>• Trustworthiness</li> <li>• Transparency</li> </ul> |
| Informational | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge approach</li> <li>• Expectancy violation (Metzger, Flanagin &amp; Medders, 2010)</li> <li>• Information preconception</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge approach</li> <li>• Information intention</li> </ul>                                    |
| Interactional | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social confirmation of personal opinion (Metzger, Flanagin &amp; Medders, 2010)</li> <li>• Enthusiast endorsements (Metzger, Flanagin &amp; Medders, 2010)</li> <li>• Endorsement heuristic (Metzger, Flanagin &amp; Medders, 2010)</li> <li>• Material connection</li> <li>• Media perception</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Material connection</li> <li>• Reader orientation</li> <li>• Community association</li> </ul>     |

**4.2.1. How do readers perceive and interpret these posts?** The results of this study correspond with those of those of Metzger, Flanagin and Medders (2010) who found that Internet

users eschew systematic processing of information online and, instead, rely on a set of cognitive heuristics to evaluate the credibility of information. Information seekers try to reduce the cognitive effort of information overload produced by the Internet, by using “useful mental short cuts, rules of thumb or guidelines” to minimize their effort and time (p.417). Their research found that heuristics can be effective in providing information processing strategies and can be more efficient than more inferential decision making in terms of time and cognitive effort (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010, p.417). While some of Metzger’s heuristics apply, a multi-dimensional picture of credibility began to emerge in some cases echoing the categories identified in the text analysis. The emergent typology of credibility assessments of readers of mother blogs can be seen in Table 5. These categories are not imposed on the interview data but rather they arise out of the analysis. The categories are conceptually grounded in credibility theory and a constructivist perspective pointing to the socially constructed nature of online information interactions. In information studies, the social constructionist approach places an emphasis on people developing meanings for their information-seeking behavior depending on their specific social environments (e.g., Chatman & Pendleton, 1995).

Table 5: *Factors influencing reader perceptions of credibility on mother blogs*

| Dimension     | Type  | Description  |
|---------------|---|--|
| Conceptual    | Objectivity<br>Authenticity<br>Trustworthiness<br>Believability<br>Transparency | "social, relational and dynamic frame of reference surrounding the person's information seeking process" (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008, p. 1473) |
| Informational | Knowledge approach  | How information is relayed (narrative, persuasive)   |
|               | Expectancy violation (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010)                        | Extent to which blog meets reader expectations in terms of features and writing style  |

|               |   |   |
|---------------|---|---|
|               | Information preconception   | How long reader had been following a particular blog and whether that blogger had disappointed them in the past |
| Interactional | Social confirmation of personal opinion (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010) | Importance of finding like-minded individuals   |
|               | Enthusiast endorsements (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010)                 | Relying on enthusiasts or presumed but non-credentialed experts   |
|               | Endorsement heuristic (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010)                   | Inclination to perceive information and sources as credible if others do  |
|               | Material connection   | Readers' understanding of sponsors' role  |
|               | Media perception  | Readers' awareness of the production and use of media messages  |

**4.2.1.1 Conceptual Dimension.** How a person conceptualizes and defines credibility can provide valuable insight into how people judge credibility in fundamental ways (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). The participants in this study had multiple ideas of credibility and applied different concepts depending on the type of information encountered. Analysis followed the process outlined in section 3.3.2 and showed that readers conceptualize credibility with respect to five different aspects: objectivity, authenticity, trustworthiness, believability and transparency.

Readers found objective posts more credible, often described in terms of a writer adopting a balanced approach. R3 describes this balance as presenting “pros and cons.” R2 mistrusts bloggers who are too “rosy”, “if they don't show that there are bad days then, that, I feel is not true.” R1 equates this balanced approach with honesty, describing a sponsored post where a blogger was critical of some items she received from a sponsor, “[The blogger] had said, ‘I just got all this stuff and this stuff I like, and this [other] stuff m-eh.’ And I thought that was kind of refreshing ... I remember thinking, ‘Huh that's interesting. She is being honest.’” Readers in the

sample expressed the idea that falsely positive reviews can result from sponsor involvement and bloggers' desire not to compromise their commercial support, as R2 says "I still feel cheated. She wouldn't say 'bad product' if she believed it because she's getting paid. They wouldn't pay her if she said it was bad."

Readers also described credibility in terms of the genuine nature of the post. "I wouldn't go to blogs where I didn't feel that I accepted them or that I felt that were disingenuine," (R2) and "I like to think that I can tell the difference if there's a genuineness to the writing or not" (R1). Others talk about credibility in terms of trustworthiness and honesty, "I do feel like I trust them" (R1) and "I think that they are usually pretty honest about their position ... and write about it in a way that's pretty honest" (R3). This is closely related to the believability of sponsored posts, "I haven't completely lost my belief in the person. It's just if they're making money I just don't trust their opinion on the product" (R2). Finally all readers pointed to the need for transparency such as R1 who says, "Oh it's important to me that they're upfront, I think so, because then I can choose whether to take it or leave it" (R3). Transparency was also discussed in terms of how the blogger handled disclosures of material connections. This is explored in section 4.2.2.3.

#### **4.2.1.2 Informational dimension**

*a. Knowledge approach.* Information salience can positively impact credibility perceptions (Metzger 2007). This may explain why readers preferred a narrative approach to the sponsored posts, looking for bloggers to share their experiences with the products. "I like to see that what they've been through or if they've used it in their own lives, or if they have anecdotes around it" (R3). R1 sees narrative experiences as separate from direct advertising and therefore

more congruous with the bloggers' overall approach. She describes a promotion for a home store that gave bloggers products and got them to build something. For her:

Using something to make something or to do something, in my head anyway, that's sort of different than buying that spray bleach because it gets the stains off my shirt. So it's a little bit more benign to say, 'Hey, look with \$200 bucks at [retailer's name] you can make this cool planter box.'

Conversely, readers found an overtly persuasive approach less credible. This supports Metzger, Flanagin and Medders's (2010) findings that perceived commercial content or persuasive intent was another cue for credibility judgements. Readers described this in terms of the number of sponsored posts on a site,

As long as it's done properly and it's not every post is all about buying this or this was sponsored. If it's one post every, oh I don't know, a week is not enough, maybe once a month, I would be okay with that. It depends on how often they post too. (R1).

R3 concurs, "If it was all giveaways all the time, it would turn me off." R2 describes how messages that appear incongruous with the subject of the rest of the post appear less credible to her. She describes reading a blog post that documented the blogger and her children making pizzas, "It was all fun and at the end, the kid is holding the bottle of Clorox wipes." She finds the sudden insertion of a commercial product changes her view of the post, "then totally I've got bells and alarms going off in my head and I actually stop reading the post. I'm just like, 'that's totally bogus.'"

**b. Expectancy violation.** Websites that fail to meet user expectations in terms of appearance, layout, features, functionality and comprehensiveness are negatively associated with credibility perceptions (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010). The readers interviewed in this study identified overall writing style and design as elements that affected how they judged the content. R3 said, "If someone is a good writer, I don't know if it's just a mark of their

intelligence or there's some thought there, I would be more likely to follow them over time, or more likely to pay attention to a sponsored post and that sort of thing maybe. Good writing is important." R2 explained that good, creative communication helped her trust the blogs she reads, "I understand why people go into that realm and have the creative outlet which is blogging. I think it's a really cool communicative tool and a good creative outlet, so I don't blame them but I trust them." Although the medium is outside the scope of this study, it is worth noting that both Readers 1 and 3 mentioned design in relation to credibility, as R1 says, "[the site] has to attract my eye. It has to look good. I definitely judge a book by its cover in that regard, for sure." R2 spoke more specifically about how personal photos added to the credibility of a blog post saying that, "I would be more likely to read it [sponsored posts] or pay attention if it was their own photos." She also said she had expectations of the blog design, "I'd like it to be pretty."

*c. Information preconception.* Previous research shows that users exhibit two distinct processes in credibility assessments: predictive judgements, made before accessing the object and evaluative judgements made when confronting the object (Rieh & Danielson, 2007, p.346). For readers of mother blogs, their credibility assessments were grounded in their experiences reading that particular blog and whether that blogger had disappointed them in the past. These experiences served as a predictor of their information evaluation. R2 says she would trust a blog she knows over one she does not know, "if it was a recipe by one person on the blog that I don't really know very well ... that I would trust less, whereas if it's one of the ones that I read ... then I trust it." She compares this experience to that of reading anonymous reviews on sites such as Amazon or GoodReads, "[with Amazon] there are anonymous reviewers first of all and I don't know who they are. It could be paid, it could be spam." Whereas with mother bloggers, "I feel

like I know them and I feel like based on reading them for a while ... I trust them more because I know them.”

**4.2.1.3 Interactional dimension.** How participants perceive the credibility of commercial posts was often largely described in the larger context of how they trust the source of the information. This supports Metzger, Flanagin and Medders’s (2010) view that the rise in social computing has challenged the characterization of web use as a solitary undertaking and replaced it with more social means of online information processing and evaluation.

