A Beautiful Mess: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Consumption, Gender, and Power

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A baked potato is not as big as the world, and vacuuming the living-room floor—with or without makeup—is not work that takes enough thought or energy to challenge any woman’s full capacity.

—Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963

I’ve become domesticated, and I’m happier now.

—Emily Matchar, *Homeward Bound*, 2013

In her provocative yet still influential book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan, an American writer, activist, and feminist, lists the woes of midcentury American domesticity (Donadio n. pag.). Her quotation above contrasts starkly with journalist and author Emily Matchar’s comment summarizing Rebecca Woolf’s mommy blog (a blog authored by a mother) “Girls Gone Child.” These quotations exemplify the striking shift from the old domesticity to what scholars Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush call the “new domesticity” (7). Whereas feminists like Friedan once dismissed domestic work as unfulfilling and unengaging, women such as Woolf are now embracing domesticity by choice, and they are doing it very publically—on the internet. According to Bratich and Brush, the new domesticity transforms the old—with its negative connotations of female subordination and restrictive gender roles—into an empowered “feminist choice” to return back to the home (8).

Matchar notes that this transformation began in the 1990s, when third-wave feminists like the Riot Grrrls, an underground punk rock movement in the Pacific Northwest, embraced traditional women’s work such as knitting and embroidery as “cool” rebellion against corporations—instead of buying products from corporations, these women made the products themselves. By 2006, this trend for handcrafts and handmade goods spread to the kitchen, where women were increasingly making nutritious food from scratch in environmentally sustainable ways. The economic recession of 2008 and 2009 fueled the fire of the new domesticity. As more women lost their jobs and became disenfranchised by the contemporary workplace, struggling to
balance work and family life, they found solace and meaningful work in the home (43-5). Today, this new domesticity exists most prevalently on the internet, especially in blogs like Woolf’s (Bratich and Brush 11).

Author Trish Wilson explains that a blog, which is a portmanteau of the words “web” and “log,” is composed of online journal entries of a blogger’s thoughts and ideas that are typically listed in reverse chronological order (51). Blogging has become a widespread practice throughout the world. As of 2011, there were over 159 million bloggers world-wide. Nearly 30 percent of the world’s total bloggers live in the United States—four times as many as the second biggest contributor, Great Britain, which accounts for 6.75 percent. Not only do millions of people blog, but the blogosphere or the mainstream blogging community has the largest audience of any other media that has ever existed (Ratliff n. pag.; Cross 3; 37).

Women’s lifestyle blogs, a genre of blogs that focuses on traditionally feminine topics such as home décor, cooking, do-it-yourself (DIY) projects, crafts, fashion, and beauty, have become popular sites of the new domesticity in the blogosphere (Hilgenberg n. pag.). Not only does A Beautiful Mess (ABM), a lifestyle blog authored by two sisters, Elsie Larson and Emma Chapman, provide an excellent example of this phenomenon, but it also makes the new domesticity seem chic and modern. Arms adorned with vintage sewing machine or 60s style hand mixer tattoos and feet snug in retro-looking Lotta brand clogs, Larson and Chapman are the new-and-improved, media literate housewives of the 21st century, and their online presence can be found not only on their blog, but on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Bloglovin’ (a website for blog writers and readers). Founded in 2007, ABM started as Larson’s just-for-fun personal blog but has since blossomed—with the added assistance of Chapman—into a successful business. Approximately 1.74 million people—a vast majority of whom are women between the
ages of 25 and 34 and 26 percent of whom own their own home—visit *A Beautiful Mess* each month. *A Beautiful Mess* became a million-dollar business in 2014 with the help of paid advertisements and corporate sponsors in addition to the release of the bloggers’ photo-altering application for Apple products and the publication of a lifestyle photography book (“Survey Results Are In!” n. pag.; “On Changing Dreams” n. pag.).

Because of its wild success among businesses and online readers and because of its engagement with the new domesticity, *A Beautiful Mess* proves to be a worthy topic of study. Naturally, the blog raises many questions related to domestic roles, consumerism, and its impact on women readers. This analysis is concerned primarily with answering the following three research questions: (1) What discourses of femininity does ABM construct? (2) How does consumerism factor into the blog’s concept of femininity and beauty? (3) Does DIY empower women or does it have the potential to create an exclusive in-group of women who have both the time and resources to DIY? In order to answer these questions, I will begin with an overview of the scholarly literature on women bloggers and then provide an explanation of methodology, an analysis of the blog, and finally a discussion of my findings.

**Background Review of the Literature**

**Where Are All the Women Bloggers?**

The lack of exposure of women’s voices in the blogosphere noted by bloggers, writers, and scholars (Wilson; Harp and Tremayne; Gregg) leads to the false assumption that women do not blog or that if they do, their blogs are not of high quality. It raises what author Melissa Gregg calls the “well-intended if naïve question, ‘Where are all the women bloggers?’” (152). On the contrary, men and women each comprise roughly half of the blogosphere (Harp and Tremayne 247). *BlogHer* (http://www.blogher.com/), an online network for women bloggers founded in
2005 by Lisa Stone, Elisa Camahort Page, and Jory Des Jardins, attempts to reverse the inaccurate perception that women’s blogs are scarce and of poor quality, a perception perpetuated by the patriarchal assumption that women are not as interested in technology as men (to be discussed later in this literature review). Communication scholar Daniels (2012) asserts that BlogHer has grown into a “social media empire,” empowering women to monetize their own blogs. The website’s mission statement is to “create opportunities for women who blog to pursue exposure, education, community, and economic empowerment” (36-7; “Our Mission”). BlogHer syndicates posts by women bloggers, publishes the posts on its homepage, promotes them via its social media channels, and pays women for contributing their work (“What is Syndication on BlogHer?”). BlogHer also hosts annual in-person conferences for bloggers. A Beautiful Mess exemplifies BlogHer’s ultimate goal by effectively monetizing its blog through advertisements, sponsored posts, and the selling of various products via e-commerce. BlogHer not only demonstrates the presence and talent of women bloggers, but it also reveals a key motivation for bloggers like Larson and Chapman—the potential to profit financially from blogging.

Beyond BlogHer, scholarly research explores the question, “Where are all the women bloggers?” by analyzing the mainstream blogosphere’s seeming ignorance of women bloggers. The bulk of available research on women bloggers, although unfortunately not focusing extensively on women’s lifestyle blogs, concentrates on personal mommy blogs (Morrison; Webb and Lee; Lopez; Powell; DiPrince; Chen). Scholars note both the controversial, gendered meaning of the term “mommy blogger” and how personal mommy blogging can build community and collective identity. Research on mommy blogs is particularly helpful for analyzing A Beautiful Mess because it confronts women’s domestic roles and explicates the commodification of women’s blogs. The content of ABM is also closely related to mommy
blogs—the authors of ABM often incorporate intimate details about their lives (such as relationship status updates and weddings) in their posts similar to mommy bloggers. Additionally, researchers analyze political blogs, also called filter blogs. Harp and Tremayne study this genre of blog, and others (Ratliff; Gregg; Saleh) also attempt to understand the patriarchal nature of the blogosphere and why women bloggers are more often recognized for writing personal diary blogs and lifestyle blogs such as *A Beautiful Mess* than they are for authoring political blogs. I will begin an exploration of scholarly literature with an overview of this research centered on political blogs and the gendered blogosphere because it lays a clear foundation for understanding how the ideology of separate spheres (private versus public spheres) impacts how blog readers experience and interpret blogs, whether political, mommy, or lifestyle.

**Inequality in a Gendered Blogosphere**

Despite *BlogHer*’s as well as others’ attempts to endorse women bloggers, scholars (Harp and Tremayne; Ratliff; Gregg; Saleh) note significant inequity in the blogosphere based on gender. Communication scholars Harp and Tremayne (2006) study gender inequality among the most popular filter or political blogs. The researchers note that while virtually anyone with access to a computer and the internet can enter the political blogosphere with relatively little social, political, and economic capital, women are still underrepresented in top filter blogs (Harp and Tremayne 247). Their study utilizes network theory to determine a blog’s success by chronicling the number of sites linking to it. Bloggers link to other weblogs in two ways. First, bloggers create a list of links to other blogs called a blogroll, which they usually post on their homepage. The blogroll serves as a form of advertisement, sending readers to other blogs. Second, bloggers’ posts typically contain links to other blog posts about similar content (250).
Due to network growth, blogs that have been active for a long time—usually ones authored by men—accumulate more and more links and thus more readership. Harp and Tremayne explain that, “the poor stay poor, and an unequal distribution of links and user traffic results” (251). This phenomenon creates a disadvantage for new(er) bloggers who increasingly are female.

After determining the top political blogs through network analysis, Harp and Tremayne find that only 10 percent of the top blogs are authored by women. They attribute this lack of female authorship to the perception held among bloggers and readers that women do not generally blog about politics, that women’s blogs are poor quality, and that top bloggers do not have links to women’s sites (247). The researchers assert that these beliefs are born out of the still persistent patriarchal ideology that men occupy the public sphere while women belong in the private sphere. The dichotomy of public/private, male/female suggests that women, because they are consumed with household and family affairs in the private realm, do not have the time or energy to blog about politics. Even when women do enter the political realm via blogging, their voices often go unheard (249). Harp and Tremayne demonstrate that mere accessibility to the political blogosphere is not enough to balance gender inequality in the blogosphere. Voices need audiences to make an impact on public, political life (259).

Communication and literary scholar Ratliff (2004) draws conclusions similar to Harp and Tremayne. Ratliff surveys members of Blog Sisters, a women-only group blog, asking them to define “blogging community” and to describe their relationship with the blogging community. One respondent defines “blogging community” in a way that highlights the blogosphere’s patriarchal nature: “Do you really want me to answer that right now, when I’m feeling rather pissy about it. It’s mostly male, mostly white and very chummy. I’ve been lucky to be ‘accepted’ into the community with open arms, namely due to the ‘sponsorship’ of a couple of great
bloggers, both men and women, but it’s still a very male dominated community” (n. pag.). The woman’s comment echoes the frustration of other women bloggers who feel excluded from their blogging community, which they see as a boy’s club of sorts—not a place for women. Ratliff claims that although some respondents such as the one above attribute the inequality in the blogosphere to sexism, surprisingly, most of them do not.