*a. Social confirmation of personal opinion.* Metzger, Flanagin and Medders (2010) found that individuals were more likely to consider information credible if the source had similar personalities and shared interests and beliefs. This was a strong theme in the reader interviews. All readers expressed a desire to read blogs from writers they found were “like me” (R2). Many of the readers described this in terms of the blogger being relatable. As R3 says, "sometimes you want to just kind of see yourself which is probably why I went to mommy blogs in particular." R1 describes reading a sponsored post for a baby sleep consultant and how she found it more interesting because of her own sleep issues with her infant daughter,

It was partly because her daughter was or is, either a couple of months either older or younger than mine, but very close in age, and I was struggling with the sleep thing too so I totally related to what she was talking about.

In one case, the reader said she would trust a blogger more if the blogger wrote about subjects that were, “in line with my principles and philosophies" (R2).

Two readers compared the bloggers to friends and said they trusted blogger recommendations in the same way they would trust those from a friend, “it is like getting a recommendation from a friend in a way,” (R3). Or, “I do feel like I trust them, which is weird because I don't know them. If they write back to me or reply or whatever, then I feel like it's a

friend replying which is odd," (R2). Despite characterizing the blogger as a type of friend, she admits feeling "giddy" when the blogger responds to a comment she posts. "It's like they're friends but they're not," she says (R2).

**b. *Enthusiast endorsements.*** Credibility can be established over time as information provided by enthusiasts or "non-credentialed experts" is tested and found not to have serious negative consequences (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010). This was another often-cited criterion in this study where readers looked to the experiences of the writers with the product. R1 describes how she believed the sponsored post for a sleep consultant because the blogger's experience with the product predated the sponsorship relationship,

It actually kind of was a promotional thing because I think she made a giveaway on her blog for a sleep consultant session with this woman. I think it was just one of those experiences where she really enjoyed this service. I don't think it was solicited or anything.

R2 also looks to see if the blogger has experience with the product outside of the sponsorship relationship to see that the blogger really "believes" in the product,

In a post, she'll have a picture of her shoes in the middle of these fallen leaves or something and people will be like, 'Oh my god. I love your shoes.' And she'll say who they're from and they're often from one of her sponsors ... and it's not that she's promoting it, it's that she uses the products in her day to day and she must believe in them if she uses them. And so I trust that but if she starts to promote it differently than I don't think that I would believe her as much. Again, it's the whole idea of pushing your product as opposed to really believing in it.

R2 goes on to frame this type of blogger experience as "more honest" and trustworthy, "if they're given something and it's like a free trial type thing, then I find it more honest" and "if it's a true trial or a true like you know, 'hey we pulled up our carpet doing renovations and we used this really cool carpet removal tool.' Then it's just like, okay I will remember that ... I will trust that opinion."

*c. Endorsement heuristic.* The endorsement heuristic proposes that people are inclined to perceive information and sources as credible if others do so also (Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010). This theme was reiterated by mother blog readers who looked at blogrolls, referrals and readership to confirm their beliefs that others were endorsing the blog. All readers mentioned having found blogs through blogrolls or through referrals from friends or other media. While these recommendations brought readers to the blog as a whole they were not related directly to sponsored content. Still these cues speak to the overall credibility readers place in the blogger.

Readers also mentioned posts seemed more credible when they perceived the blog's readership as high. For example as R2 says of the mother blogs she reads, she is not sure exactly what the readership is but she is sure it is "insanely big" and that "if that many people follow them that majorly than one post on one product? I trust it." R3 agrees saying, "I would tend to look for more trustworthy sources. I think you can get a sense that some are [trustworthy] if their readership is higher." She added the simple act of being published on the web made bloggers appear more knowledgeable, "They really are as knowledgeable as any of us, but I think there is something about the published aspect of it or that people are going to that site anyway that lifts it up a little bit." R1 believes too high a readership could impact a blogger's authenticity, "I think if they get really big you end up having to have staff and then it just becomes a juggernaut and it's not about you anymore. The blog itself becomes this thing." All readers said they gauged readership through the number of comments with one saying she looked for blog mentions in other media. Despite relying on the number of comments to gauge the popularity of posts, all three readers say they rarely commented themselves.

*d. Material connection.* Although the role of the sponsor in these types of posts may appear peripheral, research has shown that these types of peripheral source cues can be used in

credibility judgements and can include individuals, groups, organizations and other social aggregates (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). All readers were aware of the sponsor involvement in these posts because of the disclosures statements. All three readers mentioned the importance of these disclosures, although because they used different methods to access the posts, some expressed concern the disclosure could be missed. For example, R1 said she often viewed blogs on her phone and thought that if disclosure statements appeared outside of the main body text, she might not see them. The effects of the device through which the post is read on the credibility of posts could be an area for further study. R1 also said she has become so accustomed to seeing disclosures, she seeks them out, "When I see a product mentioned or if they don't specifically outright say at the beginning, I definitely look for some sort of disclosure." Readers were aware that even in the absence of disclosures, they might still be reading sponsored posts, "It could be sponsored I don't know. That's something I can't speak to because I will never know if I'm being lied to" (R2).

Readers also tended to separate their belief in the blogger from their belief in individual posts as part of their overall understanding that bloggers need to work with sponsors to make money:

I haven't completely lost my belief in the person it's just if they're making money I just don't trust their opinion on the product because I believe that this is their job and they need to make money. I don't have any problem with that.

R1 said she felt her level of scrutiny increased when bloggers were paid in cash for reviews, rather than being given free products, "I feel like free stuff ... you can be more subjective ... I would feel like I could be honest and give my opinion. Whereas ... I would feel just bad giving it a bad review if I was getting paid" (R1). Overall, all readers spoke of skipping over sponsored posts if they were not of interest to them.

Readers felt sponsors were not directly involved in the creation of the content and that if they sensed such an involvement it would impact their perception of the post, "I think I might be less interested, or I would see it more as pure advertising" (R3). All three readers saw giveaways as something separate from sponsored post, despite the fact that giveaways are popular and can drive traffic to the site thereby benefitting the blogger with more readers which might potentially attract more sponsors. As R1 describes, "I don't mind that at all. I don't think they're making money off of it, right? It's advertising but it's not lying. It's not necessarily like they're endorsing the product."

*e. Media perception.* Previous credibility research has shown that credibility assessments are based on an information seeker's existing knowledge, beliefs, goals and expertise (Rieh & Danielson, 2007). Individuals compare and contrast the relative credibility of different media when making judgements of online information (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). In this context, information seekers develop knowledge of persuasion tactics that shape how they perceive the information (Friestad & Wright, 1994). This study identified individuals' sense of their own media awareness of one or more aspects of the production and use of media messages (Rosenbaum et al., 2008). Although this was not a direct response to the research question, it was such a dominant theme in the responses, that it is worthy of exploration.

All three readers made reference to specific mother blogs in their responses. Although individually they mentioned several different mother bloggers, they all mentioned Dooce, a blog run by Heather Armstrong who was listed 26 on Forbes' list of 30 most influential women in media, and whose daily readers number in the hundreds of thousands (Blakeley, 2009). This suggests readers have enough of an understanding of the production of this medium to situate the blogs they read in the context of the genre of mother blogging. "Familiarity with the site genre,

potentially as a source of a particular kind of information, is an important component of credibility perceptions” (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007, p. 336).

The readers were also aware of the influence sponsors held over them. R2 talks about how mothers have the "buying power" in the household and that because ad revenue in magazines is declining, marketers need a "new way to access that demographic." R3 described mothers as an “easy target” for marketers because they want the best for their kids and can easily be persuaded. Similarly, R1 describes herself as “susceptible to suggestion” to posts around children’s products. R3 describes this influence further, “I go through ups and downs of like feeling inadequate or feeling like I have to ... I really need a Bumbo seat apparently. I really need one of these things” (R3). Despite this perception of their vulnerability in the face of marketing messages, upon reflection readers do not always carry through on their initial intentions to purchase, “I so don't need any of that. Like the minimum is fine, you know?” (R3) or “I was like, ‘do I need one [a sleep consultant]? Maybe I do. I don't know.’ And so I looked into it a little more and I was like, ‘ok. No I don’t. This is dumb’” (R1).

This general sense of being able to recognize and evaluate the influence of marketing messages was expressed by all three readers. One reader talked about taking concrete means to corroborate online information, “I'm quite skeptical of most things. I mean I really tend to not take everything at first glance you know... I'm that person that goes to Snopes [a site that looks to correct misinformation online] and looks it up and is like, ‘duh’” (R1) or R2 who talks about a general mistrust of commercial messages that leads her to perform background research on online information “I like to do my research. I won't go to certain websites if I believe that they are ... like if I'm skeptical ... I do have distrust of big corporations. I personally don't like commercials or advertising.”

**4.2.1.4 Summary.** The effect of this pattern of information exchange on the reader was examined in phase two of this study, the reader interviews. These interviews provided a glimpse of credibility based on the two dimensional model of message and source to show how participants form credibility perceptions when faced with a mixture of commercial and informational content. Readers draw from different concepts of credibility, pointing to its multidimensional nature. Despite these differences, readers described consistent experiences and largely used both information and interactional cues to guide their credibility assessments. They tended to look for relatable content with narrative or experiential modes of delivery believing this approach to be more authentic. Their assessments are more heuristic, calling on assumptions or intuition rather than a systematic method of information evaluation. While they expressed awareness of the sponsor's involvement in the initiation of the posts, they believed the content to be entirely of the bloggers own making.