Whether or not the women bloggers feel marginalized because of their gender, Ratliff finds a disparity of links shared between men and women’s blogs. Ratliff argues that the most widely-read bloggers link more to men’s blogs than they do to women’s. Ratliff analyzes “Blogstreet,” a list of the 100 most important weblogs, and discovers that the top 10 blogs list does not include any authored by women. “Blogstreet” determines importance by the number of sites, including bloggers and commercial news media, that link to a blog. Further, blogs written by men substantially outnumber those authored by women on blogrolls. Ratliff concludes that, although the blogosphere provides a tremendous opportunity for individuals to have a voice online, its hierarchal nature stunts women’s ability to achieve recognition for their blogs. Harp and Tremayne’s more recent study indicates that women appear to have made moderate gains in the blogosphere, suggesting that Ratliff’s assertion that no women author top blogs is no longer completely accurate. It is important to note, however, that Ratliff did not study filter blogs as Harp and Tremayne did.

Author Melissa Gregg (2006) reinforces Harp and Tremayne’s findings by examining the disparity between male and female bloggers. She states that while there is a relatively equal number of male and female bloggers (as Harp and Tremayne contend), male bloggers are still perceived to be more influential to the world and politics (151). Gregg believes that the public/private, male/female dichotomy is a significant factor in this inequality, but her analysis
goes further than Harp and Tremayne in that she questions the very definition of what is considered a blog or political. She argues that what has come to be viewed as women’s personal online journals should really be identified as blogs, and that the personal content on these websites should not be disregarded as apolitical:

…the logic behind this position [that women do not blog about politics] is that politics itself is static, that what counts as political does not need to be debated because it is self-evident. Not only is this truly worrying for the prospect of any kind of effective political change or agitation, as it assumes an unchanging list of priorities for political debate, but it refuses any mention of the second-wave feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s that established personal issues as political. (154-6)

English literature scholar Saleh (2010) agrees that the existing definition of politics—which includes discussion and debate about domestic and foreign policy, current events, and warfare—is reductive and narrow, minimizing the experiences of women and issues such as healthcare and childcare. Saleh, in addition to cyberfeminist scholars Daniels (2012), Orgad (2005), Podlas (2000), and Plant (1997), views blogging as a way to transform the private lives of women into public discourse and as a feminist tool for subverting the public/private dichotomy (Daniels 29; 44). Saleh explains that third-wave feminism, which started in the 90s and continues today, challenges essentialist definitions of femininity and emphasizes the uniqueness and individuality of women. She argues that blogging is an incredible tool for promoting this diverse view of femininity and women. Blogging enables women to create their own e-space, forming community with other women and publicizing their everyday experiences on the internet.
Although Saleh asserts that blogging can help feminists actively deconstruct the public/private binary, she also acknowledges the limitations of the blogosphere for equalizing men and women in politics. She writes that challenges of blogging include harassment and sexism—some women bloggers today even identify themselves as males to avoid sexist comments—and the lack of diversity in the blogosphere, especially in terms of race and class. Attorney Filipovic (2007) confirms that internet misogyny often parallels real-world harassment and undermines women bloggers’ perceived legitimacy as writers and thinkers. She notes that:

> When women write about politics or technology, or when they pursue an education in a traditionally male field like law, they are reminded of their secondary status through sexualized insults, rape threats, and beauty contests…they [internet aggressors] remind her that even if she is a popular blogger, her sexual allure (or lack thereof) makes her not worth listening to. (295)

Although Filipovic’s claim may not apply to all women bloggers, internet sexism perpetuates inequality in a gendered blogosphere.

**Mommy Bloggers**

Scholarly research historically privileged political blogs because of the perception that they were more influential to society than personal diary blogs, although personal blogs vastly outnumber filter blogs (Morrison 39). Tremayne de-emphasizes the cultural and scholarly significance of personal diary blogs in his book about the role of blogs in contemporary media. He states that, “…the greatest impact on mainstream media comes not from personal journals but from political blogs…” (x). However, a genre of personal blogs labeled by scholars as “mommy blogs” is gaining critical attention. According to literary scholar Morrison (2010), personal mommy blogging is “purposive and deliberate social engagement, a creative as well as
interpersonal practice that mitigates the assorted ills (physical isolation, role confusion, lack of realistic role models, etc.) and celebrates the particular joys of contemporary mothering, especially in the earliest years of parenting” (n. pag.). Mommy blogging became a worthy topic for researchers (Webb and Lee; Lopez; Chen) after a controversial conference held by BlogHer in 2005. Mommy bloggers at the conference felt marginalized and underappreciated by fellow bloggers who thought that they only wrote about the mundane tasks of mothering such as changing diapers. A participant in the conference and a mommy blogger herself, Alice Bradley of “Finslippy” (http://finslippy.squarespace.com/), responded by describing mommy blogging as a radical act that redefines previous, limiting conceptions of motherhood. As a result, the 2006 BlogHer conference hosted a discussion entitled “Mommy Blogging is a Radical Act!” thus affirming the credibility of mommy bloggers, at least within the BlogHer community (Webb and Lee 244).

Communication scholar Lopez (2009) agrees that mommy blogging is a radical, feminist act that has the potential to break down negative stereotypes of mothers. Lopez utilizes lenses of feminism and autobiography to examine the discourses surrounding Bradley’s comment at the 2005 BlogHer conference (730). By conducting a Google search of the phrase “mommy blogging is a radical act,” Lopez determines what was being said about mommy blogs, how it was being said, and who was saying it (733). She discovers that the topic of mommy blogs functions as a springboard for analysis of the term “mommy blogger” itself. Many mommy bloggers felt that the term was inherently belittling and reductive, putting their blogs in a negative light. The women bloggers’ frustration may stem from the implicit diminutive meaning of “mommy,” a weakened form of “mom,” which is “a term used only by children…[it] doesn’t have the authority of ‘mother,’ because it addresses from a child’s eye view. It assumes a
familiarity, an approachability, to mother that is, frankly, patronizing; reminiscent, in fact, of the difference between woman and girl” (qtd. in Lopez 737). However, Lopez also discovers that nearly every woman who posted about the BlogHer conference valued the support and camaraderie mommy blogging gave them; it gave them a chance to talk to and identify with other mothers through blog posts and comments (742).

Lopez concludes that mommy blogging can show the realistic, “ugly side of motherhood” and provide a way for mommy bloggers as a community to rewrite previous narratives of motherhood (744). Powell’s rhetorical analysis (2010) of three prominent mommy blogs (www.dooce.com, www.girlsgonechild.net, and www.notesfromthetrenches.com) confirms Lopez’s conclusion. Powell emphasizes that mommy blogs complicate the dichotomy of good mother/bad mother. She asserts that, “There is no dichotomy. These women did not become new people for their children; motherhood expanded their subjectivities. It did not do away with them” (45). Through their stories, mommy bloggers have the potential to greatly expand possibilities for contemporary motherhood (DiPrince 56).

On the other hand, communication scholar Chen (2013) views the term “mommy blogger” in a more negative light. Chen rhetorically analyzes 29 blog posts by women about mommy blogging and 649 comments posted on these blogs in order to uncover and describe the processes whereby people create meaning (510; 514). Based on these posts and comments, she recognizes that the act of mommy blogging can be empowering for women. However, she critiques the term “mommy blogger,” arguing that it can force women into a “spatial captivity,” defining women solely on their identities as mothers. She states that the term “reinforces women’s’ hegemonic normative roles as nurturers, thrusting women who blog about their children into a form of digital domesticity in the blogosphere” (511).
Chen also notes how the use of the word “mommy” further marginalizes these women by suggesting that they fit neatly into a unitary category of mother: one who cares for her children, is limited to the private sphere, has little to say on public matters, is not welcome in the public sphere, and does not work outside of the home (522). Furthermore, the word “mommy”—similar to the term “girl power”—can infantilize females because it emphasizes the stereotype of women as passive beings. Mothers may feel empowered by blogging, but their label offers them only fleeting and limited “agency masked by stereotype” (525). Communication scholars Stavrositu and Sundar (2012) confirm that although women perceive themselves to be empowered through blogging, their actual empowerment does not necessarily match this perception (383).

In addition to analyzing the term “mommy blogger,” scholars (Webb and Lee; Karlsson; Morrison) study how mommy blogging creates tight-knit communities of women. Communication scholars Webb and Lee (2011) note that blogging allows women to connect easily and frequently with other blog users with similar interests. Users can discuss their ideas and receive feedback and validation from their online community (247). Women who feel isolated as new mothers may turn to blogging for social support (249). Heather Armstrong of dooce.com even argues that her supportive blogging community helped her fight postpartum depression. She writes, “I believe my audience was part of what saved my life” (250). Not only can online communities provide support, but they can also lead to lasting online—or even offline—friendships (250).

Through participation in mommy blogging communities, women form collective identities. Webb and Lee assert that because identity is performed and enacted, blogs are like an “interactive extension” of identity. Mommy blogging is a performance of the self and often also of gender. Bloggers perform their identities and gender by choosing what to post on their blogs,
how to post it, and what details of their lives they wish to exclude. Through their comments, readers validate the performance and thus a blogger’s identity (Webb and Lee 246). According to feminist scholar Karlsson (2007), both blog writers and readers are drawn to this process of self-presentation because of the possibility for identification and recognition (150). Readers are attracted to blogs that they can identify with, that are recognizable, and that reflect their own life stories. Identification often shapes readers’ understandings of their own identities (149). Literary scholar Morrison (2011) calls this cycle of identification the “intimate public,” whereby mommy bloggers disclose intimate personal details of their lives to an online public, which in turn provides reciprocal emotional support (42). Reciprocity within the intimate public results in emotional release or catharsis for both bloggers and readers, which can lead to positive psychological health (41).

In another article explicating the genre of mommy blogs and outlining the particulars of the intimate public, Morrison (2010) studies the texts (blog posts and comments) surrounding a controversial article about mommy blogging published in the Globe and Mail, a nationally-distributed Canadian newspaper. Morrison notes that the article is an illustrative example of other press releases about mommy blogging during a three-year period (2005-2008). By examining these texts, Morrison attempts to understand the genre of mommy blogs, defining genre as, “a rhetorical means of mediating private intentions and social exigence; it motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent” (n. pag.). In other words, genre describes what something does; the purpose of a rhetorical and thereby public act. Morrison begins her analysis by describing the criticisms of mommy blogging in the Globe and Mail article. The article claims that mommy blogs exploit children, publicizing the life of a child who has not given his or her explicit permission. It discusses the potential harm of mommy
blogging to children, which include threats to children’s safety and future mental health issues. Moreover, the article trivializes blog writers and their texts, suggesting that mommy blogging is the “province of mentally-ill new mothers, writing up embarrassing or indiscreet—and certainly banal and possibly tasteless—private details of their children’s lives for personal enrichment and name-recognition” (n. pag.).