**4.2.2. How do bloggers perceive and interpret these posts?** As discussed in section 2, mother blogs can create online communities (Lövheim, 2011; Yonker, 2012; Chen, 2013) that connect both writer and reader (Yonker, 2012; Fleming, 2008). In light of the reciprocity implied by this relationship, it is important to study credibility perceptions of bloggers as well as readers. To understand how bloggers perceive credibility in sponsored posts, this study undertook a series of semi-structured interviews with sample bloggers to examine the information interaction that takes place between bloggers, sponsors and readers. This was examined in the context of the two-dimensional frame of message and source credibility (Metzger 2010). Results of these interviews revealed that bloggers often perceive the credibility of sponsored posts in relationship to their readers, their sponsors and at times, the community of mother bloggers as a whole. The

emergent typology of credibility assessments of writers of mother blogs can be seen in Table 6 and is then discussed in further detail.

Table 6: *Factors influencing blogger perceptions of credibility on mother blogs*

| Dimension     | Type   | Description   |
|---------------|--|---|
| Conceptual    | Objectivity<br>Authenticity<br>Trustworthiness<br>Transparency   | "social, relational and dynamic frame of reference surrounding the person's information seeking process " (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008, p. 1473) |
| Informational | Knowledge approach   | How information is relayed (narrative, experiential, informational and persuasive approaches)   |
|               | Information intention  | Extent to which motivations and perceived independence affect bloggers sense of credibility   |
| Interactional | Material connection<br>(Blogger and sponsor)                     | How relationships with sponsors impact perceptions (disclosure, trust, giveaways)   |
|               | Reader orientation<br>(Blogger and reader)                       | How reader focus and perceptions of reader understanding of media impacts credibility perceptions   |
|               | Community association<br>(Blogger and other<br>"mommy" bloggers) | How writers see themselves in relation to others writers of "mommy blogs"   |

**4.2.2.1. Conceptual dimension.** As discussed in section 2.4.1, credibility can include a range of different concepts that result from a person's "social, relational and dynamic frame of reference" (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008, p. 1473). Like readers, bloggers used different concepts to refer to credibility, including objectivity, authenticity, trustworthiness and transparency. These categories matched the reader categories with the exception of believability, a concept absent from the blogger discussions. Given the nuanced nature of credibility terms however, this absence should not necessarily be interpreted as an absolute difference between readers and

writers. Further investigation could explore exactly what is meant when readers and bloggers employ these terms.

All bloggers talked of the need for objectivity in posts or a desire to “just make sure that my content isn’t being influenced by the brands” (B3). All three spoke in terms of attempting to balance posts by showing the “good” and the “bad” (B3), the “pros and cons” (B2) or the “balance” (B1). As B1 says, overly positive reviews can ring untrue for the reader,

If I write with rabid enthusiasm about this can of soup and I write with rabid enthusiasm about the Toyota I test drive and I write with rabid enthusiasm for the lawn fertilizer I use, after a while you'll probably start to wonder if I'm rabidly enthusiastic about everything.

B2 pointed to the difficulty some writers experience when they do not like a product, “a lot of bloggers won't even write a negative review. If they don't like the product, they won't write about it.” She says they make these decisions so as not to compromise the continued relationship with the marketer. This suggests that while they value objectivity, some bloggers may struggle with how to maintain it while balancing sponsor expectations.

Bloggers also spoke about their desire to be genuine or authentic in their content. For B1, this meant writing about her experiences in an authentic way, “I think the only thing I can do is be authentic myself and hope that that will inspire that [the authenticity of the content].” B3 said she is careful about including personal details on the blog but, “I don't think that it means that the things that I'm writing about are not genuine.” Trustworthiness was a characteristic bloggers recognized that readers needed in making credibility judgements. “So they look at me and they can decide for themselves if they can trust my research and my opinion” (B2). Finally, transparency played a large role in how bloggers perceived the credibility of their content. “I'll tell people, ‘yeah I got paid for it and then you can decide if you trust my opinion or not’” (B2) or “I always disclose. I follow the FTC guidelines. I always disclose and also because I think

readers want you to" (B2). This theme is carried through the discussion on material connections in section 4.2.2.3.

#### **4.2.2.2. Informational dimension**

*a. Knowledge approach.* Bloggers had a range of ways in which they framed their sponsored posts. B1 talks about adopting a storytelling style, "I try to incorporate a storytelling element into all of my product reviews and things like that. I've tried to put a lot of myself into it and to find this ... unique way of presenting their [the sponsor's] product" (B1). She makes a distinction between storytelling bloggers, those who adopt a more narrative style and product bloggers or those who focus more on product reviews and giveaways. B2 adopts a similar approach, choosing to write about her experiences using products, "A lot of people in the blogging community who do a lot of reviews will have a 'no touch no review' policy. So I'm not going to talk about your product unless you're going to send it to me. I can review it. I can touch it." While B3 often adopts a storytelling approach in her blog posts in general, she chooses not to do sponsored posts and says she doesn't see how bloggers can combine product reviews with compelling content:

I don't think that that makes for, in most cases, particularly compelling or interesting content. I think it takes a very, very talented writer to be able to do a sponsored post and actually make it interesting to their audience so it's just not something that I'm really interested in doing and it's not something that I see is done very well in most cases.

The bloggers also spoke of trying to avoid overtly persuasive commercial posts like B1 who says she tries to keep both sponsors and readers happy, "I'm able to deliver what they [sponsors] want in a package that's also attractive to the people who are reading so it doesn't feel as if I'm an extension of their press machine." Bloggers spoke often of the need to keep the number of sponsored posts to a minimum so as not to appear overtly persuasive, "My readers are just going to turn off and not come back if all of a sudden I'm doing all sorts of reviews about

products and they're not even going to bother because that's not what they originally started [reading] for" (B2) or "if you read a blog for one full week and that blogger every single thing that they write about is a product and they're glowing about it, then you know every product they write about they're going to glow about it ..." (B2). All bloggers said they try to balance the sponsored posts with information, sometimes doing hours of research on a product before writing about it to save the reader the time of doing the research themselves, "people are looking for the ingredients in [beauty product brand] products and they're coming to my site because I did a review and I went through the whole list of ingredients" (B2). This blogger also talked about providing readers with information on where to buy the product or how much it costs (B2).

**b. Information intention.** Credibility perceptions of bloggers were also influenced by their motivations for starting the blog and their perceived independence in maintaining it. Most talked about how they are not motivated by financial gain, such as B3:

I didn't go into this with the intent of making money with it. I actually went into it with the intent of learning about social media and then the love of blogging and so on kind of took over from there. And making a little bit of money with it for me is just more of a side goal rather than the primary goal. It's something where I can say, if I am making a little bit of money with it then I am able to spend more time on it versus other money-making bill-paying pursuits that may not be as interesting to me. So it's never been the primary purpose. I didn't go out and create a blog in order to pay my bills or to make a profit or anything like that. (B3)

B1 points out that not all mother bloggers have the same motivations and that some are expressly looking to build traffic to attract marketers, "Some people only want to build enough traffic that they can get these kinds of advertising opportunities and be compensated for them and whatnot ... They don't even put their personal lives into the blog as opposed to somebody like me whose is all about the, 'oh hey here I am.'" B1 also makes a distinction between "true" advertising and her sponsored posts and explains the two are different because she exercises choice over what to review, "there's a filter for me. The idea of just having absolute true advertising that is out of my

control on my site is too much for me.” The idea of choice is echoed in the words of B2 who explains why she does not include guest sponsored posts (i.e. sponsored posts written by the sponsor themselves), “they send you the article and it's just so obviously a piece of garbage ... and you're like, I don't want to publish this and then you have to explain to them why you don't want to publish it so now I just say no.”

Bloggers also spoke about their information intentions when asked whether they have guidelines around creating sponsored posts. All bloggers agreed they had strong personal directives about the products and sponsors with which they chose to work, however none had explicit guidelines, “I'm just making it all up as I go along” (B1) and “I think they've [the rules] evolved over time,” (B3) again suggesting their attempts to create credible information are heuristically driven as opposed to following an explicit set of guidelines.

#### **4.2.2.3. Interactional Dimension**

*a. Material connection.* A common theme with all bloggers was their relationships with the sponsors. Although they all had instances where they had approached potential sponsors, it was far more common for sponsors to approach them. For the most part, the bloggers did not feel that pitches from sponsors were personalized or targeted to them. Instead they felt they were approached because of a high Google ranking or inclusion in a list of top bloggers. Bloggers described being paid in cash or in products for reviews and one talked about how the amount paid by the marketer might have an impact on a reader's sense of objectivity, "well this is a 10-dollar-and-50-cent product so you can decide if my opinion can be bought for 10 dollars and 50 cents. Or this is a 200-dollar product so you can decide if I can be bought for 200 dollars" (B2). She also talked about choosing only to work with sponsors she “trusts” (B2). The bloggers who wrote sponsored posts acknowledged their relationship to sponsors through disclosure

statements. All bloggers said they included disclosures because readers expect them. They also say they generally follow the FTC guidelines because a lot of their readership comes from the United States (B2 and 3). Bloggers weaved the disclosure into the blog post when they could, posted it at the bottom or at times used disclosure text provided by the sponsors themselves. While the bloggers all supported disclosures, they did say they found the writing of them time-consuming (B2) and inelegant (B1). B2 wondered at the usefulness of this type of information saying, “In a lot of ways, I think it's just garbage because it's not like you watch a movie and anytime a can of Coke shows up they go 'this is sponsored disclosure.' You know what I mean? Like, it's all product placement ... newspapers don't have to disclosure anything and magazines don't generally disclose anything.” B1 agrees,

I'm also just sort of more digital literacy advocate not necessarily sure that we need it either. I mean, maybe it's because I'm sophisticated in this area, but I automatically assume most of that anyway, and I guess I give most people credit for that kind of ability, just like I don't believe in the disclaimer on your McDonalds coffee cup, ‘caution contents might be hot.’ Yeah, I kind of figured that out myself.