Morrison finds that mommy bloggers responding to the article internalized their blogging community, using pronouns such as we/us/ours. For example, on a Her Bad Mother’s (http://herbadmother.com/) post, Sam comments that, “I was saddened and a little outraged when I read the comments to your article. Not only are they harsh and rude to YOU and YOUR family, but to the rest of us as well. Those commentators refer to ALL of us as pimps and zombies that are taking advantage of our children” (emphasis added). This further substantiates scholars’ (Webb and Lee; Karlsson; Morrison) assertions that women develop communal identities through blogging. Other commenters defend mommy blogging as a form of legitimate autobiography and point out that women’s writing has always been deemed less worthy than writing by men. For instance, Sweetney posts that, “Do I, as a woman who also happens to be a mother, have the right to compose a memoir of my life?” Morrison concludes that mommy blogging is “autobiography in real time,” actively rewriting the public script of mothering. Blogging, given its accessibility in addition to its blurring of the distinction between writers and readers who leave comments, offers a more democratic form of autobiography than ever before. As a genre, mommy blogging unites communities of women to author their own stories and identities rather than defaulting to the popular media’s image of maternity.

One argument that critics such as the Globe and Mail make against mommy blogs is that the blogs exploit children in order to make money. While most mommy bloggers would disagree
with this claim, scholars (Lopez; Webb and Lee; Daniels; Powell) note that mommy blogs can indeed turn an impressive profit. Armstrong of dooce.com, one of the most widely-read mommy blogs, earns enough money through advertising on her site to fully support both her husband and child—mommy blogging has become her full-time job (Lopez 741)! Advertisers view mommy bloggers as influential consumers because they often make financial decisions for their families (Webb and Lee 245). In fact, Daniels (2012) notes that women control 80 percent of household spending. Not only are authors and readers of mommy blogs (typically women) powerful consumers, but blogs are often more trusted sources for news and information. Consumers are more apt to trust a description or review of a product on a blog within their trusted blogging community than a random “expert” or company (36).

Advertisements transform blogs into commodified spaces (Powell 45). Corporate sponsors not only advertise on blogs, but they also entice women bloggers to write favorable posts about their products (Daniels 45). Daniels explains how, through this process, women themselves are commodified: “The commodification of women’s blogging is also the commodification of feminism, as it takes women’s emotional labor and the crypto-feminist impulse toward diary keeping…and uses it to sell back to women their own experience” (53). In other words, when women bloggers portray their womanhood based in part on brands and products, readers often literally buy into a commodified view of femininity, believing that they need to buy certain brands in order to be feminine. A Beautiful Mess is no exception to this phenomenon. ABM features a multitude of ads on its website and routinely features sponsored posts. In order to be a member of the A Beautiful Mess community, women readers are encouraged to follow the consuming habits of Larson and Chapman; to buy the brands the bloggers advertise and to use the products they use for DIYs.
Scholarly work focused on women bloggers provides an excellent glimpse into the political, social, and economic environment surrounding the lifestyle blog *A Beautiful Mess*. Scholars who study political blogs and inequity in the blogosphere demonstrate how women bloggers are often limited to domestic roles (i.e. blogging about matters of the private sphere such as parenting) even within the blogosphere but also how blogs can be used to expand notions of femininity by challenging the public/private dichotomy. Research on mommy blogs also demonstrates how blogs can be used as a feminist tool for redefining motherhood. Literature on mommy blogging also questions the motives of women bloggers like Larson and Chapman—are they primarily motivated by money?—and demonstrates how women’s blogs can be commodified. Although this review raises many important issues relevant to *A Beautiful Mess*, it also reflects a serious lack of scholarship on women’s lifestyle blogs. The present study will attempt to remedy this lack of research. To do this, I will utilize the cross-disciplinary methodology of critical discourse analysis.

**Methodology**

The theoretical framework employed in this study is critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA has been applied in a multitude of scholarly contexts—in sociology, linguistics, and communication studies, to name a few. Regardless of the academic discipline, however, CDA is primarily concerned with how language, symbols, and images produce, reproduce, or deconstruct systems of power. Critical discourse scholars strive to reveal how language can serve a hegemonic function, reinforcing the dominant ideologies in a society while suppressing alternate or subversive ideologies (Fairclough et al. 357; 373). As a critical approach, CDA positions itself against dominating groups and on the side of oppressed groups, promoting the minority voice; giving a voice to the voiceless (358). Because of its value of minority voices, CDA is a useful
tool for analyzing issues about women, whose voices are routinely suppressed, and how class affects the agency and power of women. It is therefore an appropriate means to answering the research questions—which concern femininity, consumerism, and women’s empowerment—for the lifestyle blog A Beautiful Mess.

According to Fairclough et al. (2010), discourse can be broadly defined as, “an analytical category describing the vast array of meaning-making resources available to us.” The theorists consider “discourse” to be synonymous with “semiosis,” which includes “encompassing words, pictures, symbols, design, colour, gesture, and so forth” (357). CDA views discourse (or semiosis) as a form of social practice, which implies a “dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and all the diverse elements of the situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s) which frame it” (357). In other words, the discursive event is influenced by these situations, institutions, and social structures, and it simultaneously influences them. For this reason, discursive practices can have a significant impact on ideologies and power relations within society. Although these ideologies and power structures are not often explicitly stated or visible within discourse, it is the goal of CDA to reveal them (358).

Increasingly, discourse is integral to social life and can even be a form of social control. For example, commodity advertising and politicians use discourse in highly targeted ways, ultimately desiring that the audience of a particular discursive act think or behave in a specific way (Fairclough et al. 359-360). Language, especially if it comes from “experts” of knowledge or “life-style gurus in the media,” has a “reflexive” quality, meaning that it has the potential to “radically alter”—often innocuously, without individuals consciously realizing it—the behavior of individuals as well as their self-concepts (360). The bloggers of A Beautiful Mess, considered “life-style gurus” of the blogosphere, likewise can influence both how women act (specifically
their consuming habits) and how they construct their identities. A critical discourse analysis of ABM is essential for exposing the potential impact of the blog on women readers.

In particular, this study will utilize Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis framework (2001), adapted from Kaur et al.’s (2013) study of beauty advertisements. Fairclough’s framework analyzes discourse at three levels: the micro level (text), the meso level (discourse practice), and the macro level (sociocultural practice). Textual analysis at the micro level involves a concentrated study of language strategies, vocabulary, and syntax within the discourse, in this instance, within A Beautiful Mess blog posts (Kaur et al. 63). It also includes an analysis of the images that accompany the text and how visuals provide framing for the discourse. At the meso level, discourse practice analysis focuses on the text’s production and consumption, which is related to how power relations are enacted (67). This level of analysis asks questions such as, “Where was the text made? Who was it written by? What perspective might this person want to promote? What kind of person might read this text?” (“Example Research” n. pag.). It concerns itself primarily with questions about the medium of communication and audience.

Finally, at the macro level, social practice analysis explains the “broad societal currents” affecting the text, in this case, A Beautiful Mess. This level of analysis also calls for an intertextual reading that helps to elucidate these broad societal currents (Kaur et al. 69). Literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), an influential figure in discourse analysis theory, introduced the idea of intertextuality, which is the idea that any text is always responding to, drawing on, and altering other texts (Fairclough et al. 361). In his essay “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin explains this idea of intertextuality:
…there are not “neutral” words and forms—words and forms that can belong to “no one”; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents… Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word. (676-677)

As previously mentioned, discourses both influence and are influenced by the various situations, institutions, and social structures surrounding them; by “the context and contexts” in which they live. This level of analysis seeks to identify these situations, institutions, and social structures.

For example, in Kaur et al.’s study of beauty advertisements, the researchers analyze views on beauty around the world and specifically Malaysia (the studied focused on advertisements in women’s magazines in Malaysia). The study also examines how the advertisements borrow words from discourses of science such as “Flex-Polymer Technology” to add credibility to their claims (69). Ultimately, analysis at the macro level asks, “What social issues are of particular importance at the time the text was created?” (“Example Research n. pag.). This analysis will focus primarily on the micro, textual level because it provides a wealth of information relevant to the research questions. However, I will introduce ideas from both the meso and macro levels in the discussion section.

This critical discourse analysis includes blog posts published during summer 2013 (June, July, and August) by A Beautiful Mess. The ABM bloggers publish on average three posts a day, so the data sample includes roughly 250 posts. I accessed blog posts from summer 2013 through the website’s (http://abeautifulmess.typepad.com/) archives, which appear on the lower right-hand column of each webpage. I first analyzed the title of the blog and then both the text and
images that appeared with each post. The selection of blog posts from summer 2013 proved most relevant and appropriate for this study because it represented the blogger’s most recent full summer of blogging, a summer that saw significant growth in the blog’s commercial success. During summer 2013, the bloggers of AMB not only released and updated a photo-altering application for iPhones, iPods, and iPads, but they also authored and published a book about lifestyle photography titled *A Beautiful Mess Photo Idea Book: 95 Inspiring Ideas for Photographing Your Friends, Your World, and Yourself* (“A Beautiful Mess App Is in the iTunes Store!” n. pag.; “A Beautiful Mess App FAQ” n. pag.; “#ABeautifulMess App Updates!” n. pag.; “A Beautiful Mess Photo Idea Book Is Here!” n. pag.). By 2014, the blog also became a million dollar business, due in large part to the successes of summer 2013 (“On Changing Dreams” n. pag.). The bloggers recorded all of these significant events and changes in their blog posts. Needless to say, summer 2013 was an important time for *A Beautiful Mess* and therefore a significant portion of blogging to analyze using CDA.

**Textual Analysis**

Analyzing the title of the blog provides a compelling entry point into exploring the research questions (1) What discourses of femininity as a gender role does ABM construct? (2) How does consumerism factor into the blog’s concept of femininity and beauty? and (3) Does DIY empower women or does it have the potential to create an exclusive in-group of women who have both the time and resources to DIY? The title frames the discourses of the blog’s content and should in some way reflect or represent the blog’s content and vice versa. Its meaning and connotations guide how visitors to the website are to read and interpret blog posts. The communicators, Larson and Chapman, specifically chose *A Beautiful Mess* as their title
because they thought that it embodied the spirit of their blog in some way; it captured the
essence of their desired image and brand.

* A Beautiful Mess is an oxymoron, juxtaposing contradictory elements into one idea. In
multiple ways, the word “beautiful” has completely opposite connotations of the word “mess.”
What is beautiful is desirable, perfect, pretty, aesthetic, attractive, whole; not messy. Mess
connotes that which is not desired, not perfect, not pretty, not attractive, not whole; that which is
jumbled, disorganized, unpredictable, stress-inducing, and overwhelming. By combining these
seemingly incongruous elements, Larson and Chapman encapsulate the process and product of
DIYing. In DIY projects (as exhibited in blog posts to be examined), the process of creation can
indeed be very messy. One begins with a smattering of everyday materials and tools and then,
through a process of trial and error—which may involve feelings of frustration and ineptitude—
one creates (if all goes according to plan) something new and beautiful; beauty emerges from
mess. Messiness is a vital dimension to beauty.

As evidenced by the title, this idea—creating beauty from mess—is foundational to
Larson and Chapman’s blog. In the “About” section of the website, the bloggers validate this
assertion, writing, “We believe in taking time each day to make something pretty. We believe in
lifelong learning. Most of all, we believe that life doesn’t need to be perfect to be beautiful”
(“About” n. pag.). To the bloggers, beautiful things are born out of the messiness and
imperfection of everyday life, and as I will discuss later in this analysis, DIY is often the means
to producing these beautiful things. DIY is creating beauty from the bottom up: starting with
ordinary, seemingly mundane objects and transforming them into the extraordinary; “something
pretty.” The question remains, however, as to whether the bloggers emphasize, either implicitly
or explicitly, the process of creating or the beautiful end product; the empowerment of being able
to do it oneself or the possession of pretty things (possession that almost always necessitates spending money—the materials and tools for DIYs do not appear from thin air, after all). Determining which of these two discourses ultimately dominates the blog’s content is an important goal of this analysis.

Before exploring the principal discourses within blog posts from summer 2013, it is helpful to examine how blog posts are framed visually on the website because visuals often influence how readers experience these posts and the pictures that accompany them. The design of the website is relatively simple: a plain white background allows blog posts and photos to pop out at viewers. The only use of color appears on the navigational buttons (“Crafts,” “Photography,” “Recipes,” “Décor,” “Fashion,” and “Beauty”) at the top of every webpage, and the colors, although ranging from cool to warm, are muted; they add variety and playfulness to an otherwise colorless design while not distracting viewers’ attentions from blog posts. The shape of these buttons is reminiscent of the label tabs on top of manila folders, giving the blog a more professional, business-like feel. An unobtrusive, light gray bar appears as the website’s header with links to information about the bloggers’ products (they sell e-courses and pre-fab Photoshop actions), their app, FAQ and “About” pages, and advertising, in addition to a search bar and the standard Twitter, Pinterest, Facebook, and Bloglovin’ logos and links. “A Beautiful Mess” appears under this gray bar in a cursive, hand-written-looking font (Larson designed the font herself), adding a level of personalization to the ABM title. Blog post titles appear in all caps; the date of posts and subject tags appear under titles in a smaller font. The font of blog posts is a basic, legible sans serif. Although straightforward, the font has a curvy quality to it (l’s are slightly curved at the bottom), preventing it from appearing too rigid or formal. Overall, the
website’s design is clean and sophisticated, but with hints of personalization and playfulness. The web design ultimately allows blog posts to take center stage.

However, the busiest visuals on the website appear on the side panel. Beyond a few advertisements—usually for cosmetics, clothing, or home décor—the side panel displays a picture of the bloggers with a brief explanation of the blog, an advertisement for the bloggers’ upcoming book about home décor (now available for preorder), a list of popular blog posts accompanied by bubble-shaped photos, a list of the bloggers’ “beautiful sponsors,” a list of their favorite posts (more bubble photos), a “get to know us” section, blog archives, an opportunity to join the bloggers’ mailing list, a reminder that ABM is indeed protected by copyright (“A Beautiful Mess All Rights Reserved”), and finally a stamp of approval from Martha Stewart (“A network of blogs chosen by Martha Stewart Editors”). The sidebar distracts somewhat from blog posts, but it primarily facilitates exploration of other content on the website. The very bottom of every webpage features previews of blog posts and a final advertisement. Advertisements mark the ABM website as a commodified space, hinting that blog content may be shaped by the whims of advertisers and sponsors.

This simple, clean, lighthearted, and commodified design gives viewers the impression that blog posts are to be taken seriously but with an attitude of playfulness. Simplicity focuses most of the viewer’s attention on the posts themselves, the color palate and fonts remind viewers that blog posts are also fun, and the presence of sponsors implies that blog posts are quality (otherwise companies would not sponsor them). The layout and visuals of the website increase the credibility of blog posts, adding to the persuasiveness of the primary discourses within the blog. Posts from June, July, and August 2013 present four sometimes consistent and sometimes contradictory discourses: (1) a discourse of commonality between the bloggers and their readers,
(2) a discourse of femininity defined as infantile docility, (3) a discourse of beauty achieved through buying, and (4) a discourse of empowerment. The following sections explore these discourses that define *A Beautiful Mess* and that instruct blog readers how to achieve a “beautiful mess” in their own lives.

*A Beautiful Mess is just like you.* The ABM bloggers consistently utilize language they believe is common to their readership in order to influence their readers’ thoughts and opinions about women’s lifestyles. Through colloquialisms or everyday language, invitations for audience participation, explicitly not claiming to be the source of specialist knowledge, admitting that they make mistakes, conveying graciousness toward readers, not taking themselves too seriously, and even unintentional spelling and grammatical errors, the bloggers give their readers the impression that they are just like them.

The use of colloquialisms establishes the bloggers’ peer persona, a persona that emphasizes similarities between bloggers and readers. Examining persona attends to issues of audience, determining how the audience relates to the communicators and whether that relationship makes the discursive act more or less credible in the eyes of readers. The bloggers’ greetings and signoffs and consistent use of smileys (🙂) address readers as if they were the bloggers’ personal gal pals. “Hey friends! We have some really fun news!!” the bloggers (from now on referred to as Elsie and Emma because it is how they refer to themselves in the blog) chirp as they announce that their lifestyle photography book is now available for preorder in a July 30th post. They gush, “Thank you SO much to everyone who has pre-ordered… We appreciate your support and excitement more than words can say! We're so excited about the release! xoxo. Elsie + Emma” (emphasis added). Nearly if not all blog posts end with XO’s from
Elsie and Emma. In fact, “XO” is used a total of 98 times and “XOXO” is used 54 times within the posts analyzed.

Beyond greetings and signoffs, blog posts reflect everyday language—one can easily imagine the bloggers saying the things that they write. In a June 28\textsuperscript{th} post, Emma’s attempts at humor make her seem more relatable. She describes her love of chimichurri sauce: “Go ahead and get saucy. Do it. Do it,” she writes, encouraging readers to try out her favorite recipe. “I love me some chimichurri!” she declares. Emma in particular utilizes humor—sometimes at her own expense—in order to align herself with readers. In a post from June 25, Emma describes her spouse’s and her own ineptness at using video cameras.

Trey and I are both able to take videos using our cameras (Canon 60D and Rebel t2i), so we decided to try and capture a few little clips while on our honeymoon. But please keep in mind being "able" is not the same as being "good at". I’d like to say we were just way into the Jason Bourne movies, but nope. We’ve just got really shaky hands, I guess. :)

Emma’s self-deprecating humor invites readers to see her as an ordinary human with flaws and a sense of humor and not solely a source of cooking tips and tricks.

Furthermore, Emma’s lexical choices reflect her commonalities with the average woman. She uses phrases such as “heck.” On June 27, she writes, “You could also do this [make “Cajun Hobo Packets”] in your backyard if you have a fire pit or even on the grill (or heck, even the oven if you just aren’t the camping type)” (emphasis added). She uses informal abbreviations when she describes her dessert menu for her wedding’s after party: “Our dessert table included: red velvet cupcakes (our favorite flavor), edible gold fruit, gold chocolate rocks, diamond shaped sugar cookies and a few other gold candies/treats. My inspiration was King Midas. \textit{Obvs.}”
(August 11; emphasis added). She writes to readers as though they are her best friends. “We thought it would be fun share some of the items we are currently crushing on… First let's talk lips,” she writes in a June 24th post about trendy cosmetics for summer (emphasis added; grammatical errors are retained from original posts). Elsie also adopts this peer persona, addressing readers as friends. “You guys! We're celebrating six years of blogging this month. SIX YEARS. Isn't that crazy?” she writes on July 10.

In addition to colloquial language, the bloggers adopt a peer persona by inviting their audience to participate in blog content creation. The women do more than simply ask readers what they think; they actively use reader feedback and comments to shape their blog posts. Through this interactivity, the bloggers learn from readers and readers become an active part of the blogging process; peers help peers. Elsie posts about making DIY tissue paper flowers in response to reader feedback: “We made these super simple tissue flowers for Emma's bachelorette party and I have recieved [sic] SO many requests to share a DIY post about them. They were really easy to make, which is essential when you are party prepping with a to-do list that's a mile long! Here's how we made them...” (June 12; emphasis added; spelling errors are retained from original posts). When the bloggers visited Nashville for their first book signing at an Urban Outfitters retail store, they posted their favorite restaurants after readers requested food recommendations in Nashville: “Per your requests, here's a list of Nashville spots we LOVED: Loveless Cafe, Burger Up, Barista Parlor, Marché, Las Paletas, Jenis and Crema. The best foodie thing I had on the trip was a Cafe ‘Tom Kai’ from Crema. It was so weird and amazing” (August 30). Katie Shelton, a guest contributor for ABM (and a personal friend of both Elsie and Emma), even goes as far as to create and post a video tutorial for readers who were confused by a previous post about how to rag roll hair: “My very first hair tutorial here on A
Beautiful Mess was How To Rag Roll Your Hair. Since I posted this tutorial 2 years ago, we’ve gotten a lot of questions about the process. Here’s a little video for how to rag roll your hair” (August 12; emphasis added). The pictures for a post on July 18 about the ABM photo-altering application are even supplied by readers. Readers become an integral dimension of blog content creation.

The bloggers convey a genuine interest in the lives of their readers and want to know what their readers think about their blog posts. Elsie asks in a June 18 post, “What about you? Have you planted anything lately? I’d love to see a link to your project,” inquiring about her readers’ gardening projects and DIYs. During the “30-Day Self-Portrait Challenge,” where Elsie and Emma challenged themselves and readers to take a “selfie” (self-portrait) once a day for 30 days, the bloggers nearly beg for audience participation: “So what do you think? Will you join us? We’d love to follow your journey! You can share your photos via your blog, instagram (#ABeautifulMess) or any other site you choose! We will be sharing ours via instagram (elsiecake + emmaredvelvet)!” You language cultivates a level of intimacy between bloggers and readers—the bloggers are speaking directly to you, the person reading the post, and they want you to participate in their challenge (Fairclough referred to this treatment of people on an individual basis as “synthetic personalization” (Kaur et al. 63).) By asking questions, the bloggers also try to establish a closer relationship with readers. The informality of asking questions can imply equality between the bloggers and audience members.