Like readers, some bloggers make a distinction between sponsored posts and giveaways, saying giveaways are “separate” because they have not seen or used the product (B2) or B1 who says, “whether a giveaway is a sponsored post, I’m not quite sure about that.” This distinction is made despite the fact that giveaways can increase traffic to a blog that could benefit the blogger by increasing their visibility to marketers. B3 says bloggers could potentially be influenced by giveaways in the same way they are when they work with any brand,

It absolutely influences them [the blogger] and if they accept to do those types of giveaways then usually the expectation from the brand is that they're going to write a post about that particular product ... you're really creating this whole machine around just generating traffic to that particular blog post which then talks about that company's product. So it's very much about the product and not so much about the writing.

Another issue mentioned by one blogger was the potential for bias inherent in the marketer's initial selection of bloggers, "if you think of a low-income, black single mom, she's not being, even if she has a blog and she has a big following, she's not necessarily being recruited in the same way by a brand ... as a married, middle-class, white, pretty mom is" (B3).

**b. Reader orientation.** Bloggers all spoke of how much they tried to focus on their readers' expectations of their blog and how they oriented the information in sponsored posts to meet their readers' needs. One blogger described an experience she had writing a sponsored post for deodorant for which she was happy to be compensated but that ultimately made her question her own motivations for writing the post in the first place:

I wrote about deodorant and one of my readers was like, 'this is so garbage. You totally sold out.' And I was like, 'oh shit.' I did kind of feel like I was selling out even writing it you know? I'm like, 'why did I agree to write about fucking deodorant?' You know at the time I was like, 'okay, I'll do it.' And then later I'm like, 'Why did I agree to do that? It's just so cheesy and so not what I usually write about.'" (B2)

Bloggers also talked about credibility judgements in terms of decisions the reader makes. In this, they spoke about how intelligent they believed the readers to be and how they felt readers were able to effectively evaluate sponsored posts, "I mean these are intelligent people. They don't need to be told like, 'I received this product and there's a chance I could have been influenced by this \$10 product'" (B2). Though they do admit there may be readers who are unable to see the difference between a sponsored and unsponsored post (B2 and 3) especially those who are "not particularly connected in with the community and what's going on" (B3).

**c. Community association.** Writers also talked about the term "mommy blogger" and how that could predispose people to discredit their blogs. The term was universally disliked by the bloggers interviewed, "when people use the term mommy blog, I also don't like it because they're almost always using it in a condescending fashion" (B2). B3 also said the term was

"condescending" and "it's also used to create this exclusive group in some cases, and there seems to be this image of what people consider a mommy blogger to be which is kind of a lot of times stay-at-home moms." B2 finds the term "pejorative" and "diminutive." She prefers the term "blogger" or "Ottawa blogger" or even "parenting blogger" but warns against seeing all bloggers labeled with these terms as the same, "But there's as many parent bloggers, mommy bloggers, as there are moms, you know? Each one has got different goals and different backgrounds and different ... long term views of where they want to go and different ideas of how their identity is tied to what they are putting out on the internet." But she says distinctions can be drawn based on how and how often these bloggers work with marketers, "I try hard not to think critically especially to speak critically about people who are more strongly fixated or interested in product blogging and giveaways and things like that." She finds a growing number of product bloggers in the parenting space, "I really think that that is the vast majority of moms who blog right now. I like that term coupon blog. It's hard to find the stories anymore" (B1).

**4.2.2.4 Summary.** Bloggers interviewed in this study had varied experiences of sponsored posts yet despite this difference, their concepts of credibility present common themes. Like readers, they draw on a range of concepts of credibility most markedly authenticity. In writing the posts, they adopt storytelling and experiential styles, actively avoiding overtly persuasive techniques. Also like readers, credibility judgements of mother blog writers are largely interactional as writers draw on their perceptions of trust in the sponsor, their views of other mother bloggers and especially their assessments of readers' expectations and perceived media awareness.

### **4.3 Summary**

This chapter provided findings on the credibility of mother blogs using the FTC's understanding of sponsored posts and a two-dimensional framework of credibility assessment based on message and sponsor. Together the findings point to an interactional understanding of credibility in the participatory culture of these blogs. The next chapter discusses the implications of this research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The previous chapter examined how sponsored posts are integrated into mother blogs and how readers and mother blog writers assess the credibility of these posts. From the findings of the research three themes emerge: 1) information, interaction and credibility; 2) credibility and disclosure of material connections; and 3) “mommy blogs” and credibility predisposition. These themes are discussed in this section.

### **5.1 Information, Interaction and Credibility**

This research began by looking at perceptions of source and information credibility on mother blogs that integrate commercial content into their posts. Given the participatory nature of the social web in general and blogs in particular however, source credibility is not always easy to discern (Lankes, 2008) so the study reframed credibility assessment as a social process. The results expand on the social nature of online information credibility assessment supporting the idea that information interaction is a component of credibility perception.

Sponsored text on mother blogs takes many forms but focuses mostly on narrative experiences with a positive orientation. Despite commercial involvement, the posts examined in this study did not appear overtly persuasive and did not display a strong commercial intent, which reflects the bloggers’ wishes to report on their experiences and inform their readers rather than sell products. Readers and writers perform an active and ongoing negotiation of the credibility of these posts and the extent of their involvement with their community affects their credibility assessment. Readers seek out credible information, characterizing it as trustworthy and genuine, and bloggers attempt to meet these expectations. This social negotiation of credibility can be explicit, such as when readers contact bloggers through comments or email, but is more often implicit in their ongoing information seeking and information evaluation

activities. For the reader, credibility is moderated by their previous experience with the blogger, whom they want to see as relatable and authentic, and their overall knowledge of media production and influence. For bloggers, credibility is moderated by their trust in the sponsor. While readers will discredit some information, it does not generally cause them to discredit the blogger, suggesting that while message and source credibility are linked, they are not inseparable. Past experiences of both writers and readers have evolved over time and have created a type of personal heuristic that permeate the information seeking and evaluation processes. In this way, both information creator and information consumer are actively involved in making credibility assessments.

## **5.2 Credibility and Disclosure of Material Connections**

As discussed in section 2.3, both Canada and the U.S. have policies in place to protect consumers from misrepresentations and there has been some speculation that social media erodes our ability to evaluate these types of messages (Dunaway, 2010). The extent to which we need changes in public policy was outside the scope of this study however the findings may have implications for policy makers. Although all the participants in this study considered sponsored posts to be advertising, some bloggers were more likely to equate them with journalists writing reviews in traditional media or with celebrities providing endorsements of products. Readers were more likely to describe them in the language of online reviews described in section 2.1. Disclosures of material connections were expected by readers and that expectation was acknowledged and met by bloggers. For readers, these disclosure statements performed a type of checkbox function confirming a blogger's transparency rather than providing a means more for in-depth information evaluation. The bloggers interviewed in this study all included disclosures in their sponsored posts and believed this to be normal practice across mother bloggers,

suggesting that the practice may be self-regulating. These bloggers expressed cynicism about the efficacy of these statements however, saying they believed readers were able to intuit the nature of the sponsorship relationship without the disclosure statements. Readers echoed these sentiments and the interviews provided some evidence that this was the case with readers reporting they actively took steps to confirm information and double check sources. Their true abilities in this regard however were untested.

### **5.3 "Mommy Blogs" and Credibility Predisposition**

As discussed in section 2.2, this research began with the idea that mother blogs are a distinct online community where personal intimacies are shared and potentially compromised by the addition of commercial content. While previous scholarly research into mother blogs characterized these blogs as inclusive communities challenging conventional notions of motherhood, confirming this in practice was difficult. Guided by a definition of mother blogs as a “deliberate social engagement” and an “interpersonal practice” (Morrison, 2010), this study looked to find a sample of blog posts for text analysis. This proved to be more subjective than anticipated when trying to determine how to identify deliberate social engagement. Mother blogs are a category that is "neither wholly continuous nor wholly distinct" and while these blogs share similar characteristics, there are differences among them in terms of audience, reach, and degree of reciprocity (Morrison, 2010). The blogs included in this study exhibited a range of experiences and sponsored post writing styles. It became difficult to determine which ones were making a genuine attempt to build intimacy and community, calling on the researcher to, in effect, perform a type of credibility assessment herself.