The women bloggers further align themselves with their audience by (sometimes) admitting that they are not the source of specialist knowledge. In a June 26 post about a kitchen experiment using a waffle iron to make hash browns, Emma concedes that she merely stumbled across the interesting idea of using a waffle iron on Pinterest: “Recently I saw a fun idea on
Pinterest involving hash browns and waffle irons… I'm really glad I stumbled across this idea and tried it out. I love how easy it is and how it can free you up to focus on cooking your eggs instead of watching to [sic] pans. If you like hash browns, give this a try and let us know what you think” (emphasis added). This admission boosts her peer persona because it is how many people discover ideas or recipes—by stumbling across them on the internet. The bloggers regularly use recipes and DIY projects from outside sources. Emma’s recipe for Madeleine Cookies is courtesy of Martha Stewart (June 14), her recipe for toasted coconut and pecan ice cream is from a book called Jeni’s Splendid Ice Creams (August 9), Elsie does a DIY from the book Furniture Makeovers involving metallic spray paint and old bottles and jars (July 15), and Elsie uses another blogger’s idea to make clay mini planters (August 30). Even these “expert” bloggers need outside inspiration for cooking and DIY posts—most likely just like their readers. Emma’s self-deprecating sense of humor further signals that she does not consider herself an “expert.” As she recounts attempting to reupholster an old couch in an August 24 post, Emma acknowledges her inexperience with reupholstering. She writes, “First off, if your budget works to get a project professionally reupholstered I highly recommend it. Especially [sic] if you are a novice at reupholstering (you can't see it but I'm raising my hand right now)” (emphasis added).

Not only do the bloggers claim at times that they are not sources of specialist knowledge, but they also admit to making mistakes in DIY projects or recipes or admitting that some of the DIYs or recipes they try are not always successful. For example, in a June 22 post on how to make infused sugar, Elsie notes that her DIY sugar did not turn out as well as she had hoped: “It wasn't a complete sucess [sic] or a complete fail and, as always, we learned some stuff to try next time… The results were super interesting and not what I expected. The rose [infused sugar] was gross. It smelled gross and it tasted like normal sugar- no flavor. If I tried that again I would use
rose tea instead of rose petals.” In a post on how to transfer a photo to wood, Emma notes that the DIY did not yield the prettiest results:

I've always wanted to try transferring a photo to wood so I looked up a few tutorials online to see how it's done. I learned pretty quickly that not every tutorial out there will result in a beautiful transfer… I bet you want to see the failed attempts huh? Yeah, I would too. Here they are along with what I learned and any additional tips that might help you if you are planning to make your own wood transfer. (July 23; emphasis added)

Emma admits that the messiness of DIYing sometimes only makes more mess. This assures readers that their DIYs do not always have to turn out perfectly—they can make mistakes, too. Emma is particularly apt to concede that her cooking adventures can go awry: “I love playing around in the kitchen. Although I must admit, sometimes things don’t turn out exactly how I plan” (August 29). Through these posts, readers realize that Elsie and Emma make mistakes just like they do. Mistakes and messes in life are acceptable so long as they become opportunities for learning and growth. Elsie and Emma indicate this when they say, “If I tried that again…” (Elsie) and “what I learned” (Emma). However, besides the posts referenced above, the vast majority of DIY projects and recipes result in beautiful crafts and dishes. So, one can make mistakes but not too many of them.

Additionally, the bloggers convey graciousness toward their readers, are not afraid to be silly, and even make spelling and grammatical errors in their posts. The bloggers’ gratitude exposes their reliance on readers for the existence of their business, suggesting that the bloggers may even possess less power than readers. As ABM turned six on July 10, Elsie reminds readers that they are the reason that she and Emma can continue to follow their dreams of blogging
fulltime: “Thank you SO MUCH for reading *A Beautiful Mess*. I wish we could have coffee with every single one of you, but more than a million cups of coffee just can't be healthy for anyone, right? Seriously though, we adore you so much! We're so thankful to do this full time. It's a dream job that only gets better each year!” Not only are Elsie and Emma willing to make themselves inferior to their audience in order to thank them, but they also are not afraid to say or do silly things. By being silly, the bloggers seem more human; more like their readers. For example, before heading out to Nashville for their book signing, the women admit to being dorks: “We'll be there [at the Urban Outfitters in Nashville] signing books and posing *like dorks* in our homemade photobooth from 2-5pm” (August 16; emphasis added). Photos from the photo booth in a later post depict the women making silly, unattractive faces (August 30). The bloggers even make spelling and grammatical errors (see blog posts above). Again, these mistakes make the bloggers seem more relatable.

Because Elsie and Emma are not perfect and are willing to admit it, their ideas appeal more to their audience. Ironically, by utilizing everyday language, audience participation, outside sources for recipes and DIYs, by admitting to making mistakes, by being gracious, and by acting silly—by cultivating a peer persona—the bloggers obtain authority over their audience members. Readers are more likely to believe and trust communicators that are more like them; like attracts like. A discourse of commonality makes other discursive acts within *A Beautiful Mess* more persuasive, so it is imperative to determine whether the following discourses are beneficial or harmful to women readers.

*A Beautiful Mess is infantile and docile femininity.* In the ways that they utilize language and in the ways that they are portrayed in photographs, Elsie and Emma construct an image of women as childlike and submissive. Besides adopting a peer persona, the bloggers take on a girly
and at times childish persona in their writing style. In photos accompanying posts, captions are girlish and cutesy. For instance, handwritten-looking captions typically appear on the bloggers’ wish lists. Elsie’s Fab wish list includes photos of products surrounded by the words “True!” and “fun” and doodles of hearts and flowers, words and images one may see in the notebook of a middle-school-aged girl (June 21). In another Fab wish list posted on July 19, pictures of Elsie’s favorite products are numbered with little quotations around them like “wowee,” “Love,” “dancin’ shoes,” and “favorite.” A DIY for giant Jenga includes a picture of Elsie pulling out a block with the caption “OMG!!!” coming from her mouth (August 26). These lexical choices made by the bloggers contribute to an image of childish women.

A girly persona is especially evident in a June 19 post titled “Let’s Make (Leather) Hair Clips!” The title itself evokes ideas of youth and playfulness, and most professional, adult women probably would not feel compelled to make a dachshund-shaped neon leather hair clip (with glitter!) unless it was for their children. Elsie describes the DIY process: “Cut your dachshund body shape out of leather and cut a separate shape for the ear as well. Take your ear, cover evenly with Tacky Glue, and generously sprinkle loose glitter on the ear and let dry. Once dry, use Triple Thick Glaze on top of the glitter to keep the glitter from flaking off and let dry again. Glue the ear to the dachshund body and attach the body to your barrette base” (emphasis added). Pictures accompanying the post feature Elsie modeling a variety of different hair clips. One of the hair clips is bow-shaped, two are simple rectangles (one has studs), and the last is the dachshund with a gold, glittery ear. In each of the pictures, Elsie is looking down and away from the camera, her face bathed in white light streaming from a window. With glittering, neon hair clips adorning her hair, she looks infantile, and her submissive posture makes her seem unfocused, even weak; unaware of her environment and not in a position to act with purpose if
need be. The white light streaming through the window evokes ideas of innocence, and in this case, innocence of youth.

Significantly, these images of Elsie are similar to other pictures of the women bloggers. When *Zooey* magazine featured Elsie and Emma (June 21), its photographs depict them as both nonassertive and childlike. In Elsie’s solo photos, she sits on a white wire chair, in one instance with her face turned away from the camera as her hair whips around her; the other with her face toward the camera while she holds a strand of hair under her nose, almost like how a child would play with its hair. In another of her solo shots, Elsie is clearly infantilized: she is not looking at the camera and has an “oh, darn, you caught me” sort of expression with her hands held parallel to the ground at her sides. She looks like a kid who has just been caught snitching cookies from the cookie jar. Emma’s photos also show her in submissive poses, albeit less childlike. In one she looks bored, sitting on a patterned ottoman and resting her head on her hand, which rests on her knee. In another, she sits with her knees touching—a childlike pose—with her head cocked to one side, as if confused. Emma’s poses suggest that she is not in control of her environment; not ready to respond to stimuli or a threat. Her head is not held high in either of these photos; she is off balance and seems defenseless. In their shot together, Elsie touches Emma’s arm while she peeks at the camera and lifts her leg into the air, another instance of an off-balanced woman who is not ready to react firmly to her surroundings. Emma looks listlessly down at Elsie’s hand touching her arm. In all of these photos, the women are not depicted as successful businesswomen—which they are—but as children and dolls; only striving to look cute and to be dressed and painted. They have no power or agency.

A reoccurring infantilized pose that the women often strike for fashion posts called “Sister Style,” involves feet that toe in. In a June 27 post called “Sister Style: Back in Biz,” both
of the women pose with their feet pointed toward each other. This toed-in posture is consistent throughout fashion posts (June 3, June 6, June 18, and July 12 are other examples). It communicates that the women are ungrounded or slightly off balance; it is not a posture of power but of a little girl. Further, in one picture, Emma lightly touches the brim of her hat with her fingertips, and in another, her hair blows into her face as she caresses her curls. This type of light, caressing touch signifies that women are not assertive or in control of their environment; they literally do not have a firm grasp on the reality around them. Elsie is even more infantilized in this post. Her hair is styled into two braids, which she plays with throughout her photos. She looks like a young girl as she stands with her feet toeing in. In her last photo, Elsie’s entire face is cropped out of the photo except for her wide smile, and she fingers one of her braids. She is the picture of an innocent, giggling schoolgirl who has been rendered identity-less by the photographer.

Other striking examples of this phenomenon of powerlessness and submissiveness are found in Emma’s wedding portraits. A series of three separate posts (July 23, July 25, and July 27) show off Emma’s numerous wedding portraits, and these posts include more pictures than usual blog posts. For this reason, the portraits’ portrayal of Emma as a woman is particularly significant to analyze because the bloggers clearly thought that it was important. Although many of the photos show her and Trey (her new husband, then fiancé) as equally in control of their surroundings and as equally engaged in one another, some do depict Emma as less powerful or in control than Trey. In one photo, Emma, standing in front of and slightly to the side of Trey, lightly rests her arm on his. She is looking down, her face angled toward him. She smiles. Trey, on the other hand, looks directly at the camera with a slight grin. He reciprocates Emma’s light touch to the arm. This photo indicates that Emma is passive, unaware of her surroundings except
for her fiancé’s touch and that Trey is active and more powerful as he stands completely straight and faces the camera head on. Several of the other wedding portraits demonstrate a similar dynamic between Emma and Trey. In another photo, Emma and Trey stand in a field. Emma is looking down once again, her face tilted slightly toward Trey, her posture is somewhat slumped, and she touches her shoulder delicately. Once again, she is seemingly unaware of her surroundings, focusing only (and rather halfheartedly) on the man in the photo. Her delicate, caressing touch indicates that her body is to be handled with light hands because it is also delicate and fragile. She looks weak. Trey, also looking down but more directly toward Emma, rests a hand on Emma’s back as if comforting her; as if she were in need of support.