Clearly, there is a range of what is meant by the term “mommy blog” but this is more than just a semantic argument. It becomes a credibility issue given that, as seen in section

4.2.2.3, writers see the term as diminutive and pejorative. If this is how these blogs are perceived on the public stage, these terms could predispose readers to discredit the information. Others have noted (Chen, 2013; Friedman, 2010; Yonker, 2012), we need a more complete understanding of what is meant by “mommy blog.” Finer categorization may be one solution (e.g., PhdInParenting, 2013) but may also prove a challenge given that “the particularities that set mommy blogs apart from one another tend not to rest in great events but instead in personal details” (Friedman, 2010). The issue is further complicated by the search terms commonly used on the internet – a recent Google search on “mommy blog” returns 639,000 results whereas “parenting blog” returns 435,000. The answer may still lie in recasting the term “mommy” but it may also be in acknowledging we can no longer equate the term blog with the authentic expressions on which they were founded as described in section 1. Blogs in general and mother blogs in particular have evolved organically and now represent a range of motivations and experiences. This lack of rules that have characterized their evolution has created an environment where they have been able to challenge cultural norms, but it also complicates the interpretive process and makes it difficult to come to a shared understanding of what is meant by mother blogs. During the course of this research, other terms to describe women who are active online have been noted, including digital divas, mompreneurs and queen bees. These terms would likely not help in presenting an unbiased approach to credibility predisposition. Perhaps the informal nature of these other social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook may eliminate the need to label these types of information at all. Regardless, as the line between storytelling narratives and product reviews blurs, the demand to critically evaluate this type of information is heightened and the credibility implications of how we label these types of information becomes more pressing.

## **5.4 Summary**

In summary, this study contributes to the literature on blog credibility by looking at the role of sponsored posts on mother blogs in determining these assessments and in consulting both readers and writers on their perceptions of this content. The results of the study propose a notional mechanism by which scholars can begin to understand the intersection of advertising and informational content on mother blogs at a time when making these types of evaluations is critically important to all information consumers.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the research undertaken in this study, outlines its contributions and makes suggestions for further investigation. A brief summary of the limitations of the study is also included.

### 6.1 Research Summary

Within the context of online credibility assessments as outlined in section 2.5, sponsored posts as defined by the FTC and discussed in section 2.3, challenge the credibility of mother blogs. Using an exploratory ethnographic approach which combined text analysis and semi-structured interviews, the goal of this study was to investigate how sponsored content is integrated into mother blogs and the subjective experiences of both readers and writers. Findings offered insight into the following research questions:

1. How is commercial activity represented in the content of mother blogs?
2. How do readers perceive and interpret these posts?
3. How do bloggers perceive and interpret these posts?

Regarding the first question, mother bloggers use a range of techniques when integrating commercial content on their blogs as discussed in detail in section 4.1. While it is important not to generalize from these findings, the sample texts reveal that common themes operate across posts with a focus on narrative techniques and positive sentiment. Relationships with sponsors were described in disclosure statements but mention of this relationship was at times absent when quoting directly from sponsor websites or marketing material. In regards to the second question and as described in greater details in section 4.2, readers assign a variety of concepts to the idea of credibility, emphasizing in particular the ideas of trustworthiness and authenticity. They assess the credibility of sponsored posts in informational and interactional ways,

responding more to relatable and experiential modes of delivery. Their information evaluation is influenced by their previous knowledge and experiences of the blogger in particular and of media in general and as such their behavior depends more on “rules of thumb” than systematic evaluations of the information. Readers show a high level of knowledge around sponsor involvement and they depend on this perceived media proficiency to help them in their credibility assessments. They bring an expectation of disclosure to the information exchange but appear to use these disclosure statements to help make transparency judgements rather than to critically evaluate the information held therein. Finally in response to the third research question, this study found that bloggers are most likely to conceptualize credibility as authenticity. They are responsive to their readers, most commonly adopting storytelling and experiential styles. They exercise choice over the sponsors and products with which they choose to work and they see this choice as evidence of their credibility.

## **6.2 Implications and Opportunities for Further Investigation**

This study brought together three principle concepts: credibility, mothers and blogging. All three concepts suggest areas of further investigation. Firstly, this study identifies several online credibility assessment behaviours that could be examined in greater detail. While this research touched on how previous experiences and knowledge play a role in online credibility assessments, these concepts could be expanded on and given more substance. Other influences could also be examined such as topic involvement and personal relevance, as research has shown the degree to which people care about the topic affects their credibility assessments (Lucassen, Muilwijk, Noordzij, & Schraagen, 2013; Westerwick, 2013).

Secondly, this research looked at mothers. Several factors identified in this study show knowledge sharing of mothers online is a unique credibility assessment experience that draws on

the perceived relatability of the blogger, the perceived vulnerability of the readers in the face of commercial content and the ongoing credibility exchange between reader and writer. The results of this study provide an opportunity to look at the boundaries of credibility assessments in times of significant life change and suggest that situations involving major life events (like childbirth, illness, financial instability) may require a new basis for exploring credibility assessments online. Further research can determine whether these types of exchanges are transferable to other online communities of women organized around moments of "intense personal meaning" (Clemens & Cushing, 2010).

Lastly, this study dealt with blogging, an informal means of information sharing in the online space. The findings show that credibility assessments are made through the interaction of the individual within their social contexts. The results could be transferred to other communities that rely on social networks to meet their information needs such as teenagers. These findings have important implications for those who provide information services and who teach information literacy under the assumption that the information relationship is a singular exchange. This study's focus on mother blogs' social networks shows that these information settings provide a critical context for the development of online credibility assessments.

### **6.3 Critique of the Study**

This study had some limitations. The framework of credibility assessment applied focused solely on information and source credibility and did not include the medium. While this approach emphasized the intimate relationship between information and source, a larger study could integrate medium to see how it affects the information interaction. In addition, mother blogs were only examined through web access and did not look at device as a platform for online information interaction and credibility perception. Understanding how credibility is mediated

through different devices may be particularly relevant as people make credibility assessments based on the information systems they choose to use (Rieh & Danielson, 2007, p. 346). This approach would have provided a broader perspective of the entire process.

Secondly, mother blog research has traditionally been situated in text analysis because the text is so rich and readily available. This study combines text analysis with interviewing and as such provided some understanding of the difference between the written experiences and spoken perceptions of those writings. However, credibility is a challenging subject for interviews because the concept can be difficult for interviewees to put into words. Another study could probe more deeply to see what people mean by trustworthiness, objectivity and authenticity. Within the qualitative paradigm adopted, other approaches could have helped strengthen the results such as immersion of the researcher into the mother blog setting either as reader or as blogger to provide a more thorough understanding. A mixed-method design using different techniques could probe further to help capture both qualitative and quantitative data and help offset the weaknesses of the single strategy approach adopted in this study. Such a design would create a more replicable study with more objective results.

Lastly, although the sample of interview participants provided rich data, selecting a more heterogeneous sample of readers and bloggers could serve to produce more generalizable results. This could provide a more nuanced understanding especially if, as the results suggests, minorities are approached less frequently by potential sponsors. Particularly adding voices of the sponsors would help bring understanding to this particular information relationship. Also, given the wide range of what is referred to as “mother blogs” it would be interesting to study the posts and the interviews of the same blogger. This would provide consistency within the context of the study and provide a more in-depth understanding of the information exchange.

## 6.4 Final Thoughts

During the writing of this thesis, Google retired its RSS feed aggregator, Google Reader, citing a decline in usage (Hölzle, 2013). Rather than seeing this as the signal that blogs have lost their allure, it may just show that “frequently modified web pages containing individual entries displayed in reverse chronological order” (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004) have become synonymous with the web. Everyone, it seems, has a blog, from the local coffee shop (Bridgehead, 2013) to the *New York Times* (2013). In many cases, blog content is not differentiated from regular site content as sites adopt blog technology as proxy content management systems. When Google started prioritizing blogs in their search results and when tools like WordPress and TypePad became commonplace, making it easy to maintain a blog and to create pages, a new form of web emerged based on the constant updating and information sharing. The ubiquity of the blog form requires us to separate the structure of blogs from the content. The structure of blogs has become the foundation of the web in many ways where the content of blogs, the sharing and connection, has spread independently and inspired sharing platforms, like Facebook. If this is the case, then the concept of mother blogs as a distinct form may be becoming less relevant. Rather than suggest however that the findings of this study are similarly less relevant, it means the opposite. As these forms of personal writing proliferate and as sponsored text increasingly pervades this personal space, it is time to consider this type of writing from an economic perspective and these women as online entrepreneurs. In this context, the current study becomes more relevant as these types of information exchanges involve continuous information seeking and evaluation and the need for conversation around credibility is an essential part of this evolving digital environment.

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## Appendix A – Recruitment email for mother blog readers

Subject: Help with Master's thesis

Hello xxxx,

As you probably already know, I am currently working on my Master's thesis in Information Studies at the University of Ottawa. I am writing because I am looking for volunteers to help in my research.

**You are not being asked to volunteer.** Because I know you I can't use you in my research. Where I'm hoping you can help me, is by referring me to people in your group of acquaintances who are unknown to me and who may be able to help.

My thesis is called: *Mothers of invention: Commercial content on mother blogs and perceptions of credibility*. The project looks at how mommy bloggers write about products and how writers and readers respond to these posts.

I am looking to interview regular readers of mommy blogs. These readers should be:

- Active readers of mommy blogs (defined as reading these blogs at least twice a week)
- Female
- Available to be interviewed in the Ottawa/Gatineau region

Interviews will last up to 60 minutes and will be held in English only in the Ottawa/Gatineau region in September, 2013 at a time and place that is convenient for the volunteers. I am looking for three to five volunteers who will be selected on a first come, first serve basis.

If you know anyone you think meets the above criteria and would be interested in talking to me, could you please forward them my contact information below?

Thanks for your help!  
Caitlin

[phone/email of researcher]

## Appendix B – Follow up email/script for mother blog readers

Subject: Help with Master's thesis on mother bloggers

Dear ...

Thank you for volunteering to be interviewed as part of my Master's thesis in Information Studies at the University of Ottawa.

My thesis is called: *Mothers of invention: Commercial content on mother blogs and perceptions of credibility*. The project looks at how mother bloggers write about products and how writers and readers respond to these posts.

I am looking to interview regular readers of mommy blogs. These readers should be:

- Active readers of mommy blogs (defined as reading these blogs at least twice a week)
- Female
- Available to be interviewed in the Ottawa/Gatineau region

Please confirm that you fit this selection criteria.

If you are willing to participate, we could set up a time to meet at your convenience. Interviews will last up to 60 minutes and will be held in English only in the Ottawa/Gatineau region in the Fall of 2013. Questions will focus on your experience reading about products on mother blogs and your perceptions of these posts and their writers. Interviews will be audio taped, but your participation will be anonymous and confidential. Any quotations used in the final report will be unidentified.

As part of your participation, I will be asking you to sign a consent form that will outline the purpose of the project, the nature of your participation and your rights as a participant.

I am seeking to interview three to five readers of mother blogs and participants will be chosen on a first come first serve basis.

This study is being supervised by Professor Mary Cavanagh of the University of Ottawa's School of Information Studies. It has been approved by the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

I hope you will consider being part of my study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Caitlin Horrall

[phone/email of researcher]

## **Appendix C – Invitation email for mother bloggers**

Subject: Help with Master's thesis on mother bloggers

Dear ...

I am writing to ask you if you would consent to be interviewed as part of my Master's thesis in Information Studies at the University of Ottawa.

My thesis is entitled: *Mothers of invention: Commercial content on mother blogs and perceptions of credibility*. The project looks at how mother bloggers write about products, and how both writers and readers of the blogs respond to these posts.

I am contacting you because you are well known in the mother blogging community in the Ottawa area and you have written on the subject of advertising on your blog.

As part of my research, I am conducting interviews with mother bloggers to hear in their own words how they understand corporate involvement on their blogs. I am also conducting interviews with blog readers to see how they respond to commercial content on blogs.

If you are willing to participate, we could set up a time to meet at your convenience. Interviews will last up to 60 minutes and will be held in English only in the Ottawa/Gatineau region in September, 2013. Interviews will be audio taped, but your participation will be anonymous and confidential. Any quotations used in the final report will be unidentified.

This study is being supervised by Professor Mary Cavanagh of the University of Ottawa's School of Information Studies. It has been approved by the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

I hope you will consider being part of my study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Caitlin Horrall

[phone/email of researcher]

## **Appendix D – Phone/email script for initial conversation with volunteer**

The following information will be conveyed:

- Thank volunteer for their interest
- Review the selection criteria to see if volunteer fits
- Review the expectation of participant:
  - One 60 minute interview, audio recorded
  - Themes of the interview
- Describe consent form they will be asked to sign
- Explain recruitment process – once three to five participants are identified, recruitment will end. Any surplus volunteers will be notified promptly
- Answer any questions participant may have

## **Appendix E – Consent form – readers**

Caitlin Horrall  
Master's Student, School of Information Studies  
University of Ottawa  
[contact information of researcher]

### **Research statement**

Project Title: Mothers of invention: Commercial content on mother blogs and perceptions of credibility

#### Purpose and objectives

The objective of this research is to explore how mother bloggers write about commercial products and how both writers and readers interpret these posts. This study receives no financial support. It is being undertaken in fulfillment of the requirements of a master's degree within the School of Information Studies at the University of Ottawa and is being supervised by Professor Mary Cavanagh, 11104-55 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, 613-562-5800 ext 7376.

To realize this study, the researcher will conduct interviews that will last up to 60 minutes. The researcher will ask questions about how readers understand commercial content on mother blogs. The researcher will audio record the interview and transcribe these recordings. You can request to view the transcription of the interview should you wish. The researcher will conduct interviews with three to five different participants. All interviews will be conducted in English.

#### Confidentiality

The names of all respondents will be kept completely confidential and they will not be identified in any publication. Interview notes and records will be kept in protected facilities at the School of Information Studies for five years after which they will be destroyed by the researcher. Digital records will be password-protected. Only the researcher and her research supervisor will have access to these notes and records.

#### Questions

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to ask questions at any time during the interview. You are particularly welcome to ask questions before signing this form. You are free to end the interview at any time and to choose not to answer any question without having to justify your decision. If you wish to withdraw, simply tell the researcher and all corresponding interview notes and records will be securely destroyed. You will be advised if there is any new information or if there are changes to procedures that might affect your decision to participate.

#### Benefits

Your participation will contribute to the expansion of knowledge of how people make credibility assessments of online content that combines advertising and informational content.

### Ethics Concerns or Questions

You may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the University of Ottawa at any time with any questions or concerns you may have. The Office can be reached at:

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity  
Tabaret Hall  
550 Cumberland St  
Room 154  
Ottawa, ON, Canada  
K1N 6N5  
Tel.: (613) 562-5387  
Fax.: (613) 562-5338

Respondent's statement (please check if you agree)

- The study described above has been explained to me.
- I agree to participate in the study.
- I can voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I have received a copy of the consent form.
- I agree to have the interview tape recorded.
- I am 18 years old or older.
- I would like to receive a summary of the research results when they become available and here is how you can reach me with this summary:

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Respondent: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix F – Consent form – bloggers**

Caitlin Horrall  
Master's Student, School of Information Studies  
University of Ottawa  
[contact information of researcher]

### **Research statement**

Project Title: Mothers of invention: Commercial content on mother blogs and perceptions of credibility

#### Purpose and objectives

The objective of this research is to explore how mother bloggers write about commercial products and how both writers and readers interpret these posts. This study receives no financial support. It is being undertaken in fulfillment of the requirements of a master's degree within the School of Information Studies at the University of Ottawa and is being supervised by Professor Mary Cavanagh, 11104-55 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, 613-562-5800 ext 7376.

To realize this study, the researcher will conduct interviews that will last up to 60 minutes. The researcher will ask questions about how mother blog writers understand commercial content on their blogs. The researcher will audio record the interview and transcribe these recordings. You can request to view the transcription of the interview should you wish. The researcher will conduct interviews with three to five different participants. All interviews will be conducted in English.

#### Confidentiality

The names of all respondents will be kept completely confidential and they will not be identified in any publication. Interview notes and records will be kept in protected facilities at the School of Information Studies for five years after which they will be destroyed by the researcher. Digital records will be password-protected. Only the researcher and her research supervisor will have access to these notes and records.

#### Questions

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to ask questions at any time during the interview. You are particularly welcome to ask questions before signing this form. You are free to end the interview at any time and to choose not to answer any question without having to justify your decision. If you wish to withdraw, simply tell the researcher and all corresponding interview notes and records will be securely destroyed. You will be advised if there is any new information or if there are changes to procedures that might affect your decision to participate.

Benefits

Your participation will contribute to the expansion of knowledge of how people make credibility assessments of online content that combines advertising and informational content.

Ethics Concerns or Questions

You may contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the University of Ottawa at any time with any questions or concerns you may have. The Office can be reached at:

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity  
Tabaret Hall  
550 Cumberland St  
Room 154  
Ottawa, ON, Canada  
K1N 6N5  
Tel.: (613) 562-5387  
Fax.: (613) 562-5338

Respondent's statement (please check if you agree)

- The study described above has been explained to me.
- I agree to participate in the study.
- I can voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I have received a copy of the consent form.
- I agree to have the interview tape recorded.
- I am 18 years old or older.
- I would like to receive a summary of the research results when they become available and here is how you can reach me with this summary:

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Respondent: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G – Interview guide – readers of mother blogs

Respondent pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_

Date of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Start time of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Finish time of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Interview location \_\_\_\_\_

### Introduction to first interview

- Introduce self
- Thank the respondent for agreeing to the interview
- Review study purpose and goals
- Present the consent form and review the information
- Answer questions from the respondent
- Tell the respondent to feel free to ask any questions at any moment; to end her participation at any time or to choose not to answer any questions
- Reassure the respondent that there is no “right” or “wrong” answer. The researcher is interested in her experience; she is the expert
- Invite the respondent to sign the consent form (two copies) and give her a copy

### Researcher’s introduction following formal consent being provided:

*I am interested in your experience as a reader of mother blogs, that is blogs written by women about their personal experiences as they relate to parenting and child-rearing. Specifically I would like to explore your experience of commercial content on mother blogs and how you perceive and interpret these posts.*

*My questions are meant to guide a very open ended conversation. I am interested in anything you have to say. If you would like to stop at any point, or decline to answer a question, please feel free to do so.*

Questions will fall into two major themes, but will be guided by the interests and responses of the participant.