A theme of infantilization in photographs also arises from the perspective that photos are taken from. In many instances, photos are taken at a child-level, conveying that the one taking the photo (often a woman blogger) has a childlike perspective. For example, a blog post about Emma’s wedding ceremony posted on July 29, includes child-level photographs of Emma pulling a garter up her leg (only her leg and arm show in the photo—the rest is cut off), of Emma’s hands holding her bouquet of white roses, of a groomsman holding a can of beer (only his torso is shown), of a hand offering wedding programs, a bridesmaid holding her colorful bouquet (only her lower half is shown), and of Emma and Trey’s clasped hands during their wedding ceremony. Although a hired photographer took these photos, the portraits are similar to other photos taken by the bloggers (posts from June 28, June 29, July 25, and August 30 provide additional examples).

This discourse of infantilization and submission reveals the bloggers’ view of gender roles. Because they are both women, their language use and photographs make arguments about how women should act and how they should look; how they should perform their gender.
Despite Elsie and Emma’s success in their careers as lifestyle bloggers, they portray themselves as powerless girls, thus reinforcing stereotypical views of femininity as docile and passive. This discourse of femininity has negative implications for women readers, who may internalize these ideas about their gender and adopt similar language usages—language that is most likely not taken seriously in a professional, male-dominated work setting—and weak poses in photographs or even in real life. Further, the pervasiveness of these images of the female bloggers normalizes them and consequently makes readers believe that they are natural displays of femininity as a gender role, which can perpetuate gender stereotypes. The following discourse also has possible negative implications for women readers of A Beautiful Mess.

* A Beautiful Mess is beauty you can buy. Brands are pervasive throughout ABM, not only featured on the side bar but also throughout posts in text and in photos. Their ubiquity communicates to readers that they need to spend money on these brands in order to dress well, look beautiful, and create beautiful DIYs. In every “Sister Style” post, the brands of the outfits are listed under photographs. For example, in the “Back in Biz” post previously mentioned, the bloggers list all of the items that they are wearing: “Emma's Wearing: blouse c/o Spotted Moth, shorts/old jeans I cut off, shoes c/o BC Footwear, necklace c/o ONecklace and hat/borrowed from sister; Elsie's Wearing: Fedora/flea market find, Top and shoes c/o ModCloth, Skirt/Francesca's, Sunnies c/o Toms” (June 27). Even though these brand listings are in small font relative to the rest of the text, viewers are still attracted to them. Readers naturally want to know how Elsie and Emma created their looks and the materials they used. The bloggers typically look stylish, trendy, and cool, and readers most likely want to replicate their looks. Occasionally, such in the post mentioned above, clothing in outfit posts is from a thrift store or
borrowed from a sibling. However, the majority of elements included in an outfit post are brand name.

Moreover, giveaway posts and wish lists establish a discourse of beauty through brands. In giveaway posts, the bloggers team up with various sponsors of their blog to provide usually one lucky winner with a variety of name brand products. In a June 27 post titled “A Beautiful Giveaway: June Edition,” Elsie and Emma write,

We're super excited to bring you a huge giveaway from some of our favorite sponsors this month! 1. JoTotes is giving the lucky winner an Abby Mint Camera Bag. 2. Haley's Heart will be giving the lucky winner 3 bottles of Scotch Naturals nail polish from her shop. 3. ChicWish is giving away a $50 gift card to their online shop, and all readers can get 30% OFF their first order! 4. Equal Vision and Eisley will be giving away this Eisley Deluxe Bundle pack to mark the debut of their album Currents. 5. Papercut Patterns is giving away two patterns of the winner's choosing from their shop. 6. ever.mi.crush is giving the winner a $50 gift card to their online shop, and all readers can get a 10% discount using the code 'ABM10'. 7. Nicole's Threads will be giving away a $50 gift card to her Etsy shop! 8. Red Clover also will be giving this lucky winner a $50 gift card to their online store. 9. Lalamagic is offering up a $50 gift card to their shop as well. 10. BonLook will be giving away a $99 gift card (good for a free pair of glasses) to their wonderful online glasses store. 11. ShopSosie is offering a $100 gift card to the lucky reader for their shop. 12. Starlet is giving away a $50 gift card to their online store. 13. And finally, SheInside is giving the winner a $100 gift card to their shop! (emphasis added)
In this post, the list of products from the bloggers’ “favorite sponsors” is extensive, and photos accompanying the post show off the items to be won in addition to Emma wearing a pair of BonLook glasses. These are brands that Elsie and Emma wear themselves. So, in order to be like them; to dress and accessorize like them, one must have these brands. Interestingly, “Beautiful Giveaway Posts” (June 11, June 20, July 30, and August 29 posts are examples of other giveaway posts) receive the most comments from readers (readers typically have to comment about their favorite items in the online shops to enter to win), indicating that the readers indeed want to replicate Elsie and Emma’s style. In order to do this, they need to acquire name brand clothing and accessory items. The same discourse of spending is present in wish list posts (see above for examples), which feature the bloggers’ favorite products from various online stores.

Physical beauty comes with a cost, too. In “A Beautiful Giveaway with CoverGirl + Ulta Beauty,” Elsie encourages readers to use CoverGirl makeup for a going out look: “We’re super excited to bring you this giveaway from CoverGirl + Ulta Beauty, who’ve teamed up to bring you the Flaming Femme look. CoverGirl’s Flamed Out mascara, shadow pots, and eyeliner make this bold, going-out look! Available exclusively at Ulta Beauty, Flaming Femme features hues of fiery red, pink, gray, gold and blue to make it pop! Check it out and see what you think!” (emphasis added). The post includes pictures of the CoverGirl products used—artfully arranged on a piece of cloth—an Ulta Beauty logo, and Elsie using the Flamed Out mascara. In these photos of Elsie, her beautification process is individualized—she acts alone—and this fits into Western ideologies of individualism and consumerism. Elsie, the individualized buyer, makes herself beautiful by spending.

Other posts about beauty function in similar ways and bring up similar discourses about consumerism. In “Emma’s Summer Favorites!” posted on June 24, Emma describes some of her
favorite beauty products for summer, some of which she used for her wedding. Again, the blogger is portrayed as an individual, wearing and testing out makeup by herself. Further, the brands of the beauty products take center stage in this post. Most of the pictures included in the post are of the products, artfully displayed and even tested on small pieces of wax paper to show off their qualities (in one of these photos, two lipsticks and a lip tar are smudged onto wax paper to show off the color). In other photos, Emma is wearing the products—in one she has her wedding makeup on; in another her neon yellow finger nail polish is highlighted. Spending is essential for achieving her look.

Some of the DIYs on the blog also require spending money on particular products. This is especially evident in sponsored posts. In the posts from summer 2013, sponsors included Washi tape (June 14), Nature Box (July 17), Chronicle Books (July 15), Coppola Wines (August 16), and H&M (August 1). The most frequent brand, however, was Canon, which sponsored posts from June 20, July 23, July 9, August 28, and August 13. Scrapbooking is one of Elsie’s passions, and in the July 9 post, she shares her scrapbooking inspiration and process, which of course requires the use of a Canon camera and printer: “For 4x6 photos we love using our Canon SELPHY CP900 printer with Photo Paper Glossy. It’s tiny, convenient and great quality!” Elsie implies that readers need or at least should have a Canon printer to do quality scrapbooking. Creating quality, beautiful things in life requires consumerism. A beautiful mess does not come easily in life—it comes with a price. Women must spend in order to be fashionable, beautiful, and to make and have beautiful things. This is problematic as it automatically excludes certain women of lower socioeconomic standing. Only those with money and leisure time can participate in DIY to make their lives more beautiful; an exclusive in-group of middle to upper-class (and probably white) women begins to form. This exclusive in-group forms also with “At
Home with…” posts, which give readers a chance to submit and share photos of their beautiful homes. Most of the women featured in these types of posts are also women lifestyle bloggers, and all of them seem fairly well off—it clearly took lots of time and money to make their homes look so beautiful. This discourse argues that beauty is not attainable for everyone. On the other hand, the next discourse presents a more positive message for women readers; a message of empowerment.

*A Beautiful Mess is empowering.* ABM empowers women to create and do the things that they love. A discourse of empowerment is demonstrated through invitation for audience participation, the use of verbs that have to do with creation, the meaningfulness of DIY, creating beauty from the bottom up, “At Work with…” features, the blurring between public and private spheres, and the inspiration that the lifestyle bloggers themselves provide.

As mentioned in the discourse of commonality between bloggers and readers, Elsie and Emma often ask their audience to participate in blog content creation. Not only do they ask for participation, but the bloggers actually use audience feedback to make their blog posts more accessible and stimulating to their readers. Readers likely feel empowered by Elsie and Emma’s apparent interest in their thoughts and opinions. When readers see blog posts inspired by their comments, they most likely feel a sense of ownership or authorship of the blog—their input really counts. Readers become active creators through the interactivity of the blogging process.

The use of action verbs also establishes a discourse of empowerment. The verb “create” in various forms (create, created, and recreate) appear in the posts a total of 33 times. Other action words associated with creating appear, for example, in an “At Work with…” June 18th post (“At Work with…” posts give readers a peek into the work lives of women who inspire Elsie and Emma) that features Kelly Amber Garcia’s leather goods business. In the post, which
is largely written by Garcia, words that indicate action occur regularly. These include the words “design,” “build,” “building,” “repurposed,” “created,” “utilize,” and “repurposed.” Emma’s post about her DIY wedding dress (August 27) uses multiple action words to describe the creative process involved in designing and making a dress. She uses words such as “design,” “designed,” “making,” “worked,” “inspired,” “created,” “pieced together,” “constructed,” “folded,” “stitched,” “hand-stitched,” and “altered.” Words that have to do with creating communicate that the women doing the creating and performing the action words have the agency—the capacity to determine oneself and one’s own actions; to choose these actions voluntarily and deliberately—to do so. Women are shown as empowered, active makers.