Themes:

- 1) Message credibility – Whether blog content is seen as:
  - Believable
  - Accurate
  - Trustworthy
  - Biased
  - Complete

2) Sponsor credibility – Whether blogger is seen as :

- A person with high integrity
- Possessing a good reputation
- Successful
- Provider of superior quality information
- Prestigious

Note:

All interviews will end by letting participants know they can review the interview transcripts once completed (subject to confidentiality form, Appendix H). The researcher will then ask the participants if they have anything else they would like to add, thanking them, and inviting them to contact the researcher if they have any further thoughts

## Appendix H – Interview guide – bloggers

Respondent pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_

Date of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Start time of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Finish time of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Location \_\_\_\_\_

### Introduction to first interview

- Introduce self
- Thank the respondent for agreeing to the interview
- Review study purpose and goals
- Present the consent form and review the information
- Answer questions from the respondent
- Tell the respondent to feel free to ask any questions at any moment; to end her participation at any time or to choose not to answer any questions
- Reassure the respondent that there is no “right” or “wrong” answer. The researcher is interested in her experience; she is the expert
- Invite the respondent to sign the consent form (two copies) and give her a copy

### Researcher’s introduction following formal consent being provided:

*I am interested in your experience as a reader of mother blogs, that is blogs written by women about their personal experiences as they relate to parenting and child-rearing. Specifically I would like to explore your experience of commercial content on mother blogs and how you perceive and interpret these posts.*

*My questions are meant to guide a very open ended conversation. I am interested in anything you have to say. If you would like to stop at any point, or decline to answer a question, please feel free to do so.*

Questions will focus on perceptions of message credibility, but will be guided by the interests and responses of the participant.

Themes:

- 1) Message credibility – Whether blog content is seen as:
  - Believable
  - Accurate
  - Trustworthy
  - Biased

- Complete

Note:

All interviews will end by letting participants know they can review the interview transcripts once completed (subject to confidentiality form, Appendix H). The researcher will then ask the participants if they have anything else they would like to add, thanking them, and inviting them to contact the researcher if they have any further thoughts

## **Appendix I: Confidentiality agreement**

All data collected for the study *Mothers of invention: Commercial content on mother blogs and perceptions of credibility* is protected under the confidentiality sections of the Research Ethics Board approval process. This means there are physical, administrative, and technical safeguards protecting all the data for this project from unauthorized access, use, disclosure, modification, loss or theft.

You are being given access to transcripts of your interviews for this project with the understanding that after you review them, you will return them to the researcher or destroy them. Your signature confirms that you have read and understand your obligations to respect the confidentiality of the transcripts.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix J: Sample post analysis

### Initial analysis

Turkey, Not Just For Dinner!

Exhausted. This past weekend I went to a conference in Toronto and arrived home somewhere between teary and exhausted. I tried so hard not to let my kiddos and Hubby see how truly wiped out I was, but I know I failed miserably. A tired Mama is a short tempered Mama, and I felt all kinds of guilt about this. [narrative (mother experience - emotions (failure and guilt))] [blogging text (mention of kids/husband)] After all, it's not their fault I spent two glorious days connecting with old friends, making new one's and living on coffee and pastry's. [narrative]. So Monday morning when I got up I knew it was time to get the week off to a better start [context/introduction to problem]. I headed to the grocery store and picked up the fixings for a couple of fabulous meals including some special ingredients for a breakfast that would knock their little socks off.

[intention/context] My inspiration for the week, turkey!

More specifically, the fabulous [positive emotion ] Butterball Turkey Bacon. [marketer info (link to product page in website)]

Breakfast in our house always seems to be in a rush, so I need something that is fast, has some nutritional value, will fill my girls up and perhaps most important that I know they will actually eat! [defining need] [product values/benefits summary: nutritional value, filling, kids will eat it)]

Here is what I did! In an effort to keep our morning moving, I cook the bacon the night before. As always, my bacon is cooked on a tray in the oven. Hint: cooking it on parchment paper helps with messy clean up and gets that bacon to the perfect point of crispy! [advice - not directly product related]

Then in the morning as I'm yelling gently reminding the girls to hurry up, I start to pull together my AWESOME breakfast! [positive emotion] Today, I cranked up the oven and rolled out some crescent dough. I stuffed the dough with my ready to go [product trial /personal experience with product] Butterball Turkey Bacon [marketing info (full product name with parent company)], adding cheese to some, and let the magic begin! [positive emotion] [product trial /personal experience with product]

In just a few minutes the house was filled with the intoxicating aroma [positive emotion] of that “weekend breakfast smell” but without all the work! [appeal to reader that “weekend breakfast smell”?] The amazing part, my kids came running down the stairs, eager to eat! I simply added a side of fresh fruit, a glass of milk and my quick and delish breakfast was ready. [narrative]

As predicted my daughters loved this meal, and even the Hubby grabbed one on the way out the door to work. [narrative] Confession: Thanks to the Turkey bacon and little creative thinking, I felt just a little bit like Martha Stewart. [expert] Maybe next week I will conquer the quiche!

*[disclosure (placement after post)] This post is sponsored [disclosure (characterization - sponsorship)] by Butterball Canada. [disclosure text (company name)] In exchange this review, I have received special perks in the form of products and monetary compensation. [disclosure (material exchange)] All opinions on this blog are my own. [disclosure text (statement of authority) summary: opinions are my own]*

## Secondary analysis once categories had been defined

Turkey, Not Just For Dinner! [review object (food & health care)]

Exhausted. This past weekend I went to a conference in Toronto and arrived home somewhere between teary and exhausted. I tried so hard not to let my kiddos and Hubby see how truly wiped out I was, but I know I failed miserably. [knowledge approach (relational)] A tired Mama is a short tempered Mama [foundation of authority (group)], and I felt all kinds of guilt about this. After all, it’s not their fault I spent two glorious days connecting with old friends, making new one’s and living on coffee and pastry’s. [knowledge approach (relational)]

So Monday morning when I got up I knew it was time to get the week off to a better start. I headed to the grocery store and picked up the fixings for a couple of fabulous meals including some special ingredients for a breakfast that would knock their little socks off. My inspiration for the week, turkey! [knowledge approach (relational)] More specifically, the fabulous Butterball Turkey Bacon. [sentiment orientation (positive)]

Breakfast in our house always seems to be in a rush, so I need something that is fast, has some nutritional value, will fill my girls up and perhaps most important that I know they will actually eat! [knowledge approach (informational)]

Here is what I did! In an effort to keep our morning moving, I cook the bacon the night before. As always, my bacon is cooked on a tray in the oven. Hint: cooking it on parchment paper helps with messy clean up and gets that bacon to the perfect point of crispy! [knowledge approach (relational)]

Then in the morning as I'm yelling gently reminding the girls to hurry up, I start to pull together my AWESOME breakfast! [sentiment orientation (positive)] Today, I cranked up the oven and rolled out some crescent dough. I stuffed the dough with my ready to go Butterball Turkey Bacon adding cheese to some, and let the magic begin! [knowledge approach (relational)]

In just a few minutes the house was filled with the intoxicating aroma of that "weekend breakfast smell" [information orientation (reader) note=calls on reader's knowledge of "weekend breakfast smell"] but without all the work! [knowledge approach (informational)] The amazing part, my kids came running down the stairs, eager to eat! I simply added a side of fresh fruit, a glass of milk and my quick and delish breakfast was ready. [knowledge approach (relational)]

As predicted my daughters loved this meal, and even the Hubby grabbed one on the way out the door to work. [sentiment orientation (positive)] Confession: Thanks to the Turkey bacon and little creative thinking, I felt just a little bit like Martha Stewart. [Foundation of authority (expert)] Maybe next week I will conquer the quiche! [knowledge approach (relational)]

*This post is sponsored by Butterball Canada. In exchange this review, I have received special perks in the form of products and monetary compensation. All opinions on this blog are my own.* [material connection (implicit) summary=opinions my own, received products and cash]

**Appendix K: Breakdown of products represented in the sample mother blog posts**

| Category of review                 | Product  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Food and health care products (14) | Club House Seasoning<br>Dempster's (bread)<br>La Roche-Posay (skin care)<br>Milk Unleashed<br>George's skin cream<br>Canadian Living (food)<br>PGX Webber Naturals (vitamins)<br>Oakrun Farm Bakery<br>Silk Canada and Tree Canada<br>Graval<br>Echinacea (Swiss Natural)<br>Butterball (2 posts)<br>Ddrops (vitamins) |
| Child and baby products (11)       | LOL Elmo doll<br>Munchkin Canada<br>Playtex diaper genie<br>Lego duplo (2 posts)<br>SnuggleBugz diapers<br>Car Seat Sidekick<br>Thirsties diapers<br>Hasbro (2 posts)<br>Skylanders Giants   |
| Entertainment (7)                  | Toons for Toddlers<br>MasterCard Fashion Week<br>Mirbeau Inn and Spa<br>Hallmark<br>Debt-Proof Your Christmas (book)<br>Printcopia<br>Petalash   |
| Retailers (5)                      | Sears (3 posts)<br>My Own Art<br>Shop.ca   |
| Household items (3)                | Rockin green soap<br>HEPA Air Purifier<br>KitchenAid   |