Furthermore, DIYing becomes a process of empowerment for women because it adds meaning to their lives. Kat Evidente, who shares photos of her home décor in an “At Home with…” post (July 15), writes about how DIYs, such as her husband’s handmade wood furniture, make her house feel more personalized: “It’s always a blessing to be able to enjoy the fruits of his [her husband’s] labor. His wood pieces are not only great but they make our place more like us” (emphasis added). Emma also notes how DIY made her wedding dress more special to her. She writes, “Elsie designed and worked on the dress. What made the project EXTRA special is how so many of my other friends and co workers worked on my dress as well. Lots of work was done by: Katie, Kinsey, and Jessica. I even cut out some of circles that became the ruffles” (August 27; emphasis added). By involving even herself in the creation of her wedding dress, Emma made the dress more meaningful because it became associated with the people and experiences that helped create it. DIY is not only about making material items but about making memories and experiences.
The best example of the significance of DIY is found in a June 10 post titled “Why DIY (And Some Peeks of Emma’s Wedding).” The post includes a video with a voiceover by Emma explaining why DIY is important to her. She puts it best in her own words:

One thing that's been on my mind during the whole preparation period is why DIY? We created a lot of the elements for my wedding from scratch. My brother made our invites. My sister designed my wedding dress (you can see it in the video) and a bunch of talented folks work on it including: Elsie, Katie, Jessica, Laura, Kinsey and even me. Big project that I will cherish forever. Elsie and Rachel (plus others) helped put together all the flowers. My sister-in-law collaborated with me to create all the recipes served at the reception, and she (plus other helpful hands) cooked everything. I had a hand in every decoration used at the ceremony and reception with a lot of help from Laura, Katie and Sharon. Jeremy (and company) preformed all the ceremony music. And so many others helped with special projects or other preparations.

I could have just bought a wedding dress. There are SO many beautiful ones out there. I could have bought all my decorations or had professional caterers make the reception food. And that would have been great too. But some of my very favorite memories from the past few months were times when I was working on projects with friends or family. I get a little teary eyed just thinking about it.

DIY allowed me to add another layer of meaning to my wedding day. And I loved every minute of it. And I feel so thankful for all the help I received. (emphasis added)
DIY adds personalization to objects like wedding dresses and to events like weddings. Personalization allows Emma to claim more ownership or authorship over the things in her life, and for her this is clearly a very empowering ability. In the video, women (Emma, Elsie, Katie, and Laura, to name a few) are portrayed as creators. Even though they are typically crafting in a domestic space in the video—most of the scenes take place in a living room and a dining room—they are still actively shaping their environment and how they are experiencing their world. Images of these women convey to readers that women can lead meaningful lives by personalizing the things in them and by making them their own; by becoming authors of their own life stories.

A message of empowerment is also demonstrated by an emphasis on creating beauty from the bottom up; creating beauty from “mess.” The A Beautiful Mess bloggers prove that women do not always need to buy new clothes and accessories or materials to look stylish and to make pretty DIYs. In fact, they can use old or cheap materials and repurpose them into something new and beautiful. As previously mentioned, in some of the “Sister Style” posts, Elsie and Emma wear items from thrift stores and from more affordable stores such as Target. Old, vintage pieces seem new again. For instance, in an August 19 post, Elsie is wearing a top from Target and Emma is wearing a vintage dress. They both look stylish and put together, proving that women do not need to spend lots of money on expensive, name brand items to be fashionable. Emma even admits to wearing a nightgown from Target as a dress. In the list of brands worn, she writes, “Emma's Wearing: dress/Target (it's from the pj section... shhhh...),” demonstrating that even cheap items can look just as tasteful as items from name brand stores.

Vintage pieces are actually preferred in some cases over new ones. A woman who owns a bakery repurposes vintage pieces to bring beauty to her work space:
Along with being a baker I am also an author of cookbooks. “The Back in the Day Bakery Cookbook” with Artisan Books is about our tried and true recipes and how we enjoy living a handmade life…I love to repurpose vintage treasures to organize my tools. My kitchen has an industrial vibe so I take every opportunity to repurpose something old in a new way. I love the juxtaposition of industrial and pretty things too. I rarely use things for what they are intended… People often ask me if I have always had a love for vintage items and the answer is YES! I like to describe my personal style as vintage bling. I love beautiful, glitzy, girly things. I love the history attached to something old from clothing to furniture. I always try to imagine the stories they might tell. (“At Work with Back in the Day Bakery,” July 3; emphasis added)

Sarah Sherman Samuel, who shows off her home in an August 27th “At Home with…” feature, writes that décor has more character if it is vintage: “We love poking around at flea markets and vintage shops to see what we can find and surrounding ourselves with storied objects” (emphasis added). Vintage items carry more history and stories than newly bought items. Another example of repurposing “old” items to create beauty is the use of mason jars. Mason jars (presumably leftovers from past canning experiences) are fashioned into pretty drink glasses or storage containers in numerous posts (June 20, June 22, July 21, and August 31). Garcia, previously mentioned, uses mason jars for organization. “I keep a giant mason jar for all my most often used tools (scissors, rotary, scratch awl, lighter, etc…) and a small tray of thing [sic] I will need throughout the build process,” she writes (June 18). These discourses demonstrate to readers that old, “unwanted” materials can in fact become beautiful. A little repurposing and restyling is all it takes to make beauty from mess.
A discourse of women’s empowerment is further crafted by the blog’s “At Work with…” features. The August 21 “At Work with…” post featuring the company No. 41 is very empowering—particularly for women of color, who have been noticeably absent from previous posts (I noticed only two posts that featured pictures of women of color). No. 41 began in March 2012 with 16 orphaned Rwandan girls, who were taught the “culturally relevant trade of sewing” and empowered “to give back to their local community.” Alison from No. 41 writes, “No. 41 literally means FOR ONE… For each bag sewn, a young woman earns a sustainable income and a child receives a hot, healthy lunch every day at school for the entire year. Currently, No. 41 employs 32 young women and 6 men feeding 870 students and 36 teachers, every day.” Through this organization, women can simultaneously earn their own income—which certainly creates a sense of agency and empowerment—and feed hungry students and teachers. The women working for No. 41 can even set their own hours, claiming a sense of control over their work lives: “An average workday doesn't really pertain to us! At the beginning, we had more structure, 8am-4pm Monday-Friday. And let's just say sewing, laughing and Justin Bieber dance parties were on the schedule. Now, that still goes on, but the girls work solely on commission and are able to come and go whenever they want, because that's what worked best for everyone” (emphasis added). Pictures with the post depict women of color working at sewing machines, producing unique artwork and patterned fabric. Their work space is open, light-filled, and clean. There is even a picture from the perspective of one of the workers, looking down at a sewing machine, inviting viewers to put themselves in the shoes of these Rwandan women (and men). The images provide a compelling argument that women of color have the agency and ability to create beautiful things, too, and that women can run life-changing, effective organizations like No. 41.
Interestingly, this post also introduces the idea that domestic spaces can become places of work, work that deserves monetary compensation—an empowering feminist message. Alison notes how her living room is used as the shop that sells the women’s creations, and further substantiates the discourse of beauty from the bottom up by describing how she used old materials for her display wall:

We love the display wall, which is actually in the living room of our house. Just as we were ready to open up shop, or landlord was knocking down the house in the back of ours to build what is now the No.41 house. As old dusty, dirty, fabulously charming doors and windows were piling up to head to the dumpster, we snatched them up to display our products on. We have visitors who come through often, so we like to change it up and make it feel fresh. We love the "store front" feel it gives to our little part of the world. (emphasis added)

Samuel from the August 27 “At Home with…” post also demonstrates the blurring between private and public spheres. She uses one of the bedrooms in her house as a studio, where she does photo shoots, blogs, paints, and creates wood pieces. Elsie and Emma also blog from their homes, and most of the pictures on their blog are set in domestic spaces. They run a business and establish a visible presence in the blogosphere—both considered part of the public realm—through domesticity. A Beautiful Mess shows the value of domestic work and how it can be meaningfully integrated into the public sphere.

Finally, Elsie and Emma themselves provide inspiration for their women readers, proving that women can be successful business owners, even if their work is primarily done in the home. The bloggers’ story is compelling because it began with what Elsie considered merely a “just-for-fun” personal project and with very little money. When Elsie started blogging about
scrapbooking and sharing personal photos in 2007, she had no intention of making a business out of it. Her aspirations expanded to starting her own small business, the first Red Velvet Art local shop and website, which she did. She admits in a July 10 post that it was a struggle to keep the business on its feet, and she often felt discouraged:

Starting the business was an incredible learning experience. It was really, really hard. Sometimes it felt worth it, and sometimes it didn't. I can honestly say 2009 was the hardest year of my life. It was hard to make ends meet, and my young business still needed so much creative development. I was sad and frustrated a lot, which of course is not good for the creative process. On the bright side I was in a place where I was forced to learn, forced to improve and forced to try to think bigger. (emphasis added)

Elsie continued to look on the bright side, and when Emma became her business partner in 2010, her small business grew into a larger Red Velvet vintage shop and bakery. The women’s blog grew, too.

Despite their success, in a July 18 post about writing their first book, Elsie and Emma reveal how their dreams once seemed out of reach:

And, like most dreams, this one [publishing a book] felt completely unattainable… We sent a proposal out to a publisher we loved. We received NO response. In fact, the only real feedback we ever heard about that book idea was "entertaining is a dead category" in the publishing world. That was discouraging. We had put our hearts into that idea, not to mention hours upon hours of work, other resources, and we'd even hired a photographer to shoot the concept. It all felt like such a waste of time. (emphasis added)
However, the women persevered and eventually got a book deal and are currently working on their second book. Their business is now worth a million dollars. This is an inspiring narrative for readers, particularly for women readers. If Elsie and Emma—who started with relatively little—can do it, then readers can, too (especially because readers are “just like” the bloggers—see peer persona).

However, the question remains as to who exactly *A Beautiful Mess* is empowering. Is ABM only empowering white, middle to upper-class, and relatively young women? Nearly all of the creating and doing in posts is performed by this demographic of women and not by poor minorities; not even by men (recall that I only mentioned two posts with representations of women of color). Within this discourse of empowerment, a tension exists between who has the power to empower (white, middle to upper-class, 20 to 30-something-year-old women bloggers), who actually feels empowered by the blog (other women bloggers?), and who actually is empowered by it (?). Further, although *A Beautiful Mess* may be empowering, what happens when DIY projects or recipes fail (see persona section and posts about making mistakes)? When businesses go under and stay that way unlike Elsie and Emma’s story of success? When mess just stays messy? Do women readers feel discouraged, especially when they see that the vast majority of projects on ABM result in beautiful end products? Does the blog’s message of empowerment lose its significant when women realize that their lives are messier than they are beautiful? Or do women see the potential for learning in mess, just as Elsie and Emma do based on posts from June 22 and July 23 (see discourse of commonality)?

Tension also exists between the discourses examined in this study. A discourse of commonality functions rhetorically to strengthen the discourses of femininity as infantile docility, of beauty through brands, and of empowerment, but these discourses are often times at
odds with one another. The first two (femininity and branding) are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and in fact inform one another. A discourse of consumerism means that femininity as presented by the blog is commodified. According to a discourse of beauty through consumerism, in order to be feminine, women have to spend money on certain brands and beauty products—femininity comes at a price. Despite this, the negative messages these discourses send to women contradict the last discourse of empowerment. ABM instructs women that they should appear powerless and submissive in photographs in order to appear feminine and should have to buy certain brands to obtain a certain level of beauty. On the other hand, it also instructs women that they can achieve a beautiful life by repurposing and restyling old or vintage items and not by spending money on expensive name brand products. Images of women, even women of color, creating beautiful things from messy lives—lives of poverty for the women from Rwanda, for example—are inspiring and hopeful for women readers, showing them that beauty can come from unexpected places. Which discourses, then, overpower the others?

This is, of course, an impossible question to answer, especially because this analysis does not determine how real women readers experience and are influenced by the blog. Based on the tensions and contradictions outlined above within the discourse of empowerment—which potentially lessen the significance of the discourse of empowerment—I propose that the discourses of infantilization and beauty through brands are most prominent in the blog. However, a discourse of empowerment through meaning-making and self-authorship cannot be discounted as inconsequential, even if it is found less prevalently in the blog (note that I found only two instances of people of color). Discourses of meaning-making and self-authorship undoubtedly inspire readers that they have the capacity as women to make an impact on their own lives. For this reason, I hesitate to make a definitive argument about the overriding discourse of the blog.
However, rhetorically speaking, crafting such intertwined and contradictory discourses is a brilliant move on the bloggers’ part: it prevents readers from forming definite negative or positive opinions of the blog and it keeps them interested and reading. For the most part, ABM lives up to its oxymoronic title, *A Beautiful Mess*. The blog is equal parts beauty and mess, and it is perhaps this balance and dynamism that has made the blog so incredibly successful and influential.

**Discussion**

This critical discourse analysis of *A Beautiful Mess* blog posts from June, July, and August 2013 is effective in answering the research questions, fulfills both communicative and literary requirements for this project, and it relates well to the findings of other scholarly work highlighted in the literature review. However, the study opens up even more issues about women, domesticity, race, and audience and leads to even more questions. A discourse of femininity as infantile docility directly answers the first research question, which sought to examine the discourses of femininity as a gender role in the blog. The second question pertaining to consumerism’s role in the blog’s portrayal of femininity and beauty is aptly answered by the discourse of beauty through spending. Consumerism plays a significant role in how to construct femininity and beauty as defined by the bloggers. Buying certain brands is essential to replicating the bloggers’ own style and DIYs. Further, a discourse of empowerment provides a mostly conclusive if somewhat unsatisfying answer to the last research question about the empowering nature of DIY. DIY is found in different instances to be both empowering—showing women that they can create, even if they have few resources—and disenfranchising, suggesting that only some women, women who have the time and money to DIY, can make
beautiful homemade creations. It is this underlying tension that makes *A Beautiful Mess* such a compelling subject for research.

The selection of methodology is highly appropriate for study from both a communicative and literary standpoint. Fairclough et al. (see methodology section) stresses how critical discourse analysis is fundamentally a cross-disciplinary method. CDA has been utilized by both scholars of communication and literature. In their handbook of discourse analysis, scholars of linguistics Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen, and Heidi E. Hamilton identify discourse analysis’ versatility as a method that can be effectively applied in a variety of contexts ranging from rhetorical acts such as speeches to works of literature:

> Our own experiences in the field have led us to the conviction that the *vastness and diversity of discourse analysis is a great strength rather than a weakness*. Far from its being a liability to be lamented because of the lack of a single coherent theory, we find the theoretical and methodological diversity of discourse analysis to be an asset. We thus envision this volume as fostering the cooperative use – by linguists and others interested in empirically grounded studies of language – of the many theoretical and analytical resources currently proliferating in the study of discourse. Our collection of forty-one articles suggests that the future cooperation which we hope will emerge will respect the many differences that distinguish the approaches reflected here. There are differences in the type of data drawn upon, ranging from political *speeches* to everyday conversation to *literary* texts. (5, emphasis added)

Communication and literary studies disciples share CDA’s concern for language, semiotics, power relations, and meaning-making systems. Specifically, this analysis’ attention to audience
in the discourse of peer persona relates strongly to communication theory, which delineates itself from literary theory with its explicit focus on the communicator/audience relationship. Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s integral role in the study of discourse connects this analysis directly to literary studies. The selection of critical discourse analysis for this cross-disciplinary research project is therefore extremely applicable and a strength of this thesis.

Moreover, the analysis connects with many of the findings of other scholars described in the introduction and literature review. *A Beautiful Mess* is a prime example of Bratich and Brush’s new domesticity, and it demonstrates the scholars’ argument that the new domesticity is increasingly being found on the internet and on blogs; that the private sphere is being pushed into the public realm of the internet. This study also shows that for women like Elsie and Emma who are embracing the new domesticity, homemaking and domestic work can be both meaningful and empowering and something that the modern woman can choose to do rather than focusing solely on a professional career (ABM may even redefine professional careers to include lifestyle blogging).

My findings confirm Harp and Tremayne’s assertion that women typically find success not by running political blogs but by running lifestyle blogs, supporting the idea that women can only be influential in the blogosphere if they blog about domestic matters such as home décor and cooking. Despite this, the blurring of public and private realms examined in the analysis fits well with Saleh and others’ argument that blogging can be used as a feminist tool for subverting the public/private binary. As Lopez asserts, blogging—even lifestyle blogging—can be a radical act for changing the definition of domesticity and of politics. The very existence and prominence of *A Beautiful Mess* on the internet pushes domestic matters into the public realm. Images and stories of women working from the home (and being paid for it!) provide hope to feminists who
seek compensation for women performing “domestic” duties. However, as pointed out by Saleh and Chen, this hope and empowerment comes with a few limitations. For one, the lack of minority voices—of women of color or of poor women—limits ABM’s potential as a feminist tool (Saleh). Furthermore, women may feel empowered by *A Beautiful Mess*, but the blog’s label as a domestic, lifestyle blog only provides what Chen calls “agency masked by stereotype” (525). Women can be empowered, but they can do so (usually) only in a domestic setting.

Karlsson’s findings that readers are attracted to blogs that they can identify with—blogs that are “just like them”—align well with the analysis’s discourse of commonality between bloggers and their readers. The discourse of commonality also connects to Webb and Lee’s idea of bloggers and readers forming collective identities. By adopting a peer persona, the bloggers invite their readers to believe that they share a common identity. Elsie and Emma perform their identities and gender on their blog, and the interactivity of blogging allows readers to affirm those identities and portrayals of gender roles through supportive comments (a superficial reading of comments reveals that most readers are extremely supportive and encouraging of Elsie and Emma’s identities—readers often comment that the bloggers look beautiful or that their DIYs and recipes are creative and interesting). Through their affirmation, readers internalize the bloggers’ identities, acknowledging those identities’ as legitimate forms of expression. This means that readers collectively internalize the bloggers’ discourses of femininity, consumerism as a means of external beauty, and women as active creators. Their identities are shaped by these discourses.

This study also supports Daniels’ assertion that blogs are more trusted sources of knowledge than corporations due to a discourse of commonality. If an audience believes that communicators are “just like them,” then it is more likely to accept what the communicators say
or write as fact. Nevertheless, Lopez, Webb and Lee, Daniels, and Powell’s reminder that blogging can become commodified is reinforced by the analysis. Advertisements and sponsored posts are an integral part of *A Beautiful Mess*—without them, Elsie and Emma could not be fulltime bloggers. Although readers are clearly persuaded by *A Beautiful Mess*, do they buy into all of the blog’s arguments when these arguments are clearly shaped in part by brands and sponsors?

This analysis may lead to even more questions than it addresses. How is whiteness portrayed in the blog? Why are black women so noticeably absent from blog posts with only a few exceptions? Who is the target audience of *A Beautiful Mess*? Which women are excluded from the target audience? How do audience members interact with the bloggers and how do these interactions shape their identities as women? Does the blog create feelings of inadequacy among their readers? According to authors Hilgenberg and Matchar, women, when viewing gorgeous photographs posted on these types of blogs of angelic children and beautiful homes, inevitably compare their own lives to those of bloggers—and they often fall short (Hilgenberg n. pag.; Matchar 63). Further, how do Elsie and Emma adopt a superior persona (demonstrating that they DO possess specialist knowledge about fashion, DIYing, and cooking) yet still maintain an overall peer relationship with readers? What are the portrayals of masculinity in the blog? How do the infantilized poses of the women bloggers compare with other images of women from the mass media? Are these poses considered “normal” or “natural” based on their occurrence in fashion advertising?

Future study and exploration of the meso and macro levels of critical discourse analysis could address this multitude of questions, however, further exploration of this topic could be an entirely new research paper. The shortcomings of this paper lie in its overemphasis on textual
analysis and its lack of analysis at the meso and macro levels, which results in limited audience analysis (although I do discuss audience in the discourse of commonality). An in-depth examination of readers’ comments on the blog—which would be possible through a meso-level analysis or a rhetorical analysis—could help answer questions about who ABM empowers and how women readers internalize the discourses of the blog. Macro-level analysis could determine how mass mediated images of women’s bodies affect how the bloggers enact gender roles in pictures. Indeed, this analysis invites further, more in-depth study into the topic of lifestyle blogging, which is clearly a rich and fruitful subject for analysis.

The most important aspect of this study is its demonstration of the value of analyzing lifestyle blogs and women’s blogs in general. As noted in the literature review, very few scholars have found worth in studying women’s lifestyle blogs, dismissing them as frivolous and meaningless. However, I have proven—in accordance with what Bratich and Brush assert about the new domesticity—that lifestyle blogs like *A Beautiful Mess* are in fact very meaningful and, beyond that, they have real-world consequences for their female (and male) readers; their impact is not merely limited to the domestic realm but has the potential to infiltrate the public realm, simultaneously perpetuating and subverting gender norms and ideas about consumption and power. Hopefully, this study encourages scholars to consider reading blogs such as *A Beautiful Mess* as sources of meaningful discursive acts, acts that have enormous consequences for the lives of women.
Works Cited