## Appendix L: Posts included in the content analysis phase of the study

|    | Blog Name          | Post name and url  | Date      | Review product                   |
|----|--------------------|--|-----------|----------------------------------|
| 1  | TJZMommy           | <a href="#">My Club House Faves- a recipe for everything!</a>  | 8-Oct-12  | Club House seasoning             |
| 2  | TJZMommy           | <a href="#">The Wiggles are having a Birthday with Toons for Toddlers!</a>                           | 15-Nov-12 | Chuggington - Toons for toddlers |
| 3  | TJZMommy           | <a href="#">Want to Win a LOL Elmo?</a>  | 23-Nov-12 | LOL Elmo                         |
| 4  | Carol au courant   | <a href="#">Shower Her with Love: Baby Shower Gift Ideas</a>   | 9-Oct-12  | Munchkin Canada                  |
| 5  | Carol au courant   | <a href="#">From the Runway to the Crib: MasterCard Fashion Week</a>                                 | 24-Oct-12 | MasterCard Fashion Week          |
| 6  | Carol au courant   | <a href="#">A Taste of Paris: Dempster's® Farmhouse™ Country White Bread Review &amp; Giveaway</a>   | 1-Nov-12  | Dempster's                       |
| 7  | Carol au courant   | <a href="#">Mommy, I'm So Itchy! La Roche-Posay 100 Families Children Eczema Sponsorship Program</a> | 2-Nov-12  | La Roche-Posay                   |
| 8  | Carol au courant   | <a href="#">Bigger is Better: Playtex® Diaper Genie® Elite Sampling Opportunity</a>                  | 19-Nov-12 | Playtex Diaper Genie             |
| 9  | Carol au courant   | <a href="#">On the Mooove: Milk Unleashed Giveaway</a>   | 22-Nov-12 | Milk unleashed                   |
| 10 | Carol au courant   | <a href="#">Battle Dry Skin this Winter with George's Cream Review + #Giveaway</a>                   | 27-Nov-12 | George's Skin Cream              |
| 11 | Nurse loves farmer | <a href="#">Learning Through Play with #LEGODUPLOplay</a>  | 10-Oct-12 | Lego Duplo                       |
| 12 | Nurse loves farmer | <a href="#">Everything Baby Month at Sears! #SearsBabysRoom</a>                                      | 18-Oct-12 | Sears                            |

|    |                        |   |           |                                |
|----|------------------------|---|-----------|--------------------------------|
| 13 | Nurse loves farmer     | <a href="#">Ethan's Days of Giveaways: Rockin Green Soap</a>  | 26-Oct-13 | Rockin Green Soap              |
| 14 | Nurse loves farmer     | <a href="#">The Gift of Giving #LEGODUPLOplay</a>   | 3-Nov-12  | Lego Duplo                     |
| 15 | Nurse loves farmer     | <a href="#">Getting Ready for the Holidays With Sears! #SearsBabysRoom</a>                              | 5-Nov-12  | Sears                          |
| 16 | Nurse loves farmer     | <a href="#">Win \$1000 in AppleCheeks Cloth Diapers from Snuggle Bugz!</a>                              | 14-Nov-12 | SnuggleBugz diapers            |
| 17 | Nurse loves farmer     | <a href="#">Car Seat Sidekick Review &amp; Giveaway</a>   | 26-Nov-12 | Car Seat Sidekick              |
| 18 | Nurse loves farmer     | <a href="#">Thirsties Duo All In One Cloth Diapers Review &amp; Giveaway!</a>                           | 23-Nov-12 | Thirsties diapers              |
| 19 | Nurse loves farmer     | <a href="#">Have Your Photos Turned Into Art! My Own Art Giveaway</a>                                   | 19-Nov-12 | My Own Art                     |
| 20 | Non-mom                | <a href="#">Adventures in kid parties as a Non with a little help from #Hasbro</a>                      | 30-Oct-12 | Hasbro                         |
| 21 | Family food and travel | <a href="#">An Evening with Chef Michael Smith</a>  | 16-Oct-12 | Canadian Living                |
| 22 | Family food and travel | <a href="#">Mirbeau Inn and Spa, Finger Lakes Region, NY</a>  | 17-Nov-12 | MIRBEAU INN AND SPA            |
| 23 | Bits and bleeps        | <a href="#">PGX® (@pgxdailylife ) Can Help You To Make Positive Changes in Your Life!</a>               | 1-Oct-12  | PGX® (Webber Naturals)         |
| 24 | Bits and bleeps        | <a href="#">Oakrun Farm Bakery Unveils 3 Flavours of Their New Line of Savoury English Muffins</a>      | 5-Oct-12  | Oakrun Farm Bakery             |
| 25 | Bits and bleeps        | <a href="#">Silk Canada and Tree Canada join forces to help Canadians reduce their carbon footprint</a> | 11-Oct-12 | Silk Canada and Tree Canada    |
| 26 | Bits and bleeps        | <a href="#">Gravol® Natural Source® Multi-symptom® Tablets ...</a>                                      | 16-Oct-12 | Gravol® Natural Source® Multi- |

|    |                        |   |           |   |
|----|------------------------|---|-----------|---|
|    |                        | <a href="#">New and Effective Too!</a>  |           | symptom® Tablets                        |
| 27 | Bits and bleeps        | <a href="#">Our household's tips for surviving the cold and flu season ...</a>          | 17-Oct-12 | Echinacea (swiss natural)               |
| 28 | Bits and bleeps        | <a href="#">Check Out These @Hallmark_Canada Holiday Must-Haves !!!</a>                 | 26-Nov-12 | Hallmark_Canada                         |
| 29 | Bits and bleeps        | <a href="#">Book Review: Debt-Proof Your Christmas, by Mary Hunt</a>                    | 25-Nov-12 | Debt-Proof Your Christmas, by Mary Hunt |
| 30 | Bits and bleeps        | <a href="#">My DD is a Directioner and @HasbroNews Has Won Her Love!</a>                | 19-Nov-12 | HasbroNews                              |
| 31 | Life of a Twingle      | <a href="#">Printcopia Review</a>   | 4-Nov-12  | Printcopia                              |
| 32 | Life of a Twingle      | <a href="#">Peptalash Review</a>  | 2-Oct-12  | Petalash                                |
| 33 | Survive in the Suburbs | <a href="#">It's The Most Wonderful Time Of The Year! #PayItForward with Butterball</a> | 23-Nov-12 | Butterball                              |
| 34 | Survive in the Suburbs | <a href="#">Skylanders Giants!</a>  | 17-Nov-12 | Skylanders Giants (Wii game)            |
| 35 | Survive in the Suburbs | <a href="#">I Just Did Something For ME!</a>  | 12-Nov-12 | SHOP.ca                                 |
| 36 | Survive in the Suburbs | <a href="#">Sears Club™ Points Program? Do it!</a>                                      | 23-Oct-12 | Sears Club™ Points                      |
| 37 | Survive in the Suburbs | <a href="#">Turkey, Not Just For Dinner!</a>  | 24-Oct-12 | Butterball                              |
| 38 | Survive in the Suburbs | <a href="#">Surviving Allergy Season With A Give Away!</a>                              | 22-Oct-12 | HEPA Air Purifier                       |
| 39 | Survive in the Suburbs | <a href="#">Baby Scares, Blissdom and Ddrops</a>  | 5-Oct-12  | Ddrops                                  |
| 40 | Survive in the Suburbs | <a href="#">KitchenAid Artisan Stand Mixer GIVEAWAY! My Kitchen Crush!</a>              | 1-Oct-12  | KitchenAid                              |

## Appendix M :Ethics certificate

File Number: 08-13-03

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 09/12/2013



**Université d'Ottawa** **University of Ottawa**  
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

### Ethics Approval Notice Social Science and Humanities REB

#### Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

| <u>First Name</u> | <u>Last Name</u> | <u>Affiliation</u>         | <u>Role</u>        |
|-------------------|------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Mary F.           | Cavanagh         | Arts / Information Studies | Supervisor         |
| Caitlin           | Horrall          | Arts / Information Studies | Student Researcher |

**File Number:** 08-13-03

**Type of Project:** Master's Thesis

**Title:** Mothers of invention: Commercial content on mother blogs and perceptions of credibility

| <b>Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b> | <b>Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b> | <b>Approval Type</b> |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| 09/12/2013                        | 09/11/2014                      | Ia                   |

(Ia: Approval, Ib: Approval for initial stage only)

#### Special Conditions / Comments:

N/A

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Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada  
(613) 562-5387 • Téléc./Fax (613) 562-5338  
<http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/index.html>  
<http://www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie/index.html>



**Université d'Ottawa** **University of Ottawa**  
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the application for ethical approval for the above named research project as of the Ethics Approval Date indicated for the period above and subject to the conditions listed the section above entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the study the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the study (e.g. change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment documentation, should be submitted to this office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at: <http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>

Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer 4 weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval. This document can be found at: <http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5387 or by e-mail at: [ethics@uOttawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uOttawa.ca).

**Signature:**